



# Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology

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Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 2

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2006

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### Recommended Citation

(2006) "An Interview with Dr. Allen Bergin," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol2/iss1/2>

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Brandon L. Roberg

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. ALLEN BERGIN

*Dr. Allen Bergin, a BYU emeritus professor, was one of the most eminent members of the BYU Department of Psychology. His influence can be seen throughout the discipline of psychology. Dr. Bergin came as a professor to BYU from Columbia University in 1972. Some of his best-known works include the article "Psychotherapy and Religious Values" (1980) and the Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change (coeditor, 1971–2003). The following interview took place via e-mail during June 2006.*

### **How did you decide to pursue a career in psychology?**

My early interests were in science and math, which is why I began college at MIT; but being in an intense scientific atmosphere for a year convinced me that I was not cut out for such an occupation full time. This was a surprise and a shock. I then wandered for two subsequent years, taking a wide variety of classes, first at a liberal arts college and then at BYU.

During the fall of my junior year, which was at BYU, I was still without a major; but by the end of that quarter I had taken enough psychology in-depth to discover that I loved it. The field brought together in one package the full range of my interests—scientific, philosophical, and humanistic. I gravitated first to experimental psychology and then to the research side of personality and clinical psych, where I found a balanced comfort zone that fit my personality.

### **How did you decide to enter the master's program at BYU?**

After an intense focus on psychology for a year, catching up on the requirements for a major, I decided to apply for doctoral programs in clinical psych, as I realized that my future in psych would be limited without a Ph.D. This plan proved to be unrealistic. I didn't realize how hard it was to get into good clinical programs; I didn't have a solid competitive background in psych, and my grades had suffered during the earlier time of wandering and switching schools. Consequently, I was admitted only to second-tier schools and none of the top ones I preferred. The BYU psych department offered me a generous scholarship, so I decided to stay a year for a master's and develop my qualifications for a first-tier doctoral program. (There were no BYU doctoral programs in 1956.) This proved to be a perfect solution. I finished the master's requirements in one year and I was able to consolidate and expand my knowledge of psychology. I also solidified my understanding of the LDS Church, which I had



joined at the end of my junior year, and secured my young marriage and family life in a nurturing atmosphere. As a result of a productive and benevolent year, I was admitted to every school I subsequently applied to and chose Stanford University. I am eternally grateful for the influence of the BYU atmosphere and the good instruction I received which changed my life and launched me in new directions with valuable skills of learning and coping.

### **What are a few of your memories of working with Carl Rogers?**

By the time I finished my Stanford Ph.D. and spent considerable time under the tutelage of Albert Bandura, I realized that the study of personal change was for me. Consequently, the opportunity for a postdoctoral fellowship with Carl Rogers, the father of psychotherapy research, was a dream come true. Carl was all that people imagined him to be: warm, genuine, caring, and gifted in perception and wisdom. He was energetic, hardworking, and creative. He devoted his entire life to the enterprise of facilitating growth in other people via research, theory, practice, teaching, and organizational intervention.

I remember fondly his interest in my wife, Marian, and our children, and the pleasure we had at his home near a lake in Wisconsin, including motorboat rides for the children. I recall vividly our various letters and our personal meetings over the years. On one occasion he gave me a bear hug while congratulating me on my work in spirituality and mental health, an issue over which we had disagreed in earlier years. He said he was pleased that I was speaking straight from "my own gut" and not trying to please anyone else. He always admired self-congruence or honest self-expression regardless of the viewpoint taken; but he had also changed his opinion and by then saw the value of spiritual experience in therapeutic change.

It was also instructive to see this warm, empathic person shift into an authority mode when needed,

for instance in disciplining a staff member or rebuking an obnoxious student. There were two dozen grad students and postdocs working under him at the time (1960–61), so he had to be a manager as well as a therapist and an international figure.

### **What has been one of the highlights of your professional career?**

Generally, this would be feeling that I was part of the positive development of psychology and of students, clients, and younger colleagues. Specifically, this past year (2005–2006) has been a highlight as two BYU faculty whom I mentored earlier and supported and collaborated with later became presidents of their respective professional organizations: Michael Lambert as president of the International Society for Psychotherapy Research and Scott Richards as president of the Division of Psychology and Religion in the American Psychological Association. Their achievements are in the two areas I specialized in and for which I received awards from several national organizations. So, it is a double delight to have both my own career and that of my younger esteemed colleagues receive recognition for our work in psychotherapy and in spirituality.

### **What has been one of the greatest challenges of your professional career?**

The greatest challenge was maintaining equanimity and suppressing the impulse to retaliate when I was unfairly criticized or maligned or when false rumors were told about me by colleagues in the profession who strongly disagreed with my views or my actions to promote my position on issues. This included a few colleagues at BYU, which was quite painful to endure. I learned to love my enemies from these experiences and many became treasured friends as a result. I also discovered that I wasn't always right in my opinions and methods. I also



learned that the Lord loved me and he supported me in many ways, including through his leaders in the Church and at BYU.

### **What is one psychological topic that you would like to see researched and discussed more thoroughly?**

How psychology in all its facets can provide skills, research, spiritually attuned theories, resources, programs, techniques, and findings for advancing the purposes of the LDS Church, which I believe to be one organization in the world that will last indefinitely and has great potential to alter the world for the better, including in collaboration with others of good will.

### **What has been your greatest conflict between your religious beliefs and mainstream psychology?**

Battling for nearly 50 years against the negative influences of naturalism and moral relativism which have pervaded the field and the other behavioral and social sciences in both theory and practice. My writings, research, teaching, and speeches have been a continuing testimony against these views of human nature and in favor of a moral and spiritual perspective.

### **What advice do you have for up-and-coming psychologists, particularly those of the BYU student body?**

Seek first the kingdom of God and not self-aggrandizement or riches, then many blessings will come; but do not assume that faithfulness alone will result in professional success.

Strive to become a true expert in some phase of your area of interest. Superb disciplinary competence is always marketable and can carry you through many difficult times.

"To thine own self be true . . . thou canst not then be false to any man." Thus learn to be independent and be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

Give marriage and family high priority; and if you remain single through no fault of your own, find ways to nurture kindred and others. Remember that some things are eternal and celestial in nature. These matter the most even though we must live in and cope with a material world.

Carefully and prayerfully plan your days, months, and years ahead; but do not be surprised nor disturbed if only half or less of your plans come to the expected fruition. In addition to limitations of mortal forecasting and implementing, God and your hidden destiny may intervene in unexpected ways.

Remember that to be learned is good if you follow the counsels of God and his prophets.

Find ways to respectfully and humbly apply your expertise to needs and problems in the Church and other similarly altruistic organizations designed for human betterment.

### *Having Something Meaningful to Say*

According to several editors of psychology journals, the primary reason a manuscript is rejected is its failure to meaningfully contribute to the discipline. According to Allan Warren, former editor of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied Behavior Processes*, by far the most common reason for rejection of papers is lack of substance. . . . If [a researcher's] work represents a genuine contribution, then [editors] will often bend over backward to help the author make the paper acceptable for publication (as cited in Siekela, 1988, pp. 186-187). Scott Lilienfeld, founding editor of *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*,