SOUTHWESTERNpsychologist

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southwestern psychological association

In this Issue!

Message From the President
By
Jonali Baruah, Ph.D.
Professor
Tarleton State University

Dear SWPA Attendees,

We are steadily marching toward the 71st SWPA Convention, and the anticipation continues to grow as we prepare to gather in Frisco, Texas from March 27–29, 2026. This upcoming meeting invites us to reflect on how our field continues to evolve.

As we move into a new era of human and AI interaction, it is helpful to recognize how AI is already shaping our daily lives and work. It is changing how we learn and teach, how we support others in clinical and counseling settings, and how we collaborate in teams. These shifts are gradually influencing how we see our lives and careers. In line with this transformation, some of our keynote speakers will offer fresh perspectives on this emerging digital era of human interactions.

Of course, the heart of SWPA is you. Your symposia, posters, talks, workshops, and discussions that make the conference a lively, collaborative learning space. As always, you will also see many exciting presentations from various disciplines of psychology submitted by our members from SWPA and our affiliate organizations.

A small request from your SWPA leadership: if you are able, please consider staying at the conference hotel. Your participation helps reduce financial strain on the organization, and even one night makes a meaningful difference. Thank you for supporting our community.
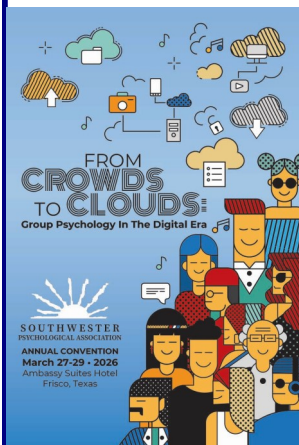
And in the spirit of the Thanksgiving season, I want to express my sincere gratitude to all our members for your continued support and cooperation. Your engagement is what keeps our organization thriving.

See you all in Frisco!

Warmly,
Jonali Baruah, Ph.D.
President, Southwestern Psychological Association

Book Now at the Embassy Suites by Hilton Dallas Frisco Hotel Convention Center

Remembering Dr. Paul Ekman

By
Drew A. Curtis, Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer
**The University of Texas at Tyler**

Greetings SWPA. It is with sadness that I write to you all to remember Dr. Paul Ekman, who just passed away on November 17, 2025. Dr. Ekman was one of the most eminent psychologists of the twentieth century (Haggbloom et al., 2002). Dr. Ekman was a world-renowned expert in facial expressions and emotions. He was professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). He is the author of 16 books (e.g., Emotions Revealed and Telling Lies) and over 500 hundred peer reviewed research articles. Dr. Ekman began his studies as an undergrad at the University of Chicago and New York University and received his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Adelphi University. After two years as 1st Lieutenant and Chief Psychologist at Fort Dix, N.J., Dr. Ekman returned to UCSF, where he worked from 1960 to 2004. Following his impactful career as a psychologist and researcher, he established the Paul Ekman Group (PEG), aimed at providing resources from his research. Dr. Ekman has received many awards for his contributions to the field, including the William James Fellow Award and the American Psychological Association Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions. Dr. Ekman has a lifetime of achievement and contributions. His work has been highly influential to many, inside and outside of psychology. Dr. Ekman's work has even influenced popular films: *Lie to Me* and *Inside Out* (in which he served as a scientific advisor).

I first learned about Dr. Ekman in an undergraduate social psychology class, where the lecture centered around emotions and concealment of emotions (discerning Duchenne from non-Duchenne smiles). In graduate school I became more familiar with Dr. Ekman's work, specifically his work on lies and deception. I first was able to correspond with Dr. Paul Ekman during my first year as an assistant professor, when I reached out to the Paul Ekman Group to request permission to use their software for a grant-funded research project.

I am very grateful to Dr. Ekman and the Ekman group for working with me on that project-Dr. Ekman was kind. Years later, when I was SWPA President, I reached back out to Dr. Ekman, asking him to be a Keynote speaker for our 2021 conference in San Antonio: **Lies: Integrating Science and Practice**. Dr. Ekman was kind and thoughtful. He wanted to come to SWPA to present, and agreed, but also was unsure about the pandemic's trajectory, at the time of the invite. In our correspondence, given the pandemic and potential health concerns, he decided that it would be best for him not to travel. I was sad to not get to meet him in person, but I appreciated and respected his decision. I was thankful for the limited correspondence, his kindness, his generosity, and the opportunity to share how much his work had impacted me.
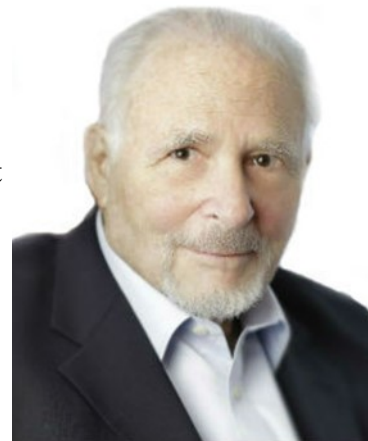
The influence and impact on Dr. Paul Ekman runs deep in psychology and even extends to many disciplines and practices beyond psychology. His work and name will be a lasting legacy. To learn more about Dr. Paul Ekman, his work and his life, visit the PEG: https://www.paulekman.com/blog/the-passing-of-dr-paul-ekman/

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No Grants? No Problem: Reasons to Capitalize on Existing Resources to Conduct Research

By
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"I'd love to do more research, but grant funding is tight." Many of us have encountered such sentiments among colleagues in our departments, at conferences, or on social media. Perhaps others have received similar invitations from university staff: "Faculty, visit the grants office to discuss funding opportunities and get your research projects started!" These messages imply that grants and research are one in the same, and that research requires grant funding. Although grants can be a useful tool to advance scholarship, faculty should not stake our research productivity solely on whether we receive funding from NSF, NIH, or similar agencies. Our discipline can benefit when we utilize the resources already available to facilitate our research projects. Sometimes grant writing is a requirement of our jobs, but it should not be mistaken as a requirement for research.

Researchers may be able to complete a project in the time it takes to draft a cumbersome grant application. Faculty spend considerable time and attention perfecting project descriptions, securing letters of support from collaborators, estimating budgets, articulating data management plans, and coordinating with co-investigators and grant offices. We wait months for a decision after submitting our proposals. All the while, many faculty have immediate access to student participant pools, free statistical software, and online platforms to design and distribute materials. Maximizing these resources first may enable more efficient publications that benefit us, our student collaborators, and our discipline.

At work and in life, it is wise to invest in pursuits with a higher, rather than lower, probability of success. Although nothing is certain in academia, we have greater control over the success of our manuscripts (i.e., publication) than we do over the fate of grant submissions that may be rejected due to budgetary bad luck or other nebulous factors. When a journal rejects our manuscript, we can turn it around quickly for submission to a different outlet. When a granting agency declines to fund our application, we might wait 6 or 12 months for an opportunity to resubmit, and in that time, we are not collecting data. It is wise to invest time in several lower-stakes manuscripts that do not require funding alongside high-stakes proposals that depend on grants.

Paradoxically, grants might lead us to make concessions in our research. Conceiving of a research project with the goal of applying for funding can orient our research questions toward funders' priorities rather than our own. Allowing granting agencies to direct our research pursuits limits innovation and diminishes our passion for the project. Have you worked on research projects that you were not passionate about? I have, and they absorbed my energy each time I sat down to work on them. Pursuing questions of genuine interest, grant funded or not, sustains our motivation. Avoiding the constraints of grant requirements can help researchers to maintain autonomy over research questions and methodology. We can design elegant experiments and pursue novel hypotheses that may not match funder priorities. These studies can advance the field as effectively as grant funded research and maintain our genuine interest in completing the project.

Sometimes grant funding is necessary to answer a research question. Equipment access, clinical trials, some multi-site or longitudinal approaches, and so on require resources that only funders can provide. Yet, every project entails limitations. Even those million-dollar studies published in top journals have a "Limitations" section! Research always requires operating around constraints. When we let go of the idea that *if only we had funding we could conduct that perfect study*, we realize that our online survey of a student sample reveals just as many insights, and has just as many limitations, as our idealized grant-funded imaginary study. Pursuing research without grant funding reminds us that scholarship is about curiosity, initiative, rigor, and methodological creativity rather than bio-sketches, synergistic activities, and progress reports. Grants are one way, not the only way, to address the questions that interest us.

Grant awards have benefits such as access to samples, summer funding, and prestige for recipients. Yet the absence of a grant should not be a reason to delay pursuing a research question. Grants are not necessary to conduct research with intellectual merit and broader impact. Utilizing the tools already available, we may be able to complete a publishable study and move on to the next one in the time it takes to prepare a grant application. Embracing a grant-free approach might inspire creativity and excitement for research that will be contagious to our students and colleagues.

The Modern Language of Love: Responsiveness in Digital Communication

By
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Romantic relationships can be an important source of happiness throughout adulthood, especially when individuals are navigating stress, responsibilities, and major life changes. When in-person time is limited, whether this is because of demanding work schedules, family obligations, travel, or physical distance, many couples rely on digital communication to stay connected. Texting throughout the day, video calling at night, sending daily updates, or reacting to social media posts have become everyday ways of maintaining closeness. Digital communication is not just convenient; for many partners, it is one of the primary ways they can remain emotionally involved in each other's lives daily. The question now is not whether digital communication can replace face-to-face interaction, but how it can be used in ways that help partners feel emotionally close, and research shows that it can when the communication feels emotionally supportive.

At the heart of emotional closeness is the feeling that a partner truly understands and cares about what matters in their relationship. This experience is described by Perceived Partner Responsiveness (PPR), feeling cared for, understood, and valued by a romantic partner (Reis et al., 2004). Emotionally engaged communication creates a sense of safety and security within the relationship. Even small moments like checking in before a stressful event, saying "thank you," or acknowledging something important plays a meaningful role in strengthening connection over time (Algoe et al., 2010). Feeling supported by a partner is not only emotionally beneficial but it is associated with lower stress, better sleep, improved well-being, and greater overall life satisfaction (Selçuk et al., 2016; Selçuk et al., 2017; Alonso-Ferres et al., 2020).

As communication has shifted into digital spaces, the experience of emotional support has shifted with it. Perceived Digital Partner Responsiveness (PDPR) reflects the feeling of being understood, valued and cared for through digital communication. A text like "let me know when you get home," a quick check-in before an important meeting, or a call during a stressful moment can increase emotional closeness between couples. When care and intention are communicated clearly, digital communication can create the same sense of emotional safety and closeness that develops through in-person conversations, because the emotional experience of being present and supported can be similar.

Digital responsiveness is meaningful across all types of romantic relationships, whether partners live together, live apart, share a home but have demanding schedules, or are navigating long-distance relationships or independent careers. When digital communication is used to show care, understanding, affection, and presence, the relationship feels protected and secure even during stressful or physically distant periods. At its core, PDPR reminds us that emotional closeness is not about the type of communication partners use, but rather how each individual feels genuinely understood. Whether that support happens in-person or through a screen, what strengthens the relationship is the feeling of being seen, heard, and emotionally supported by the person you love.

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Policy, Not Policing: Ethical AI Usage in Higher Education

By
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Over the past decade, educational technology has evolved drastically and has posed new challenges to educators (Sonia et al., 2023). Generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, such as ChatGPT (Developed by OpenAI), have recently become a popular resource for students seeking assignment assistance. While there are articles that have been published on whether or not students work with (or are allowed to use) generative artificial intelligence (Cao & Zhong, 2023; Su et al., 2023; Vazquez-Cano et al., 2023), there is little published research that explores differences in how students use it in academic settings.

This lack of research, especially regarding how artificial intelligence can be integrated successfully into institutional honor systems, creates uncertainty about what constitutes ethical usage. Educators, students, and institution's policy makers are often left navigating blurry boundaries without clear guidance. A common example used in my personal presentations and conversations involves how parents sometimes tell their children to simply not worry about certain subjects. People, or children in this example, do not stop thinking about a topic just because they are told not to. Instead, they look for someone who can answer their questions and help them understand at their own capacity (Corriveau and Kurkul, 2014). When artificial intelligence is handled the same way and only met with warnings or prohibitions, attempts at deterrence can unintentionally encourage unchecked or inappropriate usage.

Many popular concerns surrounding artificial intelligence stem from questions about education. *Are students really learning when they use these tools? Is using artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT technically cheating?* Educators and institutions want students to earn their degrees honestly and through hard work, so it is understandable that some fear artificial intelligence might make this more difficult. However, rather than painting artificial intelligence as a threat or a shortcut, it may be more productive to shift the question toward reclaiming this tool. How can artificial intelligence be used in ways that are useful, mindful, and aligned with modern educational standards? How can we guide students to interact with this resource responsibly instead of pretending the resource does not exist? These are the questions I implore institutions to turn their attention towards.

During my sophomore year at Lyon College, I was given the opportunity to assist in a research project that observed artificial intelligence usage in a classroom setting. Students were instructed to write a one page narrative assignment in which they were allowed to use generative artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT if they wished. The only requirement was that they had to report the interactions they had with the artificial intelligence by submitting a screenshot. This encouraged students to experiment with artificial intelligence while also creating an honesty clause that supported transparency rather than secrecy. Applying the methods used in this project to an actual class syllabus would be the next step in demonstrating that this system can work.

College policies that encourage ethical usage of artificial intelligence can be beneficial for both institutions and their student bodies. Liberal arts institutions such as my own can continue to offer students a well rounded and thoughtful education while also helping them develop skills that will continue to evolve throughout their lives. I hear this said often, but artificial intelligence, much like many technologies, resembles a boulder rolling down a steep hill. We can try to ignore it, but we will be crushed in the process. Or we can hop on top of the boulder and learn to work with it.

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