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Message From the President

By

Shawn R. Charlton, Ph.D.

Professor & Director of Undergraduate Program in Psychology
University of Central Arkansas

Becoming Psychologists in Service of Self and Society

My first conversations with new psychology majors or with students considering the major almost always begin with some version of the same question:

"What can I do with this degree?"

This is a critical question. Careers matter. Graduate school matters. Finding meaningful work matters. Throughout our careers, we all wrestle with questions about where psychology fits into our lives.

As we consider our continued personal development in psychology and our interactions with students, there are two additional questions that it is critical we address:

Who am I becoming through my study and practice of psychology?

And from that question:

How can I leverage psychology to make a meaningful impact within my sphere of influence?

These two questions have increasingly shaped my own thinking as an educator and someone deeply interested in how we help people develop a **psychological identity**.

Psychological knowledge is something a person has.

Psychological skills are something a person uses.

Psychological identity is who a person is becoming through the study and practice of psychology.

Psychology programs do an exceptional job teaching what psychology is and does. We introduce theories, research methods, statistics, neuroscience, learning, cognition, development, social behavior, personality, and the many applications of psychological science.

Yet the most meaningful psychology education does something more: it facilitates psychology becoming part of who we are and how we engage with other people and the world around us.

That shift is subtle, but profound.



People who are developing a psychological identity are learning to think differently. They ask different questions. They become more curious and less judgmental. They look for evidence before drawing conclusions. They notice context instead of assuming character. They understand that biology, environment, and social context are inseparably interlocked in shaping behavior. They begin to understand that behavior is lawful, contextual, and worthy of careful study.

Psychology is no longer simply something they know; it is a part of how they live.

Because psychology is the science of who we are, it has always been more than a body of knowledge. **It is a discipline that quietly reshapes those of us who study and practice it.**

It changes how we see the world.

It changes how we understand ourselves.

It changes how we relate to other people.

It changes how we contribute to our communities.

We begin to replace the question, "What's wrong with this person?" with a more useful one: "What experiences, environments, motivations, and histories might help explain this person's behavior?" Curiosity replaces judgment. Evidence replaces assumption. Compassion grows alongside understanding.

Perhaps that is psychology's greatest gift. More than just helping us understand human behavior, it changes the kind of people we become.

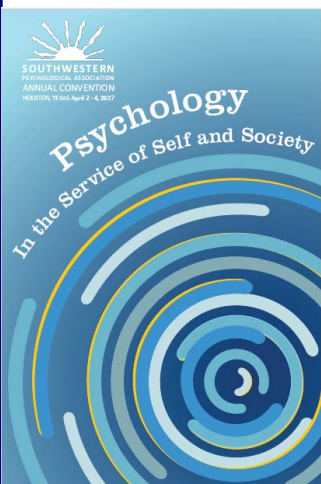
And those changes don't stop with us. Psychology has a remarkable tendency to move outward. We bring psychological science into our classrooms, clinics, laboratories, organizations, businesses, hospitals, families, churches, friendships, and communities. What begins as personal understanding becomes public impact.

Our own growth becomes someone else's opportunity.

Like a ripple spreading across the surface of water, psychology begins with understanding and moves outward through countless acts of application, leadership, kindness, discovery, and service.

The ripples of psychology became the inspiration for our themes for the **2027 SWPA Annual Convention**,

April 2 - 4 in Houston, Texas (please visit our website for full details about the convention):



Psychology in Service of Self and Society

The theme is intentionally written as one idea expressed in two directions.

Psychology serves the self as it transforms how we think, learn, relate, and grow.

Psychology serves society as transformed people impact relationships, organizations, and communities.

One naturally leads to the other.

That movement, from the individual outward, is beautifully reflected in the work of our 2027 keynote speaker, **Dr. Michael E. McCullough** (University of California, San Diego; <https://www.michael-mccullough.com>). Dr. McCullough's work demonstrates that experiences that begin within individuals often become forces that strengthen relationships and communities.

His work has shown that gratitude is more than an emotion. It strengthens relationships, encourages generosity, and increases our willingness to invest in one another. Likewise, forgiveness does more than heal past hurts. It repairs relationships, reduces cycles of retaliation, and creates the conditions for renewed cooperation.

Dr. McCullough's work highlights our 2027 theme: psychology fulfills its greatest promise when personal transformation becomes social impact.

If psychological identity develops through meaningful experiences, then conventions should intentionally cultivate those identities.

That philosophy is shaping our conference planning.

Alongside our outstanding scientific program, SWPA 2027 will feature a professional development series designed specifically for students. These sessions will explore mentoring, networking, graduate training, and other topics critical to the development of psychological identity.

Research presentations will always be the heart of SWPA.

But conferences are also places that shape professional identities.

Many attendees arrive wondering where they belong in psychology. They leave having found inspiration, mentors, collaborators, and friends.

Sometimes even a new vision of who they are becoming and their future impact.

Helping cultivate those transformational moments may be one of the greatest services a professional convention can provide.

As we prepare for Houston, I want this year's convention to reflect the collective wisdom of our SWPA community. If this year's theme resonates with you or if you have ideas for our student professional development series or other programming to help students develop their psychological identities, I hope you'll reach out (scharlton@uca.edu). The strongest professional communities are built together, and I hope Houston 2027 will reflect our shared commitment to psychology's impact on individuals, relationships, and society.

I look forward to seeing you in Houston. Not only to present your scholarship and reconnect with colleagues, but to reflect on the psychologist you are becoming and the ripples your work will create.

Because, in the end, the question is not simply what psychology can do for us.

The question is what we will do with psychology, in service of ourselves, one another, and society.

A Short, Practical Guide to Self-Regulation

By

John A. Terrizzi, Jr., Ph.D.

**Professor & Director of the School of Social Work, Psychology, & Philosophy
Texas Woman's University**

In this essay, we will explore a mechanistic model of the self-regulatory system. We will discuss the utility of viewing the regulatory system from a mechanical perspective. Lastly, we will unpack a few common examples of regulatory failure in the hopes of enhancing regulatory success.

A thermostat is a sort of self-regulatory system. Its intent is to keep your air temperature in a tolerable range. It is a relatively simple, mechanistic system. The user sets the thermostat at the desired temperature. If the temperature falls outside of that range, it sends a signal to the air conditioning unit if set to cool or the furnace if set to heat. The thermostat is not self-conscious. There is no deliberation. The message that is sent is the result of a simple mechanical process (e.g., the temperature-related expansion of a metal coil that completes an electrical circuit).



Some have suggested that the human self-regulatory system may function in a similarly mechanical fashion (see Carver & Scheier, 1982). Though materialistic explanations of psychological processes may initially feel dehumanizing, they can be pragmatic. If we are interested in self-betterment, it is important for us to understand what we are and how we work even if it isn't flattering.

One of the common mechanistic models of regulatory system is the TOTE model (see Miller et al., 1960). The acronym stands for Test, Operate, Test, Exit. Let's translate his computer programming language into the more relatable human experience. We will break each of these steps down into more easily digestible pieces.

Test is the process of making a comparison. In the thermostat model, the comparison is between the desired temperature (set by the operator) and the actual temperature. In the human experience, self-regulation involves self-discrepancy (see Higgins, 1987). According to this way of thinking, the self is composed of multiple components (i.e., the Actual, Ideal, and Ought selves). The actual self is comparable to the actual room temperature in the thermostat model. It represents all the current self-reflective data (e.g., abilities, social roles, life circumstances, etc.).

The Ideal and Ought selves represent possible comparison points. The Ideal is our hopes, dreams, and wishes. It is primarily driven by our internal motivations. For example, if I am a college student, my Ideal self (in part) is to be a degree holder. The Ought self is externally motivated. Whereas my sense of the Ideal comes from I (or me), the Ought self comes from the other, those to whom I have some responsibility (e.g., family, community, co-workers, friends, partners, etc.).

In the thermostat model, the Operating message is relayed as an electrical signal to the HVAC system. In the human self-regulatory model, the signal is experienced emotionally. Though these emotions undoubtedly have their own underlying (mechanical) electro-chemical causes, we will stick with discussing the perceived human experience (i.e., the emotion). When we do not meet the expectations of our Ideal and Ought selves, we often experience a negative emotion (e.g., anxiety, disappointment, sadness, shame, etc.). These emotions serve as a motivating function. They encourage us to change our behavior in a way that helps us reach the goals set by our Ideal and Ought selves.

This is the Operate step in the TOTE model. The discomfort that results causes us to change our behavior. For example, if I am underprepared for my Statistics exam, it might cause me to experience anxiety. Ideally, that anxiety will trigger studying behavior. If I have developed good studying practices over my academic career, the activation of those study habits should minimize the discrepancy thus reducing my anxiety.

The second T in the TOTE model is another Test. Reexamining whether the Ideal or Ought states have been achieved. This process can occur iteratively. One can imagine that if you were a perfectionist that this testing process could go on forever, a Sisyphean loop. Much like Sisyphus's eternal punishment of continually rolling a boulder up a hill only to see it roll down again, the Self may never be satisfied with its actual state, constantly activating behavioral scripts that never quite close the gap. This might be what an AC unit would feel like in the throes of a long hot summer if it were self-conscious, continually completing a circuit as the energy bill rachets up.

Once the discrepancy is finally solved, we reach the final stage in the TOTE model, Exit. This is the end of the loop. Once the objective is achieved, there is no longer a need to activate the corrective behavioral scripts.

Now that we have explored the mechanics of the regulatory process, it might be worthwhile to talk about how the system could fail. We don't like internal discrepancies. They result in uncomfortable feelings (e.g., anxiety, shame, sadness, guilt, depression, etc.). In a functioning regulatory system, these emotions lead to behavioral change (e.g., studying behavior) as discussed earlier. However, that is not always the case.

Humans are ego protective. We don't like our feelings hurt. Criticism hurts. We are motivated to maintain high self-esteem. This can lead to a well-known phenomenon, self-serving bias (see Mezulis et al., 2004). Essentially, this is a disruption in the attributional system (i.e., how we assign causes to personal outcomes). In the case of self-serving bias, it is assigning internal causes for positive outcomes and external causes for negative outcomes.

In the case of our performance in a Statistics class if we perform well on an exam, we may say that it is because we are smart. If we perform poorly, we may blame the professor. They were unfair. We can see how this framing can be detrimental to the regulatory process in at least two ways.

One of these is over externalization. If all our inadequate performance is the result of external factors (e.g., the system is rigged, my professor is out to get me, etc.) then there will be a sort of self-regulatory self-sabotage. That is, the disappointment that results from your performance will be directed toward external factors, factors that, even if they do exist, are often beyond our control. Externalization relieves the negative emotion, but it doesn't solve the problem of poor performance. In fact, it derails the regulatory process altogether. In a sense the thermostat never sends a message to HVAC. A behavioral script is never triggered.

A propensity toward internalizing can also be problematic. If everything is always our fault, then the regulatory system becomes overwhelmed. We can become paralyzed by our anxiety and depression, which also causes a breakdown in the system. The HVAC system cannot keep up with the demand.

In this essay, we have relied on the thermostat as metaphor for our regulatory system. Though this metaphor is useful, our regulatory system is not a thermostat. It is more complicated. We are not singly goaled organisms. Our regulatory system is a complicated labyrinth of hierarchical goals. Some of these goals are pre-chosen because we are human organisms (e.g., food, sleep, social relationships, etc.). Because of this and the limitations of our cognitive resources, it is important for us to address our immediate biological needs if we are to optimize our regulatory system. That is, if we want to maximize our chances of earning an A on our Statistics exam, we should make sure that we are rested, hydrated, de-stressed, and well fed. This is good advice no matter what the test.

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Should Research Be About Me?

By

Tyler N. Livingston, Ph.D.

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Students in my research methods course once asked me what motivates us to conduct research. To gather a variety of perspectives, I surveyed a group of psychological scientists and shared their motivations with the class. An anonymous respondent described the appeal of research simply as me-search, a way of learning more about oneself. This motivation resonated with most students, many of whom were surprised that other motivations existed. I admit my skepticism about the idea of me-search. It can be attractive but potentially risky, and there are other motivations for fascinating research that have little to do with oneself.

The pull toward research driven by personal experience is understandable, especially early in our training. Personal relevance can inspire interest in a project, and students who are still learning to generate hypotheses might find it easier to begin with questions they have already been asking themselves. Moreover, firsthand experience with a phenomenon can generate questions that others might not think to ask, which can be valuable at any career stage. Notwithstanding benefits of me-search, there are reasons to be cautious.

Greater understanding of the world beyond oneself is a goal of empirical study. Self-knowledge is a worthy pursuit, and psychology often attends to the individual person. If greater self-knowledge results as a byproduct of our research, that is a welcome outcome. But the tools of empirical inquiry are designed to address population-level questions about phenomena rather than individual-level questions about oneself. Empirical research involves collecting data from many participants with diverse attitudes and behaviors that often differ from our own. If we interpret their data through the lens of ourselves, we risk missing what our participants are telling us in the aggregate. They are the subject of our research.

Personal investment can compromise the research process at the start. When we have a vested interest in the result, we may be more likely to frame hypotheses in ways that favor a preferred conclusion rather than to test an idea objectively. Investment in any theory or outcome can bias research design and interpretation. Me-search presents a potent version of this challenge because the investment is personal rather than merely intellectual.

After we collect our data, me-search can distort how we receive the results. It's important to accept the result of a well-designed study, even when it counters our expectations. Researchers with a stake in the outcome might be more likely to rationalize away or contort inconvenient results, or attribute them to a methodological artifact rather than to receive them at face value. Even detached researchers are sometimes surprised by findings or struggle to accept them. Those difficulties can be more intense and consequential when the research is personally relevant.



It may seem counterintuitive, but we are sometimes more likely to abandon personally relevant research. A colleague who studies death, dying, and grief shared that several of her students who entered that area through experiences with loss discontinued their research. The subject that initially attracted them became burdensome to study over time. A productive research program can benefit from some distance from our topic. By definition, we live our own lives all the time. Research can be an opportunity to study something totally different from what we think about the rest of the day.

Me-search can subtly narrow our thinking by limiting our research agenda to the bounds of our personal experience. Scientific curiosity about the broader world has no such ceiling. Researchers who explore beyond their immediate experience can build versatile programs that develop in new and unexpected directions as the field evolves.

There is a sense in which research is always about us. Research teaches us about ourselves, but what we learn may have less to do with our findings and more to do with how we navigate the process itself. How we respond to setbacks, how we handle critical feedback, and how we make decisions under uncertainty all become apparent through the practice of research regardless of topic. This type of self-knowledge is available to any researcher, and what we learn about ourselves in the process serves us in other areas of our lives as well.

When I surveyed researchers to share their motivations with my methods class, other respondents described curiosity about how people think and behave, and how the results of each study raise new questions that inspire the next investigation. The progression from one finding to the next question generates a dynamic and responsive research program. If our research questions originate in our own experiences, findings may be less likely to inspire the next study and more likely to send us back to the same starting point. There is no shortage of interesting questions that have little to do with any of us personally, and pursuing them can be just as rewarding.

Policies That Support Students: Implementing Flexibility Into Courses

By

Stefanie S. Boswell, Ph.D.

Professor

University of the Incarnate Word - San Antonio, TX

Like many instructors, I have been challenged by the desire to support students while also maintaining academic standards. When a student emails asking for an extension because they are overwhelmed, of course I want to help. At the same time, instructors may worry that being too flexible will encourage procrastination or send the message that due dates are inconsequential. In weighing these decisions, I found myself questioning what was fair and how best to apply the ethics code. Eventually, though, I realized I was asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, “Am I being consistent?” I started asking, “How can I design my course so that students have flexibility when they need it?” That shift changed the way I think about course policies.



Life happens: students have three exams in the same week, relationships dissolve, cars break down, and family responsibilities arise. None of these situations is unusual, so I began designing my courses with the expectation that some students would inevitably encounter them. Over the past several years, I have implemented policies that give every student access to built-in flexibility. Instead of students wondering whether they need to request exceptions, I provide clearly defined opportunities that anyone can use. I explain these policies at the beginning of the semester and remind students about them throughout the term. They are applied consistently and designed with specific limits. Students know what options are available to them, so they do not have to negotiate individual circumstances. As a result, I no longer face stressful ethical dilemmas about exceptions and consistency.

Although my courses now offer more flexibility, the learning objectives remain the same. Assignments and exams have not become easier, and grading expectations have not changed. Students are still responsible for demonstrating the same knowledge and skills as before. Now, however, they have more control over when they demonstrate that learning. An unexpected benefit has been the change in the tone of many instructor-student interactions. Conversations are less about pleading for exceptions and more about planning for success.

It is important to recognize that flexibility is not a one-size-fits-all solution. What works in one course or institution may not work in another. The pace of a 16-week course is quite different from that of a three-week course with multiple assignments and quizzes each week; the level of flexibility that works well in one course could quickly put a student behind in another. Moreover, each instructor has different learning objectives and teaching philosophies. Each institution also has its own policies that individual instructors must follow. The goal is to consider how our current policies support the kind of learning environment we want to create while maintaining effective pedagogy within our respective institutional cultures.

As professionals in psychology, we spend a great deal of time thinking about how environments shape behavior; our classrooms are no different. Course policies communicate expectations, influence student behavior, and shape the relationships we build with our students. When flexibility is intentional, transparent, and applied consistently, it can support student learning while still expecting students to reach the same destination.

Graduate Student Burnout: When Passion Becomes Exhaustion

By

Fatmanur Cifci - **SWPA Graduate Representative**
University of North Texas

No one goes to grad school with the intention of burning out. Many of us choose it because we have a genuine love of learning, of research, and of the potential to contribute to our fields. Yet, somewhere between coursework, deadlines, assistantships, conference submissions, and the uncertainty of what comes next, that excitement can start to feel like exhaustion. When your work is tied to your identity, exhaustion stops being ordinary tiredness. It starts to feel like failure. Burnout was originally described as a response to chronic workplace stress, marked by emotional exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and a diminished sense of accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Students juggle coursework, research, teaching, clinical hours, conference deadlines, and service, usually all at once, and usually without any clear boundary between work and the rest of life. A manuscript can always use another revision. There is no point in the week when a dissertation is officially closed for business.



The numbers back up what students already know. A meta-analysis found that approximately 35% of graduate students report symptoms of anxiety (Chi et al., 2023). Likewise, 24% and 17% of doctoral students reported symptoms of depression and anxiety at clinical levels, respectively (Satinsky et al., 2021). Indeed, nearly half of graduate students report depression, anxiety, or burnout (Evans et al., 2018; SenthilKumar et al., 2023). Almost 75% of graduate students feel stressed or very stressed (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). These are not fringe experiences. They are common enough to be considered a feature of the training environment rather than a personal anomaly.

Money makes it worse. Funding is uncertain, assistantship duties expand, and rent keeps rising. Meanwhile, the questions about what comes after (e.g., internship match, licensure, and an academic job market that inspires little confidence) sit in the background of every semester. All of this lands during years when many students are also starting families, caring for relatives, or simply trying to build an adult life in a new city.

There is a quieter contributor, too: isolation. Cohorts scatter after coursework ends, into different labs, practicum sites, and schedules, at exactly the point when the work gets hardest. Hybrid and remote arrangements have made us easier to reach and harder to actually see. Loneliness and burnout may feed each other, and both may grow best in the gaps where informal, everyday contact used to be.

Academic culture adds its own pressure. Graduate students spend their days surrounded by accomplished people, which can be motivating and corrosive in roughly equal measure. Comparison is constant. The comparison doesn't end when you leave campus, either. On LinkedIn, every small milestone becomes a public announcement, and posting them starts to feel less like a celebration and more like an obligation and a quiet competition. Scrolling through it can turn even a productive week into evidence of falling behind. Imposter feelings come up in nearly every candid conversation I have with fellow students, yet each person seems privately convinced they are the only one faking it. Perfectionism gets rewarded right up until it becomes the problem.

What burnout costs is well documented: motivation, empathy, academic performance, and engagement with work that once felt meaningful (Bullock et al., 2017). At its worst, it pushes people out of programs and out of the profession entirely. For a discipline that studies well-being for a living, there is something uncomfortable about how routinely we accept these conditions in our own training.

The tempting response is to prescribe self-care, and to be fair, sleep, exercise, and social connection genuinely help (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021). But burnout is not primarily an individual failing, and it will not be fixed one wellness workshop at a time. It emerges from systems, which means real solutions have to reach the departmental, institutional, and professional levels as well (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Programs need to be much more proactive in monitoring graduate student mental health than they are now (Satinsky et al., 2021).

Mentorship is one of the strongest levers we have. A supportive mentor can calibrate expectations, normalize setbacks, and make it safe to say "I'm struggling" without professional penalty. Peer relationships matter just as much because they remind students that nobody is carrying this alone. Regional organizations like SWPA are an underused resource here. The annual convention is one of the few places where students from dozens of programs share a room, and some of the most durable professional friendships and informal mentoring relationships in this field begin exactly there.

Institutions have their part to play: clear expectations, mental health resources that students can actually access, and a culture that treats sustainable work as a strength rather than a lack of ambition. Students report less burnout when they feel genuine institutional support behind them (Andrade et al., 2023). This finding should surprise no one. It should also obligate all of us.

Graduate school is supposed to prepare people for long, meaningful careers. That only works if people survive the preparation. Burnout is not the price of admission to this field. Treating it as inevitable does a disservice to the students who will build psychology's next several decades.

If you are a graduate student in our region and any of this sounds familiar, or if you have ideas about mental health resources, mentorship, or program climate that SWPA leadership should hear, reach out to me or any executive officer.

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A Call to Contribute to STP's Teaching Tips

Did you give a teaching-focused presentation at SWPA this year? If so, the Editorial Board of STP e-books welcomes you to consider contributing to the forthcoming edition of Teaching Tips (2025-2026). The Teaching Tips volumes provide summaries of teaching presentations originally delivered at different national or regional conferences, many of which are sponsored by STP. The goal of this series is to preserve these works, which may otherwise be forgotten after their original presentation, for dissemination to a wider audience of current and future educators. The volumes are organized into topical areas, such as: accessibility; assessment; best practices; critical thinking; diversity, equity, and inclusion; online teaching; pedagogy; professional development for both faculty and students; scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL); service learning; student belonging; student engagement and motivation; student success; student well-being; and undergraduate research.

Heather Scherschel and Iva Katzarska-Miller serve as managing editors for Teaching Tips volumes, and they would like to hear from you! Please contact Heather (hscherschel@gmail.com) to learn more about submitting to Teaching Tips.

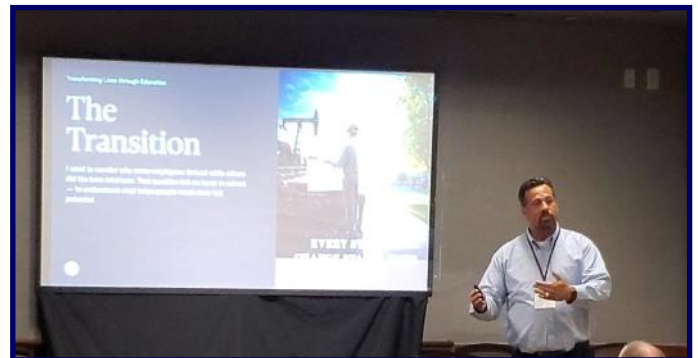
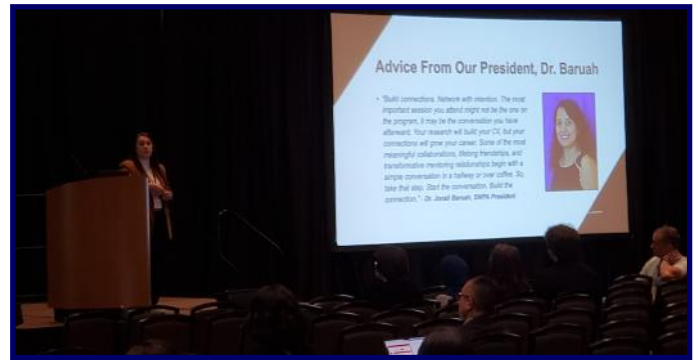
SWPA 2026 Highlights!

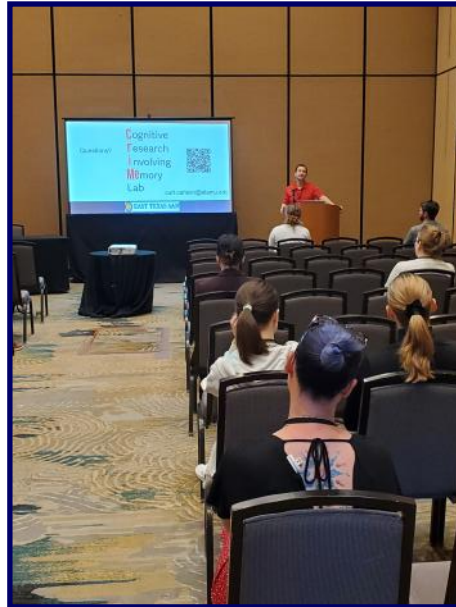
We had a great time in Frisco in 2026!!

We had some great presentations...









We had so many pictures of wonderful poster presentations at SWPA 2026 that we needed to create a share folder to house them all! Please click [HERE](#) to view all the pictures of poster presentations taken at SWPA 2026.

We also had some great invited talks...



Dr. Paul Paulus

Dr. Mahzarin Banaji



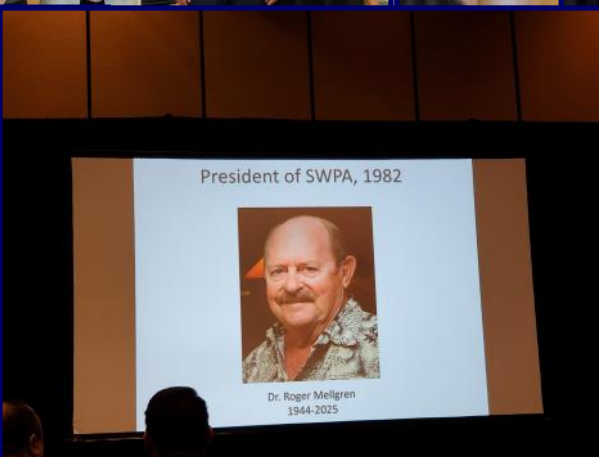
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Dr. Shinobu Kitayama

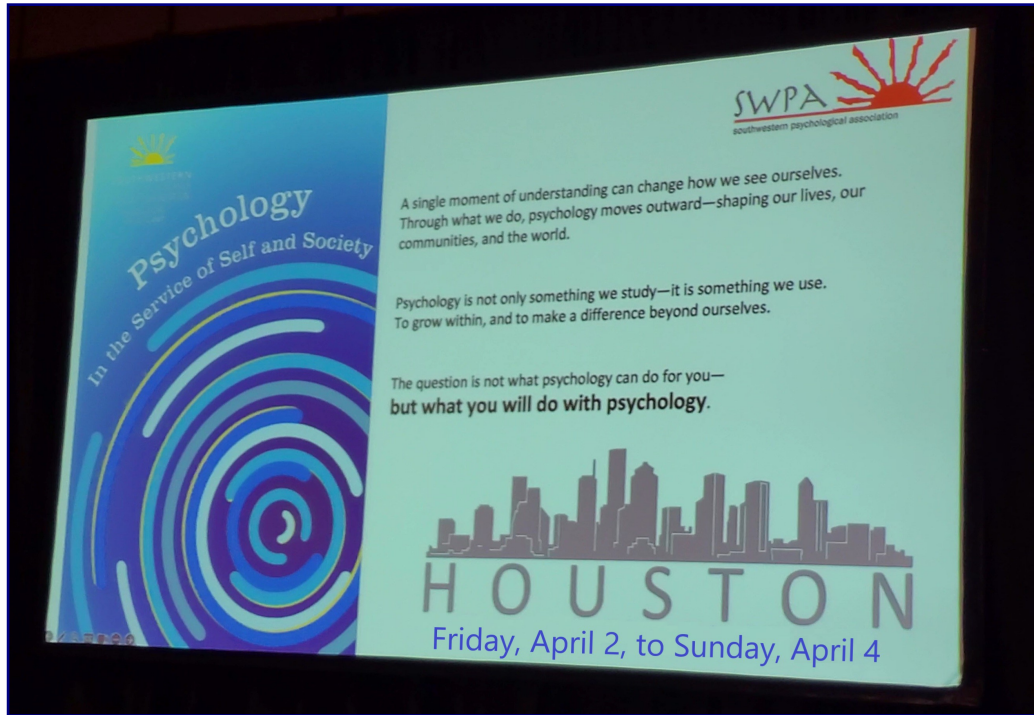


Dr. Jonali Baruah
SWPA Presidential Address

...and made some good memories!



We hope to see everyone next year in Houston for
SWPA 2027!



We'll see you there!

SWPA 2027

Houston, TX

April 2 - 4, 2027

Join us for SWPA 2027!

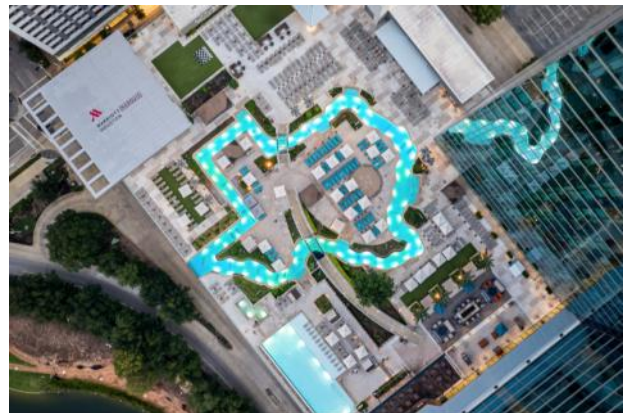


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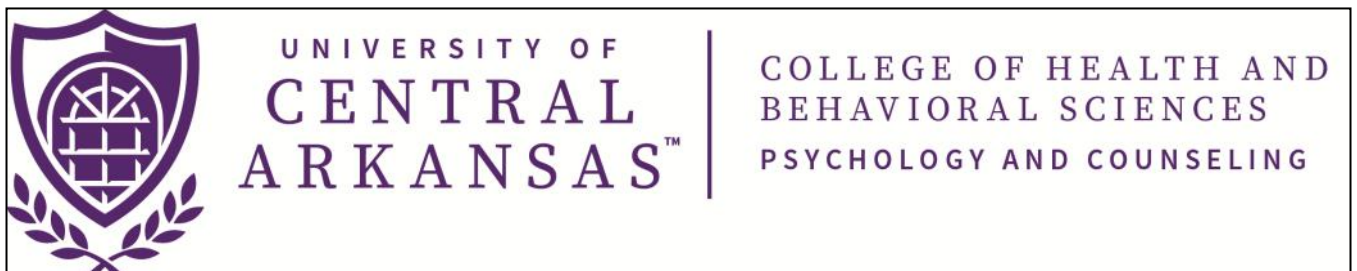
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