

Award for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology: Kate Sweeny

APA's Awards for Distinguished Scientific Early Career Contributions to Psychology recognize psychologists who have demonstrated excellence early in their careers. One of the 2016 award winners is Kate Sweeny, whose formulation of "crisis decision theory, the bad news response model, the uncertainty navigation model," and other theories and models demonstrate her capacity to provide "order and sense to unfocused and confusing research domains." Sweeny's award citation, biography, and bibliography are presented here.

Citation

"For pushing the boundaries of theorizing on health and social behavior. Kate Sweeny is a gifted theorist who is able to synthesize research and draw connections that most researchers overlook. Whether she is formulating crisis decision theory, the bad news response model, the uncertainty navigation model, or any of the other theories and models she has developed, Dr. Sweeny has demonstrated an amazing knack for providing order and sense to unfocused and confusing research domains. Her theories forge links across psychology, medicine, public health, and communication. More importantly, they provide a road map for future research aiming to address health problems."

Biography

Kate Sweeny was born in Burlington, Vermont into a home that was full of lively conversation, curiosity, love, and laughter. Her early life was paced to a cycle of adjustment and adaptation, as her father's burgeoning career moved her family first to Massachusetts, then Pennsylvania, then Florida, and eventually to Michigan. This vaguely nomadic life taught Sweeny at an early age to pay close attention to her social surroundings in an effort to find her place and her people in each new location.

Sweeny's early teenage years proved to be a formative period in light of her ultimate career. During that time her mother faced a treacherous but ultimately successful battle against non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which took her away from the family for several months of intensive treatment. Due to her father's frequent work-related travel, Sweeny spent much of this time with a close friend who suffered from severe depression. Although Sweeny's youth rendered her largely helpless in the face of her friend's suffering, this experience sparked her initial interest in uncovering the mysteries of the human mind. Her mother's battle with cancer would also become a source of inspiration, both personally and professionally, as Sweeny has looked to her mother for insights into the harsh and often unexpected

realities of facing a devastating diagnosis and fighting to live another day.

Her high school did not offer psychology courses, but Sweeny jumped in with both feet when she arrived at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. The psychology department at Furman is full of talented, passionate faculty who challenge their students to learn more, think harder, and write better. Sweeny has fond memories of late nights spent in study groups, drawing sensory systems on whiteboards in the psychology building, and all-nighters spent hashing out the finer points of APA style. She was fortunate to interact with many eminent faculty in the psychology department at Furman, including Gil Einstein and Charles Brewer, who first revealed the path toward doctoral training. They emphasized that students needed to do only three things to pave the way to graduate school: "research, research, research." In a particularly memorable incident during a class in Sweeny's junior year, Brewer asked for a show of hands from students who expected to someday be published researchers. Only one student (not Sweeny) boldly put up her hand, but the very question opened Sweeny's mind to the possibility of a life in research. Sweeny had begun her psychology training with the typical and rather generic desire to "help people" but quickly realized that her interest in the human experience was an intellectual rather than a prosocial one. A fortuitous conversation with Elaine Nocks, Sweeny's mentor at Furman, helped her to see that her academic life was just beginning and refined her general love for the field into a focus on health and social psychology. Sweeny conducted her first research project as part of Nocks's social psychology course, and with Nocks's encouragement submitted the paper to a regional conference. The presentation was accepted, and Sweeny's life as a researcher began.

In another fortunate turn of events, Furman's psychology department hired Beth Pontari in the spring of Sweeny's junior year. Pontari was a productive young social psychologist who had just received her PhD from the University of Florida, and Sweeny knew that she would be in good hands under Pontari's mentorship. She contacted Pontari months



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before her arrival at Furman, and that summer Sweeny began work in her lab. Pontari was instrumental in training and inspiring Sweeny to think like a social psychologist, generating novel and interesting research questions and testing them with creative, rigorous studies. She also introduced Sweeny to James Shepperd when he gave a talk at Furman that fall. Sweeny was captivated by the findings Shepperd presented and by the real-world implications of his work, and so she ultimately followed in Pontari's footsteps and headed to the University of Florida for graduate school the next summer.

Sweeny launched into her graduate career brimming with excitement and motivation. Sweeny's early work addressed two facets of difficult life events: bracing for the worst and bad news delivery. Shepperd's research had demonstrated a robust tendency for people to lose confidence as they approach a moment of truth, partly in an effort to prepare themselves for the possibility of bad news. Sweeny expanded this work to identify when and why people are most likely to brace, as well as the consequences of this coping strategy, and she extended the timeline of this research to include the moment of bad news delivery. It was during this time that she also began to nurture a growing interest in health psychology that would prove central to her later work. Shepperd was an exceptional mentor, providing the encouragement, support, and guidance necessary to excel in graduate school. Sweeny also benefited from the excellent training she received from Barry Schlenker, Ben Karney, and Dolores Albarracín during her time at the University of Florida.

Sweeny spent 6 years building her research repertoire in graduate school, with the help of a National Institute of

Mental Health-funded Predoctoral National Research Service Award to study the best ways of giving bad news. Her time in graduate school had one further highlight: It was there that Sweeny crossed paths with an intriguing fellow graduate student named Ryan Johnson, with whom she bonded over deep and often hilarious conversations about the meaning of life. Sweeny and Johnson ended their graduate careers with a bang, graduating one after another on a sunny spring morning in 2008 and then marrying a few hours later in a small and casual ceremony at the local botanical gardens (Sweeny's dog was the only one wearing a tie).

Sweeny was extremely fortunate to find her next academic home as an assistant professor of health psychology at the University of California, Riverside. With guidance and inspiration from some of the best colleagues imaginable (including but not limited to Sonja Lyubomirsky, Robin DiMatteo, Howard Friedman, David Funder, Dan Ozer, Carolyn Murray, and Bob Rosenthal), Sweeny's research program continued to evolve. She ultimately identified the topic that has become her professional obsession: the experience of awaiting uncertain news. Sweeny developed and published the *uncertainty navigation model*, a theoretical framework for understanding the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that emerge during the wait for news about medical diagnoses, grades, job interviews, layoffs, promotions, and the like. She also began to shift her work away from the tightly controlled but often contrived lab studies that were central to her training and moved into the field with support from the National Science Foundation and collaborators in the University of California, Riverside School of Medicine and at the Riverside University Health System Medical Center.

Sweeny's recent work has provided broad and novel insights into the experience of awaiting uncertain news. Longitudinal studies of law graduates awaiting their result on the bar exam and undergraduate students awaiting a grade on a midterm exam have revealed how waiting experiences unfold over time, typically most stressful at the start and end of the wait. Those and other studies have also identified anxiety as the dominant emotion during waiting periods, shown that people's natural coping strategies are ineffective to ease distress while waiting, demonstrated that worriers respond better to both good and bad news, and linked distress during waiting periods to poor sleep and poor health. Of course, the fun thing about the life of a researcher is that her job is never done, so Sweeny and her lab remain hard at work tackling the many unanswered questions about waiting.

Sweeny continues to expand the scope of her research, working increasingly in healthcare contexts where uncertainty has the greatest stakes and stretching her methods and expertise to include cutting-edge data collection techniques designed to capture the daily lives of people who are await-

ing uncertain news. She is endlessly motivated and inspired by her outstanding collaborators, including Megan Robbins, Jenny Howell, Will Dunlop, Zlatan Krizan, and Chandra Reynolds; by her ever-growing “family” of graduate and undergraduate students; and by the unwavering support of her husband and parents.

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