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A Communication Leader

Long considered an exemplary scholar in her field, UC Santa Barbara professor of communication Tamara Afifi has cemented her status as a leader in the area of family and interpersonal communication with two new awards. The National Communication Association (NCA) has named Afifi a Distinguished Scholar and recognized her with the 2021 Gerald M. Phillips Award for Distinguished Applied Communication Scholarship.

“I am extremely humbled and honored to receive these awards,” said Afifi, also chair of UCSB’s communication department. “These particular awards mean a great deal because they represent years of work in the field helping families.”

The NCA Distinguished Scholar Award is the association’s highest accolade. Given to only five recipients each year, it honors a lifetime of scholarly achievement in the study of human communication.

The Phillips Award is presented annually to scholars responsible for authoring bodies of published research and creative scholarship in applied communication. Afifi was chosen for the award in part because of her sustained commitment to at-risk and underserved populations, and for highlighting communities that have been largely

overlooked, including mothers and adolescents in Palestinian refugee camps and families coping with natural disasters.

“Scholars are in a unique position to use their knowledge to improve relationships and communities,” said Afifi. “In my opinion, the very best research is that which both advances theory and is community-engaged or socially meaningful.”

In addition to these awards, she was recently named a fellow of the International Communication Association (ICA), making her one of only 27 scholars in the world who have been made fellows of both the NCA and ICA.

“I congratulate Tammy Afifi on this prestigious recognition as Distinguished Scholar from the National Communication Association,” said Charles Hale, SAGE Sarah Miller McCune Dean of Social Sciences. “Her research on family and interpersonal communication has received many professional accolades over the years, but her latest awards — from both professional associations — are crucial in securing her position as a true leader in the field. Her groundbreaking scholarship and stellar international reputation are a credit to the division of social sciences and to the university.”

Afifi’s work examines, among other issues, how family members communicate when stressed, the impact of that communication on personal and relational health and information regulation in interpersonal contexts. She has produced nearly 150 publications, with articles in the field’s top journals.

Her latest research project, funded by the National Institute on Aging, uses virtual reality (VR) to connect 200 older adults in senior living communities who have cognitive impairments with their adult children who live at a distance.

“The goal is to help them thrive and maintain important family relationships, despite cognitive and physical challenges,” Afifi said. “Caregiving for someone with dementia can be stressful, relentless and isolating. If I can provide some relief with the VR, reduce caregiver burden and improve mental health, it would feel like my research has made a difference personally and professionally.”

Afifi’s awards will be presented Nov. 20 at the NCA 107th Annual Convention in Seattle.

Tags
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