

# ENGAGE

Psychological & Brain Sciences  
UC SANTA BARBARA



**Friday, February 28, 2025, 11:30am**  
**ENGAGE Distinguished Alumni Colloquium**  
**Psychology 1312 (Sage Room)**



## **Susan Persky PhD**

Associate Investigator, Social and Behavioral Research Branch  
National Human Genome Research Institute  
National Institutes of Health

### **Psychological science X virtual reality: A formula for health innovation**

The interplay between virtual reality (VR) technology and psychological science represents a powerful opportunity, enabling unique ways of bridging laboratory precision with real-world and clinical relevance. This presentation draws from two decades of work to demonstrate how immersive technologies like VR are revolutionizing research, education, and practice in health and medicine. Based in extensive research on clinical simulation and behavioral measurement, we will examine how VR enables novel approaches to the study of critical health psychology topics including patient-provider interaction, effective communication about the future of genomic medicine, and health behavior intervention and assessment. This work leverages validated VR environments designed to capture nuanced behavioral data while maintaining ecological validity in areas such as food choice behavior and clinical decision-making. The talk will explore how individual differences and motivational states moderate users' experiences in VR settings, and how this can be leveraged for the development of precision interventions. Looking forward, we'll discuss emerging research needs and opportunities as VR is more widely deployed in healthcare and beyond, and as it converges with AI, biosensors and the future internet. We'll conclude by examining crucial psychological considerations for balancing technological innovation with privacy, autonomy, and equity.

**Bio:**

Dr. Susan Persky is an associate investigator within the Social and Behavioral Research Branch at the National Human Genome Research Institute, National Institutes of Health. She heads the Health Communication and Behavior Unit and is the founding director of the Immersive Simulation Program - an emerging tech research lab, founded in 2006. Dr. Persky earned a BA in psychology from Northwestern University, and an MA and PhD in social psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara where she studied at the Research Center for Virtual Environments and Behavior. Throughout her career, she has examined the emergence of technological advancements, their influence on society, and ways to harness these innovations to improve research, medicine, and public health. She has published extensively in the areas of health communication, genomics, and virtual reality methods and application. She has provided scientific leadership through service on bodies such as the World Economic Forum Global Future Council on Virtual and Augmented Reality and the Veteran's Administration Immersive Executive Round Table. Dr. Persky has presented her research in venues such as the Smithsonian Institution and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine.