

Sapere Aude — Dare to Be Wise:
06 Steven Y. Sussman

CHILDHOOD

Full name: Steven Yale Sussman (aka, Steve)

Tell me about where you were born and how you grew up.

I was born at Mount Sinai Hospital in Chicago on March 16, 1955, and grew up in Skokie, Illinois. Skokie had the largest concentration of holocaust survivors in the United States after WW II. Up to 10% had concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. I grew up in a red brick townhouse. There were four families per townhouse row and seven rows; so, 28 families resided in my immediate neighborhood. Our townhouses were the place to go for Halloween candy. This was a working-class neighborhood. As a youth no one had air conditioning and people would gather outside during the summer, set up a coffeemaker, and drink coffee. My dad had the most education among the parents, as he had a Master's degree in Electrical Engineering.

I grew up kind of differently. As a young child, I loved rocking in the car when we were on the road and rocking on the couch at home. For a brief period of time, I liked running head-on into a marble and wooden table in the living room. It felt good. I suppose I had "cooties" as there was a two-week war on me in kindergarten; some classmates put snow in my boots and shoved the boots back on my feet. I had to learn to toss them off of me. Even the kindergarten teacher had difficulties with me and I came home with buttons off my shirt. Apparently, I wandered around the room some. I liked looking at doll houses more than trucks. Mainly my wandering around seemed to get me into trouble. I also started getting a bit mad at the teacher, who did not seem to communicate well with me. I seemed to "quiet down" some by first grade. My first-grade teacher didn't know I could read. I suppose I didn't talk much in first grade. Once she knew I could read, my

academic life was much brighter. Still, in the early grades, teachers noticed that I tended to wander about the room aimlessly. I grew out of much of this behavior by the time I reached sixth grade. I played trumpet in the grammar school band and orchestra and became involved in some school plays. I won the grammar school math fair in eighth grade, involving over 100 projects. I entitled my project "Sussman's Identity Times Multiple Addictive Patterns."

My brother moved out of the house when I was quite young. He was about 16 years older than I was. He eventually received his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. My sister went to Northwestern University majoring in drama and speech. She is about eight years older than I am.

Just when I first began high school, most of my closest friends dropped out of high school and received their GEDs at a later time. I was "difficult" in summer and winter vacations but worked hard during the school year. I have had several periods when I was difficult. I was in a few high school plays but mostly was involved with the cross-country and track sports teams. I ended up the senior athlete and scholar-athlete for Niles East High School in my senior year of 1973. They gave me two trophies and I was often in the local newspaper. I went downstate in the two-mile run, placing 16th in the State of Illinois in 1973 with a 9:37 two-mile run. I also did run the Boston Marathon in 1978, with a 2-hour 43-minute marathon time.

My dad suffered from lung cancer when I was 15 and he died when I was 16. He was just 52. He was exposed to nuclear radiation from his job. He also smoked two to four packs of Kent cigarettes a day. My mom suffered from late onset Alzheimer's Disease but she lived almost to 94. My brother died of sepsis, indirectly related to Parkinson's at 77 years of age. My sister is still alive.

What did your parents do for a living?

Again, my parents had the most education in the neighborhood. I suppose that made my family a bit different, odd within the

neighborhood. My dad was an electrical engineer who often did work for the government. My mom went back to school as I grew up, earned her master's degree in education, and eventually became a sixth-grade teacher; later, she became one of the first learning disability teachers in Chicago. She taught in uptown Chicago at Stockton Elementary School, and her students made sure that she was always safe. They liked her.

What about your education?

I went to the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana as an undergraduate. I almost flunked out after my first year there but turned it around and graduated in 3-1/2 years with a 3.59 GPA. Next, I went to the University of Iowa Law School and dropped out the second semester. Finally, I went to the University of Illinois at Chicago and received my PhD in clinical-social psychology in 1984. I graduated with seven publications, mostly in leading psychology journals.

What kind of educational environment did you grow up in?

My dad received his MS in electrical engineering and almost completed his dissertation. My mom received her MA in special education. My brother received a PhD in philosophy and my sister received a BA in speech and drama. Most of my family read a great deal. I was the exception. I watched TV a lot.

What were your interests in high school?

I was interested in sports (wrestling somewhat but mostly long-distance running). I also was interested in creative writing, particularly poetry. I had a solid set of running buddies. We have maintained our cross-country running friendship group for over 50 years. I also always had a girlfriend from sophomore year on, so I guess I was interested in dating back then.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree. (i.e. BA/BS, undergraduate degree, college).

I went to the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana as a pre-med student. I had no idea what I was doing. I chose psychology from a list of majors because they told me I had to choose a major. I attempted to join the School of Social Work program during my undergraduate years, but at that time my grades were too low. Eventually, I graduated with an interest in psychology and law.

What inspired you to get your master's degree? (i.e. MA, MS, MPH, master's degree, college)

After I dropped out of law school, I watched a lot of TV. My friend, Monte, who was taking a course there, suggested I try to get a research externship in the psychology department at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I went down there, asked around, and Alexander Rosen hired me to study serious psychiatric disorders at an inpatient facility, Illinois State Psychiatric Institute. I was accepted to UIC in psychology and received my MS and PhD there.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

Alexander Rosen helped me get in the door and was my advisor for a bit. For a while, Leonard Eron was my advisor. I ended up with Harry Upshaw as my advisor. He was quite influential in my development as an academic. My brother, Alan, also mentored me a great deal on critical thinking.

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

By the time I was in graduate school, I knew to not drop out, not to give up, and to go for it. So, I studied very hard. Dr. Rosen was a behavioral pharmacologist and exposed me to naturalistic observation research methods. Dr. Eron was a clinical psychologist and exposed me to the youth aggression literature. Dr. Upshaw taught me a great deal of cognitive social psychology, including his own work in Attitudinal Perspective Theory, and some on critical thinking. My brother taught me philosophy of science and how to engage in literature searches.

Now tell me about your doctorate work. Again, what inspired you to go on, instead of getting a job out of your master's degree (i.e. doctorate, college).

The program I was in focused on obtaining a PhD, with the MS being just part of it. So, I wasn't focused on the MS. I found the material I learned as a clinical-social psychology student fascinating, so it was easy to keep going. My dissertation was on psychophysical scaling of social psychological attitudes in the context of interpersonal attraction. I ended up using this knowledge for my study of the addictions. I utilized a PACE (pragmatics-attraction-communication-expectations) model at the time.

A couple of bookmarks inspired me: "When the light is green go, when the light is red learn." And "Bloom where you are planted".

What factor or set of actors contributed to your pursuing an academic career and becoming a researcher?

I joined my girlfriend at the time on her clinical psychology internship after I completed mine. We traveled to California. I didn't have a job. A secretary pool in Camarillo helped me type up a nice CV and I applied around, taking a

one-month job position at the VA Hospital studying hypertension. After that job ended, Brian Flay hired me as a junior research associate at the University of Southern California. This was in October of 1984. I have been there ever since.

Were there professors, mentors or advisors that made an impression on you during this time?

Brian Flay got me involved in tobacco use prevention work. That led to my interest in translation research, program development, and addictions work. Bill Hansen also helped me develop in tobacco use prevention work. Elbert Glover, perhaps without knowing it, also mentored me on health behavior research as did Stan Einstein on addictions, both focusing me on paper production. I also worked with my peers and students, including Clyde Dent, Alan Stacy, Dee Burton, Luanne Rohrbach, Donna Spruijit-Metz, Lourdes Baezconde-Garbanati, Jennifer Unger, Ping Sun, Tom Simon, Pallav Pokhrel, Artur Galimov, Leah Meza, Mark Griffiths, Tom Wills, and many others, all of whom taught me a great deal. On my clinical psychology residency at the University of Mississippi Medical Center and VA Consortium, I received mentoring from Robert Rychtarik and Geary Alford, which helped me shape a course in addictions research. (Unfortunately, my nickname was "Wildman.")

What lessons would you say you learned from them that have influenced your educational and professional development?

Being introduced to the content areas was quite helpful. I learned to work with people who were good at working with people. I also learned to work with very good statisticians. I worked on developing my conceptual skills.

Tell me about what you studied as a student, and what led you down that path.

My training at the University of Illinois at Chicago was in clinical-social psychology, with

an emphasis on the scientist-practitioner model. There was a history of mood disorder and the addictions in my family, and neurodiversity, and so I became interested in this arena. I completed all my predoctoral and postdoctoral clinical hours but ended up not getting licensed and, instead, moved more towards health behavior research and practice.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life and what have some of those impacts been?

I have been involved in tobacco, alcohol, and other drug abuse (ATOD) concepts, etiology, program development, prevention and control research since 1983. Much of my body of work is relevant to addiction conceptualization, etiology, prevention, and cessation, particularly in the arena of tobacco use but also with other drug use and the behavioral addictions. To really understand addiction, one needs to go beyond substance use. This work included my role as the editor of the chapter on etiology for the 2012 Surgeon General's Report on tobacco use and young people. I was the primary developer of three evidence-based programs: Project Towards No Tobacco Use (Project TNT; tobacco use prevention for young teens), Project EX (tobacco use cessation for older teens), and Project Towards No Drug Abuse (Project TND; drug abuse prevention for older teens). My most cited publications actually have been pertaining more to the behavioral addictions (food/eating, exercise, electronic media, shopping, work, sex, love). I have mentored multiple undergraduate and graduate students, and junior faculty. I also have engaged in translation research over this time. I have over 600 publications now.

I am kind of fond of a recent model I developed, integrating various concepts, the Associational Memory-Appetitive Systems Relations (AMASR) model of addiction. This model describes how appetitive motives may become excessive, atypically elicited, or

misdirected, with inputs from genetics-epigenetics, social and physical environmental settings, lifestyle and human development, and associative learning. The fundamental underlying perspective is that addiction involves disruption of appetitive functioning; that is, of behavior directed towards fulfilling specific human psycho-socio-biological needs. It has been theorized that addictive phenomena operate through appetitive mechanisms involving, in part, a misleading, temporary subjective sense of neurobiological fitness. Again, over the last 17 years I have focused some on the field of behavioral addictions, which is needed to improve understanding of what the concept of addiction is all about: appetitive need, satiation (subjective improvement in affect, cognition, or arousal), preoccupation, loss of control, negative consequences.

Were there any projects or studies you thought would lead to something interesting that just didn't pan out?

Early on I attempted to develop a measure that might differentiate normative from informational social influence among teens but that never worked out. More recently, I mentored a study looking at environmental variables (e.g., presence of graffiti) and presence of vape shops but that didn't work out. Most of the work I completed though, did pan out.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research chain of inquiry and your other academic pursuits?

Health behavior research concepts often involve a lot of sloppy thinking. Thus, thinking concepts through carefully is important. My brother influenced me on utilizing philosophy of science notions to guide my work. That has been important to me (e.g., contrasting social constructivism versus knowledge of kinds).

Inasmuch as you have been successful in disseminating your research, what advice do you have for young professionals who struggle?

Have passion for the work you do, you are creating new knowledge, uncovering truths, helping to alleviate health ills – maintain your motivation. You may do some work because you need to keep working and you may do some work because you love it. Both are okay.

What single best piece of advice would you pass along to a new investigator or student researcher-in-training today?

Bloom where you are planted. When the light is green, go; when the light is red, learn.

Describe the most courageous thing you have had to do in your academic career—perhaps something that put you at risk for the sake of standing up for a principle.

The most courageous thing I did, which was also the stupidest thing I did, was to tell my mentor as a junior researcher that I felt I was being treated too well and that he needed to help mentor my colleagues as well. It may have upset my mentor. It may have enabled me to have long-lasting work relationships. Heck, I don't know, maybe it was just stupid.

In recent times, I spoke about being “different”. That may be stupid too. However, I view myself as neurodivergent, an example of 1 out of every 100 people – a minority in aspects of cognitive processing... but not as being disordered.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

I hope some of my heuristic theoretical models will be remembered. These mostly pertain to the addictions. I just published a very brief piece in World Psychiatry... maybe this will help get some of my ideas out there. I also hope that people will look back and say that I was a

good mentor. I always got a rush out of training others and hope I did well.

From the Korean episodic, “Extraordinary Attorney Woo”: “My life is eccentric and weird, but it’s meaningful and valuable.”

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

When I was a young researcher, I did all-nighter grant writing, slept in my boss’s futon in my office, worked incredible hours, particularly on my first grants. For example, I worked 21 hours a day for three days at one point. I held off on being a dad until I was in my 40s. My work-personal life balance suffered. However, I (barely) was able to achieve a satisfactory personal life.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIA

Who are the people outside of your professional world who have impacted your life?

I suppose my friends and family have kept me fired up on life. My brother actually taught me how to think critically, get familiarized with philosophy of science, and how to look up resources. My oldest friend, Monte, actually was a substitute dad in some ways after my father died even though he is younger than I am. He got me to apply to graduate school. My ex-girlfriend, whom I was with for 17 years, got me out to California. She is on my editorial board (*Evaluation & the Health Professions*). Whereas we wanted different lifestyles, she is a great human being. My wife of 26 years rounded out my life with three children, friends, had me straddle a couple of cultures, and I learned that life is wonderful – that academia simply is not all there is.

What are some leisure time activities for which you have a passion?

Currently, I walk 2.5 hours every day. Each walk is an adventure. I also got addicted to Korean episodics and have to be careful to try not to binge watch. I also like numismatics, belong to a coin club, go to coin shows, and have written 12 articles for *The California Numismatist*.

If you could spend an evening with anyone, living or dead, contemporary character or historical figure, who would it be and what would you want to talk about?

I have no idea. To be honest, I probably would want to spend the evening with my wife, Rotchana Sussman. She is a historical figure, one of the El Monte Slaveshop Workers, who overcame incredible adversity, held captive for 17 months, working 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, one day off per month. She has a restaurant, White Springs Café, and works very hard.

If you weren't doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

I might be a full-time numismatist with a focus on Spanish Colonial Coinage and early American coins. I would also be walking a lot more than I am now. I might hang out at my wife's restaurant a bit more. Oh, and I would probably go to Disneyland a lot more than I do.

Which three books outside of academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

The Practical Book of Cobs by Daniel Sedwick for those who love Spanish Colonial Coins.
Huckleberry Finn? *Grapes of Wrath*? Heck, I don't know.

Share something about yourself that you believe is misunderstood by others.

I may appear blunt or confrontive, showing a dead-pan face, or hard-to-interpret facial

expressions. I may make strange body movements at times, look like I am staring one down. I may get nervous when a train whistle blows, or a car alarm goes off, or an ambulance zooms by. I may be different from you, but that does not mean I am not nice. I am just wired differently. Every so often I do get misunderstood by allistic communicators. I always remember that life is wonderful, that every breath is precious, that every moment is the best moment.

Editor's note.

Dr. Sussman was named Fellow of The Academy in 2001, Research Laureate in 2005, and served as the seventh president of The Academy (2007-2008).

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.