Standing on the shoulder of a giant: Remembering Scott Lilienfeld

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I think we all agree that 2020 will not easily be forgotten, and not only because of the pandemic. Our field also lost many great scholars and colleagues this year. And when you think it just cannot go worse, it does: 2020 will also be remembered as the year we lost another giant, Prof. Dr. Scott Lilienfeld (Emory University). He was only 59 years old when he lost his battle against pancreatic cancer.

Some ATSA members might not be familiar with the work of Scott Lilienfeld, given that his primary research focus was psychopathy. Notwithstanding, he did publish several papers related to sexual violence. As a personality researcher, he was mainly interested in how personality traits, and mainly, psychopathic traits were related to sexual violence and relevant correlates, including attitudes toward rape victims and sexual objectification.

But he did not only spend his time on exploring the psychopathic mind. He also liked to question things, … many things. No psychological theory, no practice was safe for him. He made it his life’s work to expose pseudoscience in psychology by tackling numerous myths in popular psychology and by encouraging critical thinking in students, researchers, and practitioners.

No doubt that Scott Lilienfeld was viewed as a troublemaker by many. He was not afraid of questioning concepts and theories that psychologists tended to take for granted, including repressed memories of trauma (see David Prescott’s contemplations on this issue), and he was very critical about the evidence-base of psychotherapy. Although he might have touched a few nerves here and there, his aims were noble: He wanted to expose therapies that do more harm than good and to raise the bar for evidence-based practice.

We could sum up the probably uncountable number of papers, chapters, and essays he has written. We could list the number of presentations he has given worldwide – although I’m afraid that is just a
hopeless task. But Scott Lilienfeld was more than these numbers. He was a mentor many could lean on, a trustworthy colleague, and a warm friend, who was always available for others who needed him or just wanted to pick his brain about a new idea, paper, or research project.

So let’s honor the impressive works of Scott Lilienfeld and the many pathways he paved for us by continuing to question our practice and our research, by continuing to address all the issues we are uncomfortable with, and by never assume we are there. Because we are not.