

The John Maddox Prize Nomination for Elizabeth Loftus

Here are extended excerpts from Goldsmiths College (University of London) psychology professor Chris French's letter nominating Elizabeth Loftus for the 2016 John Maddox Prize (see News and Comment, p. 7).

CHRIS FRENCH

I would like to nominate Professor Elizabeth Loftus for the John Maddox Prize. She is an outstanding candidate with respect to all of the listed criteria:

- How clearly the individual communicated good science, despite adversity.
- The level of responsibility they took for public debate, and going above and beyond their job requirements.
- How effectively they placed the evidence in the wider debate and engaged others.

Biography

Elizabeth Loftus (usually referred to as “Beth”) spent almost three decades at the University of Washington, Seattle. She was determined to carry out research with direct relevance to real-world issues and thus became the world’s leading researcher in the area of the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Her innovative studies showed convincingly how leading questions could influence witness reports. For example, if participants are shown a video clip of two cars colliding, participants will give different estimates of speed depending upon whether the cars are described as “making contact with,” “colliding with,” or “smashing into” each other. Her research also demonstrated what has become known as the *misinformation effect*. This occurs when, after viewing an event, a witness is subtly presented with misinformation about that event. For example, a

questionnaire administered after the event might include a question asking, “What was the color of the car next to the stop sign?” In fact, the sign was not a stop sign, but when memory is tested some time later the misinformed witnesses are more likely to report that they did indeed see one. Such effects are amongst the most robust and widely replicated within the discipline and are routinely described in virtually every introductory psychology textbook. Her book, *Eyewitness Testimony*, won a National Media Award for a Distinguished Contribution from the American Psychological Foundation. The implications of such work for the criminal justice system are obvious and, as a result, Elizabeth Loftus has been called as an expert witness in hundreds of criminal cases, including high profile cases such as Ted Bundy, the Hillside Strangler, and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. Loftus took the

greatest pleasure in helping to acquit those whom she believed had been falsely accused of brutal crimes on the basis of faulty eyewitness testimony.

Having been at the forefront of one major wave of memory research, that of the unreliability of eyewitness testimony, Loftus went on to lead a second major wave of memory research: that of research into false memories. A false memory is an apparent memory for an event that either never happened at all or else happened in a completely different way to the way in which it is remembered. The issue of false memories took on great significance back in the 1980s and 1990s when numerous cases were reported in the United States and elsewhere of patients in therapy apparently recovering memories of being the victims of childhood sexual abuse, typically at the hands of their own parents, despite having had no such memories prior to going into therapy (often for common psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, etc.). Such cases were seen by some psychotherapists as proof of the psychoanalytic concept of *repression*. The idea is that if a person experiences a severely traumatic event (such as being the victim of childhood sexual abuse), this automatic defense mechanism kicks in and pushes the

memory for the event into the subconscious mind. It can then no longer be accessed by the conscious mind, but it can still exert a toxic influence leading to the development of various psychological problems in adulthood. The problem is that there is very little evidence to support the existence of repression—after all, no one ever forgot being in a concentration camp. Most experimental psychologists who study memory are extremely skeptical regarding the concept of repression, pointing out that the available evidence suggests that traumatic events are in fact much more likely to be recalled than non-traumatic events.

Loftus's interest in this issue was sparked by a legal case in which a man was on trial for murdering a child many years previously. The charge had been brought when his daughter allegedly "recovered" the memory of his criminal act, having repressed it for many years. Loftus suspected that the daughter's memory may have been a false memory based upon reading the many accounts of the case that had appeared in the media.

To study this phenomenon, Loftus and her collaborators developed several different techniques aimed at implanting so-called "rich false memories" in volunteer participants. Rich false memories are detailed false memories for entire events that never actually happened. One technique for doing so involves repeatedly interviewing participants and asking them to recall in as much detail as possible various events from their childhood, details of these events having been obtained in advance of the experiment from the participant's parents. However, along with the true events, participants are asked to recall an event that never actually took place. In Loftus's first study of this type, participants were asked about the time when, as a child, they got lost in a shopping mall and were eventually reunited with their parents. The technique was successful in implanting detailed false memories in several participants and has since



Elizabeth Loftus

Credit: Brad Swonetz/Redux/Eyevine

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been used by Loftus and many other researchers to implant false memories for a wide range of other events (despite still commonly being referred to as the "lost-in-a-shopping-mall" technique). Other techniques used by Loftus to implant false memories involve the use of false feedback, (bogus) dream interpretation, and guided imagery.

This line of research by Loftus and others established beyond all doubt that human beings are susceptible to false memories. Furthermore, a very strong case could be made that the conditions

under which certain forms of therapy took place provided the perfect context for the development of such false memories. Some of the memories so produced were of extreme forms of ritual satanic abuse involving human and animal sacrifices, cannibalism, sexual perversion, and so on. No forensic evidence has ever been found to support such claims, providing further proof that they are almost certainly based upon false memories.

It was particularly her research into false memories that led to Loftus being

attacked by those who continued to believe that recovered memories reflected events that really had taken place. Inevitably, emotions run high with respect to this issue. Patients had gone into therapy because they were psychologically vulnerable and, as a result of the therapy, ended up believing that they had been the victims of the most horrendous abuse. Families were torn apart and the accused sometimes found themselves facing criminal charges. When Loftus appeared as an expert witness casting doubt on the veracity of such memories, it was inevitable that she would upset many people, not least the therapists and patients in question. Her testimony

very aware of the profound ethical issues raised by such research and has carried out research surveying people's attitudes towards the potential for mind control that further advances in technology could produce.

Adversity

Like all good scientists, Loftus has always enjoyed respectfully arguing with colleagues for her favored theoretical position based upon empirical evidence and sound reasoning. Such debates can get quite intense at times but should never become personally hostile. However, Loftus's appearances as an expert witness in various high

Loftus, however, was not convinced and decided to investigate further. Using public records and newspaper reports, she managed to identify the Doe family. She suspected that Jane's initial stories of abuse may have been coached in order to win the custody battle. Having interviewed both Jane's mother and her former stepmother, she became even more convinced that Jane's memories of abuse were probably false.

Before Loftus had published any of the results of her investigation, Jane Doe emailed the University of Washington complaining that Loftus's investigation constituted an invasion of her privacy (this was despite the fact that she had already spoken openly about her claims and allowed her face to be seen). Loftus was given fifteen minutes' notice before someone arrived at her office and seized her files. She was exonerated following a stressful twenty-one-month misconduct investigation. Understandably, she felt badly let down by the University of Washington, having worked there for a quarter of a century. More than that, she felt utterly betrayed.

Almost the first thing that Loftus did following her exoneration was to publish an account of her findings in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* magazine (Loftus and Guyer 2002a; 2002b). In an accompanying article in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Carol Tavris (2002, p. 43) provided an account of this painful episode and urged readers to appreciate "the courage, persistence, and integrity of those skeptical inquirers who are still willing to 'offend' in the pursuit of truth and justice."

Loftus could not forgive the lack of support that she had experienced from the University of Washington, and she never received from the university a proper apology for what they had put her through. One year later, she accepted a position as a distinguished professor at the University of California, Irvine, despite a generous counteroffer from Washington. She was sad to leave her friends and colleagues of many years at Washington but soon made great new friends and colleagues at UC-Irvine.

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has, however, undoubtedly helped to acquit several people falsely accused of abusing children. Further details of the adversity that Loftus has had to face are presented below.

For now, it should be noted that her work in this area played a major role in her decision to accept a distinguished professorship at the University of California, Irvine, in 2002. Here, new lines of research opened up, particularly investigating the consequences of implanting false memories. For example, she has shown that implanting a false memory of having gotten sick as a child as a result of eating particular foods will lead to an aversion for that food in adults. Conversely, if you are led to believe that you really liked some healthy food item as a child, it will increase your desire to eat more of that food. Loftus is

profile cases of alleged historic sexual abuse triggered extreme hostility in those who did not agree with her conclusions.

In 1997, Loftus read about a case that, it was claimed, proved that repression really did occur. Psychiatrist David Corwin had recorded his interviews with a six-year-old girl referred to as Jane Doe. Jane's estranged parents were involved in a vicious battle for custody of Jane, and it was alleged that Jane had been abused by her mother. The mother lost. Eleven years later, Corwin again videoed Jane being interviewed and recorded her first appearing to be unable to remember the abuse and then apparently recovering the memory. On the surface, the evidence appeared to prove that both repression and recovered memory were, in fact, valid concepts. That was the conclusion proclaimed by many therapists.

However, it turned out that the Jane Doe nightmare was not yet over. In 2003, Jane Doe sued Loftus using her real name—Nicole Taus—despite the fact that Loftus had not revealed her true identity in any publication. Taus also sued Mel Guyer, a lawyer and psychologist from the University of Michigan who had assisted Loftus in her investigations, and Carol Tavis, who had written about the case. Taus asked for \$1.3 million for invasion of privacy, defamation, and other claims. After several years of litigation, three California courts rejected all but one of the twenty-one allegations. Against her wishes, Loftus's insurance company decided to accept Taus's offer to withdraw the one remaining allegation in return for \$7,500. This is known as a "nuisance settlement" and simply reflects the fact that it would have cost the insurance company more than \$7,500 to fight the case in court. The California Supreme Court judge ordered that the trial judge determine how much Taus would have to pay to cover the defendants' costs; the

total came to almost \$250,000. Taus declared bankruptcy soon after.

It is fitting to sum up this sorry episode with Loftus's own words from a forthcoming autobiographical chapter for the *Annual Review of Psychology*:

During this protracted and miserable legal process, I learned a great deal about the vulnerability of academics to lawsuits. Scholars are not always afforded the full protection of constitutional guarantees, and this is especially true when the scholars work on problems that matter in people's lives—and are therefore likely to be sources of controversy or conflict. But these are precisely the kinds of scholarly inquiries in which there is a profound need for our institutions to provide vigilant protection of free speech.

Despite the adversity she has faced, Loftus has never wavered in her dedication to carrying out research of the highest quality with real-world impact and to communicating her findings to the widest possible audience. I cannot conceive of a more worthy recipient of

the John Maddox Prize, and I hope that the panel agrees with my assessment. ■

For further details (including full CV), see: <https://socialecology.uci.edu/faculty/eloftus>

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