

Inside the Psychologist's Studio: The Road Taken

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Renowned memory researcher and Past APS President Elizabeth Loftus, University of California, Irvine, shared the personal side of her journey to prominence in the annual “Inside the Psychologist’s Studio” program (based loosely on the Bravo channel show of a similar name) at the APS 19th Annual Convention. Interviewed by APS President Morton Ann Gernsbacher and aided by photos from her life, the characteristically candid Loftus talked about her experiences from childhood to her position today as one of the most influential researchers in psychology.

She was born Elizabeth Fishman in Los Angeles, CA, to parents Sidney and Rebecca. Sidney was a physician who sometimes let his daughter tag along on house calls. He and Rebecca met during World War II, when he was working as an Army doctor and she was an Army librarian.

When Loftus was 14, her mother drowned in a swimming pool. In her later teens, her family home burned down in the 1961 Bel Air/Brentwood fire. In their coverage of the fire, *Life* magazine recounted young Elizabeth’s discovery that her house was burning. Although the roads were blocked, Loftus knew a back road and was determined to get to her house “because I had homework to do.” She arrived to find the house in flames. She rushed in, saved the encyclopedias, and only then went to a neighbor’s house to call her father.

During high school, Loftus enjoyed math, particularly because her busy dad took time to help with her math homework. She headed to UCLA aiming to become a math teacher, but while there, she took an introductory psychology class taught by Allen Parducci and got hooked. She kept taking psychology classes and ended up with enough credits for a double major.

After UCLA, Loftus enrolled in Stanford’s mathematical psychology PhD program because it was a perfect fit for her interests, but also, she admits, because she thought she had a better chance of meeting a husband who wanted to live in California if she stayed in the state. Loftus described the Stanford Psychology Department of that era as an intimidating, male-dominated place, with towering figures such as Gordon Bower and William Estes roaming the halls. Loftus recalled only one female tenure-track professor in the entire department, Eleanor Maccoby. She did find a cohort of friends she keeps in touch with to this day, including Phoebe Ellsworth (in social psychology), Richard Shiffrin, and Steve Link. During the second year of grad school, Loftus was assigned an incoming grad student mentee, Geoffrey Loftus. They were engaged three months after they met and were married the following June.

Loftus finished at Stanford a year earlier than Geoff, and they spent the next several years apart until they both gained positions in 1973 at the University of Washington, where Loftus studied semantic memory. One day, over lunch, a visiting cousin asked Loftus if she had made any discoveries in her research. She responded, “Yes, I’ve discovered it takes longer to name a yellow fruit than a fruit that’s yellow, about 250 milliseconds longer.” Her cousin’s response: “And how much did that cost us [taxpayers]?”

That question led Loftus to the realization that she wanted to do something more directly socially relevant. She started investigating changes in memory, specifically how leading questions and misinformation can distort memories of events. This work evolved into *Eyewitness Testimony*, published in 1979, a review of her own research as well as 80 years of previous work on the subject.

The book caught the attention of the legal community, and Loftus soon found herself serving as an expert witness on memory in hundreds of court cases. She helped acquit innocent people accused of murder, traveled to Korea to testify in a court martial, and also traveled to the Hague to testify about Bosnian War crimes. These experiences culminated in another book, *Witness for the Defense*, which blended research and trial experience in a compelling portrait of memory and its fallacies.

Eventually, though, Loftus's unquenchable mind became bored with even these life and death situations. In the late 1980s, she was asked to be an expert witness in the trial of George Franklin, who had been accused of murder based on his grown daughter's 20-year-old allegedly recovered memory. To prepare for her testimony, Loftus looked into the research on repressed memory and found surprisingly little. Loftus wondered about these types of memories. Were they real? Fake? Either way, where did they come from and why all of a sudden?

So, like any good psychological scientist, she ran a study. To test whether false memories could be planted, Loftus gave subjects personalized questionnaires about events in their early childhoods, based on preinterviews with family members. Subjects were told to answer the questions about events they remembered and say they didn't remember if they had no memory of the event. But, in addition to true stories from family members, each questionnaire contained a made-up story about being lost and then found in a shopping mall at the age of five or six years old. Even though none of the subjects had actually experienced this, about a quarter of the sample answered questions as if they remembered this traumatic event, some even adding details about what they "remembered" happening. This seminal research sparked a new line of inquiry into false memories by Loftus and others. Ultimately, studies showed that some techniques used by therapists, such as hypnosis, guided meditation, and even directly planting information (i.e. "80 percent of bulimics were abused. It's likely you were, too.") could lead to false memories.

"This made some psychotherapists pretty mad," said Loftus in what can be characterized as a significant understatement. There were negative letter-writing campaigns to the University of Washington, to societies she was involved with, and to groups that had invited her to speak. Once, Loftus said, she was on an airplane and struck up a conversation with her neighboring passenger, who turned out to be returning from a sex abuse conference. The woman was so enraged when she found out who Loftus was that she swatted her with a newspaper. The animosity escalated, and Loftus was the target of so many threats of violence that organizations thought it best to hire plainclothes security for some of her speaking engagements.

In the late 1990s, Loftus became involved in a court case in which a woman claimed to have recovered memories of sexual abuse by her mother. Loftus cast doubt on the woman's claims, and to make a long story short, the woman made a complaint to the University of Washington concerning Loftus' ethics. With only 15 minutes notice, said Loftus, her files were seized and she was the subject of an investigation by the University. It took two years for the University to clear her of any wrongdoing, and she still did not receive a formal apology. This strained her relationship with UW and so, when she

received a tremendous offer from the University of California, Irvine, she jumped at the opportunity.

In 2002, shortly after the move to Irvine, Loftus was awakened by a phone call at 6 o'clock in the morning. On the line was fellow psychologist Duncan Luce telling her that she had been elected to the National Academies of Science. Still not quite awake, she mistakenly hung up on Luce, who later joked that he was a bit offended that she wanted to get off the line so fast to go call someone else. Loftus says she was genuinely surprised by her election to the NAS because she believed her research was too applied.

NAS is just one in a long list of Loftus' honors. She holds five honorary degrees. She has won both of APS's highest honors, the James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award and the William James Fellow Award. She ranked 58th (and was the top-ranked woman) on *General Review of Psychology's* list of the "One Hundred Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century." In 2005, she received the Grawemeyer Prize in Psychology, which came not only with recognition from her peers but also \$200,000.

Looking back on her career to date, Loftus says she has few regrets and is always looking forward. Up next: a place on a committee being formed to investigate how cognitive psychology relates to military/intelligence efforts. Loftus has no plans to slow down because, as she says, "Why would you want to retire if it's this much fun?"

(See also [Inside the Psychologist's Studio with Elizabeth Loftus](#), interviewed by Carol Tavris.)