

...with Elizabeth Loftus

Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Irvine

One thing organised psychology could do better

Spend more time thinking about how to reach the public with good psychological science. Perhaps then, the person sitting next to you on a plane who asks 'What do you do?' and hears 'Psychologist' will not reflexively say 'Oh, can you fix my nephew's depression?' I want to hear instead: 'Oh, do you teach? do research? see patients?'

One great thing psychology has achieved

Psychological science has given us the gift of knowing how to ask the right questions about any claim. When someone tries to tell us that people are being abducted by aliens, or that exercise is good for us, anyone could ask 'What is the evidence?' But psychologists don't stop there. We can get more specific about what we ask next: What kind of study was done? What was the dependent variable? Was there a control group?

What kind of statistical tests were used to analyse the data? Was the study replicated? In other words, we're asking 'What *exactly* is the evidence?' We understand that some evidence is so flimsy or fragile that it is not really evidence at all.

One book you should read

Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me) by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. You'll get to understand why hypocrites never see their own hypocrisy, why couples so often misremember their shared history, why many people persist in courses of action that lead straight into quicksand. It's lucid and witty, and a delightful read.

One nugget of advice for aspiring psychologists

Appreciate the gift of knowing how to ask 'What exactly is the evidence?', and use it often.

One moment that changed the course of your career

Deciding that I wanted to learn not just about laboratory eyewitnesses but to see actual witness testimony in the context of a real live court case. I volunteered to help out the defence of a woman accused of murder, and wrote about the experience after she was acquitted. Afterwards my professional life became heavily intertwined with the legal system. Legal cases sometimes led to research hypotheses; research findings got introduced into legal cases. Now I'm not only a psychology professor but also a professor of law.

One thing you like to do when you are not doing research

Help falsely accused people – and when I'm not helping the falsely accused I like to 'eat, drink and be merry'. (I'm also merry when I do research or help the falsely accused, but I'm usually not eating or drinking).

One hero from psychology

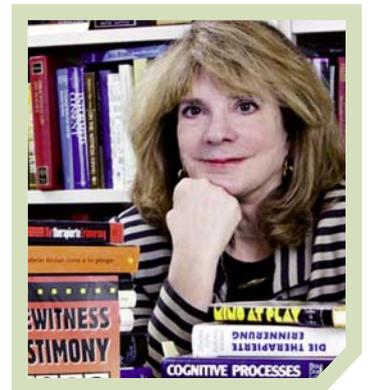
A few years ago, there was a festschrift for eminent cognitive psychologist Gordon Bower, who was one of my professors in graduate school. I spoke at the event, and

presented a number of letters and e-mails that he had sent to me over the decades, in good times and in bad. I ended the talk with one I had sent to him, saying how I will always cherish his support and mentorship. There is never a bad time to let someone know that they made a difference in your life.

One big stumbling block

For quite some time now I have had to contend with a bevy of enemies who got angry about my research on memory, and my efforts to communicate the problems of recovered-memory therapy.

One situation dragged on for years. I learned a number of lessons through this ordeal, not the least of which is that scholars need legislation and court decisions that erect strong barriers against frivolous lawsuits, and we



Elizabeth Loftus
eloftus@uci.edu

resource

Loftus, E.F. (2002). Memory faults and fixes. *Issues in Science and Technology (Publication of the National Academies of Science)*, 18(4), 41–50. [See www.seweb.uci.edu/faculty/loftus]. This article was based on an award I received from the US National Academy of Sciences, for 'application of the best social and behavioral sciences research to public policy issues'.

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