

Illusions of Memory

These are remarks by psychologist and CSI Fellow Elizabeth Loftus accepting an honorary doctorate at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

ELIZABETH LOFTUS

The honorary doctorate being awarded by Goldsmiths is deeply meaningful at this particular time in my life.

It gives me a chance to talk with you about my work on illusions of memory—or the memories that people sometimes have of seeing things or doing things that they never saw or did.

I'm proud of the work I've been able to accomplish as a psychological scientist and proud of the people I've had a chance to help along the way.

When I began my life work on illusions of memory, I had no idea it would one day prove to be such a socially relevant and politically explosive topic. Of course, couples and siblings quarrel endlessly about whose memory of past events is right—that is the amusing and infuriating *Rashomon* aspect of every family's life. But who



could foresee, in the late twentieth century, “recovered memory therapy” or that people would come to believe with all their hearts that they remembered being abducted by aliens or Satanic cults? Who knew that by the first decade of the twenty-first century we would find hundreds of individuals in prison who were innocent—proven innocent by DNA analysis—and the major cause for their wrongful convictions was faulty human memory?

And so, as my research on memory evolved, its findings became ever more applicable in the service of justice.

To briefly summarize, in that research I and my collaborators showed that you could alter people's memories for crimes, accidents, and other events that they had recently witnessed. You could pretty easily make someone believe that a car was going faster than it really was or that the bad guy had curly hair instead of straight hair. Later we would show that you could plant entire events into the minds of ordinary healthy people, letting them believe that they had experiences that they never ever had—even experiences that would have been pretty traumatic had they actually happened.

So you can see how these findings might be applicable in the service of justice. They help us understand how improper handling of eyewitness testimony can lead to false memories and the conviction of innocent people. They help us understand how sug-

gestive or coercive therapy can lead people to develop memories of being abused in a Satanic cult, accusations that can cause untold misery for innocent people and their families.

At the same time, this research became emotionally controversial and the focus of terrible hostility among those who could not accept its findings or its implications for the real world.

In my case, disgruntled people have written countless threatening letters. They have tried generating letter-writing campaigns to the chair of my former academic department, the president of the university, and even the governor of the state to get me fired from my academic job. They have threatened violence at places where I've been asked to speak, prompting universities on several occasions to provide armed and unarmed guards to accompany me during those speeches. People spread defamatory insults in their own writings, in newspaper columns, and, of course, on the

Internet. One person even sued me in court when I published an article questioning the veracity of a psychiatrist's case study of a young woman's recovered memories of maternal sexual abuse. That litigation dragged on for almost five years before it ended.

Through these experiences, I've learned firsthand that science is never dispassionate, at least not if you are studying anything that has political, emotional, or financial implications for people's lives: child testimony, sex, the unreliability of projective tests such as the Rorschach, or, in my case, illusions of memory. I could have chosen to study memory in the sea slug—hardly anyone would get exercised about that. But I chose to study human memory, eyewitness testimony, false memories, confabulation in adults and children, and harmful therapeutic methods. And big trouble came my way.

But I'm proud of the work I've been able to accomplish as a psychological scientist and proud of the people I've

had a chance to help along the way. I've learned to accept the hassles as the price that all scientists pay for doing research that matters or that threatens deeply held beliefs.

And this brings me back to Goldsmiths—where we are today: I am especially grateful for the honorary doctorate from Goldsmiths—where a number of superb academics are doing research that threatens deeply held beliefs, and also matters to people. That is why this honor holds such extra-special, extra-poignant, meaning for me.

Elizabeth Loftus is Distinguished Professor, Psychology & Social Behavior and Criminology, Law & Society, in the Department of Cognitive Sciences and School of Law, University of California, Irvine. She is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and a fellow and member of the Executive Council of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

SCIENCE AND THE PUBLIC



Earn your master's degree in Science and the Public through the University at Buffalo and the Center for Inquiry!

Explore the methods and outlook of science as they intersect with public culture and public policy. This degree is ideal for enhancing careers in science education, public policy, and science journalism—and prepares you for positions that involve communicating about science.

This unique two-year graduate degree program is entirely online. Take courses from wherever you are in the world at your own pace! Courses include: Science, Technology, and Human Values; Research Ethics; Critical Thinking; Scientific Writing; Informal Science Education; Science Curricula; and History and Philosophy of Science.

Science and the Public  
Graduate School of Education & the Center for Inquiry

For details, visit www.gse.buffalo.edu/online/science

Questions? Contact David Koepsell, at dkoepsell@centerforinquiry.net.