

Elizabeth Loftus: interview

“False Memories : My Life’s Work”

After her lecture about the delusions of memory¹ in Geneva, September 1st, Elizabeth Loftus answered Brigitte Axelrad's questions.

B.A.: What is the ultimate aim that you would like to reach with your researches?

Elizabeth Loftus: I'm interested in learning everything there is to know about false memories and how people come to believe in things that didn't happen.

This has really been my life's work. It also happens that I apply this scientific knowledge to real cases in which people have possibly developed false memories. So it has a practical side to it as well as a theoretical one.

B.A.: What do you answer to people who say that it is not ethical to manipulate individual brains for research purposes, even if these manipulations are for everyday events like eating behaviours or, for example, hugging Bugs Bunny at Disneyland?

E.L.: All of our experiments pass through a rigorous review process that is part of most university procedures now. We would not ever want to knowingly harm someone, and to our knowledge most of our experimental subjects have, if anything, been fascinated by the process (or indifferent) - not upset by it. Hundreds of researchers over the century have been involved in research that involves either a little bit or even a lot of deception... and many of the studies have produced valuable insights for psychology and humanity.

B.A.: In your opinion, why some psychotherapists can implant false memories to their patients? Are they malicious or well-meaning?

E.L.: Some therapists have only one theory about what's causing the patients problems. They believe that buried trauma memories of a sexual nature are the root. and they dig for them, or reinforce every whiff of them... that is part of the problem.

B.A.: Do you think that recovering true or false memories could help patients to heal?

E.L.: I'd like to see any bit of credible scientific evidence that dredging up supposedly buried repressed memories truly helps people get better.

B.A.: How to be sure those memories are true or false? What clues can help to make the difference between true and false memories?

E.L.: Without independent corroboration, you can't. False memories, like true ones, can be detailed, and expressed with confidence and emotion.

¹ <http://www.pseudo-sciences.org/spip.php?article1230>.

B.A.: *Which therapists are the most dangerous: those who are indifferent to this question of false memories, but help their patients to recover memories, or those who use Recovering Memory Therapy, but pretend that all memories they help their patients to recover are true.*

E.L.: The problem situation is to pressure, even subtly, patients for buried memories and then reinforce every memory report (if it is sexually uncomfortable) as though it were true. another problem is telling patients they have to do this to cure their problems. another problem is encouraging patients to act on these unsupported memories.

B.A.: *What do you think about the influence of Freud and Freudism as well as Lacanism on Recovered Memory Therapy?*

E.L.: I'm sorry, I don't have an answer to this question...

B.A.: *Do you think that repression exists and if so, can it repress childhood sexual abuse memories?*

E.L.: I think people can not think about things for a long time and be reminded of them. This is ordinary forgetting and remembering. But I haven't seen evidence for some process that goes beyond this.

B.A.: *In your opinion, what could be the best arguments to convince people (judges, lawyers, medical doctors, journalists, the public opinion, etc.) that recovered memory therapies are inadequate and dangerous for patients and families?*

E.L.: They should read richard McNally's book 'remembering trauma.'

B.A.: *When do you think that the False Memory Syndrome will vanish and which factors could help?*

E.L.: Sadly some other "fad" will probably take its place. We can only hope that it won't harm so many individuals and families, and ruin so many lives.