Elizabeth Loftus is Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Irvine. She holds positions in the Departments of Psychology & Social Behavior and Criminology, Law & Society. She received her PhD in Psychology from Stanford University. Since then, she has published 20 books and over 400 scientific articles. Loftus’s research of the last 20 years has focused on human memory, eyewitness testimony and also on courtroom procedure. Her work had been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and the National Science Foundation. Loftus has received numerous awards and honors for her research. She received the Distinguished Contributions to Forensic Psychology Award from the American Academy of Forensic Psychology, the American Association of Applied and Preventive Psychology Award for Distinguished Contribution to Basic and Applied Scientific Psychology, the James McKeen Cattell Fellow (applied research) and William James Fellow (basic research) from the Association of Psychological Science, and five honorary degrees. Loftus was also the recipient of the inaugural Henry & Bryna David Lectureship from the National Academy of Sciences, the APA Distinguished Scientific Award for Applications of Psychology, the Grawemeyer Prize in Psychology, and the Lauds and Laurels Faculty Achievement Award from UCI for “a faculty member who has achieved great professional prominence in their field for their contributions to research, teaching, and public service.” In a review of “The 100 Most Eminent Psychologists of the 20th Century,” Haggblom et al (2002) ranked Loftus 58th which made her the top ranked woman on the list. “The False Memory Diet,” based on research by Loftus in collaboration with Cara Laney, Erin Morris, and Dan Bernstein, was listed in the New York Times Magazine’s most noteworthy ideas of 2005 and in Discover Magazine’s 100 top science stories of 2005. Loftus is a frequent speaker at Psi Chi programs and is a Distinguished Member of Psi Chi.

How did you become interested in psychology?
I began as a math major as an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I loved algebra and geometry, but was decidedly less excited about calculus. Nonetheless, I wasn’t giving up. While plowing through integrals and derivatives, I needed some elective courses, and turned to psychology. I took introductory psychology from Allen Parducci and got hooked. Nearly every elective course I took thereafter was in psychology, and, when all was said
and done, I had enough credits for a double major. When I heard about a field called “mathematical psychology”, I thought: “This sounds perfect for me” and I chose to go to graduate school at Stanford University, known to excel in that field.

Who was your mentor?
My master’s thesis was supervised by Richard Atkinson. My doctoral thesis was supervised by Patrick Suppes. I consider Gordon Bower and Jonathan Freedman, both faculty when I was a graduate student, to be especially important mentors.

What did your mentor do that was particularly meaningful for your development as a psychologist?
Freedman taught me that I could carry out experiments from start to finish. Bower continued to support my career, through highs and lows, over the next many decades. Suppes and Atkinson are just downright inspirational (even if they seemed to be quite busy during my graduate school days).

How much of your academic lineage or "family tree" do you know?
Suppes got his Ph.D. from Ernest Nagel, the philosopher. I believe he may trace back to William James.

Do you have any advice for maximizing one's graduate school experience?
Try to hook up with one or more research projects with faculty who love what they do, publish frequently, and include students as authors.

What is your source or inspiration for research ideas?
They come from everywhere. Many come from legal cases that I’m involved in or that are in the news. One recent idea came from dating an economics professor - it led us to put economic dependent measures into our experimental design.

Do you have any tips for developing a successful research program?
It’s fine to work on more than one topic if they both fascinate you. But it is also important to stick with a topic at least for a period of time so that a series of studies can be done that answer a set of questions about some phenomenon. In my case, I was interested in memory distortion. After doing initial studies that established that complex memories could be altered by post-event information, I went on to delve more deeply and to answer other questions, such as “Who is more susceptible to memory contamination?” and “Do people genuinely believe in their false reports?”

What is psychology's biggest problem today?
The public doesn’t understand what psychology really is. Consider the scenario wherein your airplane seatmate asks “What do you do?” and you reply “I’m a psychologist.” When the seatmates next question is “Oh, what kind of experiments do you do?” rather than “I bet you’re analyzing me,” we’ll know we’ve gained ground.

Where is psychology as field headed?
In the next few years there the explosion of interest in brain-behavior relationships will continue. I hope it doesn’t completely overshadow the important work that needs to be done understanding behavior in its own right.

What is the biggest area(s) of application for the psychology?
Psychology relates to so many real world problems. We’ll continue to see applications to education, employment, and the legal system. A newly emerging interest is applications to our military and intelligence enterprise. Since National Security is much on the minds of many Americans, can we marshal our knowledge so that we anticipate what others might do to harm us, and avoid surprises.

Are there any social issues that psychology should address?
Psychology has so much left to contribute. That’s a good thing, as we don’t want ourselves and our students to be without meaningful employment. Whether you work on helping devise ways of enhancing student learning, or making our justice system fairer, or reducing prejudice, it’s a pretty good life when you feel your work is making a difference.