



For her dedication to research, teaching and justice, UC Irvine will honor Loftus with its highest award, the UCI Medal, to be presented at the Oct. 27 gala.

**2012 UCI Medalist
Elizabeth Loftus**

A UCI Distinguished Professor, Elizabeth Loftus' 30 years of research have focused on the misinformation effect, eyewitness fallibility, and the creation and nature of false memories. She has contributed her expertise to hundreds of high-profile criminal cases, including those of Martha Stewart, Oliver North, Scooter Libby and Michael Jackson.

Elizabeth Loftus: Researching How People Misremember Their Past

Elizabeth Loftus is as comfortable in the courtroom as she is in the classroom or research lab. Renowned for her groundbreaking work on the malleability of human memory, the UC Irvine Distinguished Professor of social ecology, social sciences and law has been an expert witness or consultant in hundreds of cases, from the McMartin preschool molestation case to the trials of Martha Stewart, Scooter Libby, Oliver North and officers accused in the Rodney King beating.

Her scholarship centers on how people misremember their past or fabricate memories that never happened. Her experiments reveal how memories can be changed by facts, ideas, suggestions and other post-event information.

According to Loftus, when people experience upsetting or traumatic events, they don't just record the event and play it back like a videotape — the process is much more complex and involves creatively selecting, focusing and arranging memories to fit the demands of the present moment.

Lately, Loftus has been working with court systems to change the way judges instruct juries about eyewitness evidence. Her goal: to reduce the number of wrongful convictions and faulty legal verdicts based on juries' overreliance on eyewitness testimony.

She spoke recently about this work.

Q. In a new development, New Jersey judges will now be required to include in their instructions to juries that human memory is not foolproof. This is specifically relevant when dealing with eyewitness testimony. Why is this procedural change important?

A. It's extremely important because eyewitness testimony is sometimes a problem. It's the major cause of wrongful convictions, implicated in hundreds of cases. Anything we can do to reduce the chances that an innocent person is convicted is going to serve us well.

Q. Couldn't this kind of jury instruction bias jurors against eyewitness testimony?

A. Right now, we think in many cases jurors are deciding cases based on their beliefs about the workings of memory — that it's like a videotape that can be played back. That description of memory is not supported by the scientific evidence. So we need to make them aware.

Q. In January, the Supreme Court decided against placing new limits on questionable eyewitness testimony. Justices argued that it's up to a jury to weigh evidence, and eyewitness testimony is like other kinds of evidence. What are your thoughts on this ruling?

A. When the Supreme Court decided that case, which arose out of a lower-court case in New Hampshire, it did not implement changes in the way eyewitness evidence is either handled or communicated to a jury. Lots of us were disappointed that the Supreme Court didn't go further, but they just decided not to. And it might have had to do with the special facts of that particular case.

More: socialecology.uci.edu/faculty/eloftus