

DOSSIER

Cover Story: Memory Deceives



Psychological studies suggest that people can be persuaded that sexual violence was inflicted on them as a child - even though this is not the case. not true at all

Symbol photo (W): Getty Images

Why we often remember things less reliably than we think - even things that have shaken us to the core BY BASTIAN BERBNER

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icole was 16 years old and hardly remembered her biological mother at all. Her father had never talked much about her, and she hadn't really asked. Her father, Nicole says today,

had always been her rock, the only stability she had known. But for some time now, he too had disappeared from her life. After a stroke, he lived in a home and could no longer take care of her. Nicole was placed in the small Californian town of Vacaville with a foster mother who showed no interest in her. The woman was only interested in the money she received for taking in children. In addition to Nicole, nine other foster children lived in the home. The older ones had to take care of the younger ones. Nicole was often not allowed to go to school because of this. She did not have any real friends. The house was dirty and noisy.

"I needed some kind of anchor," Nicole Kluemper recalls. She is 44 years old and lives with her husband near San Diego, California, a city of millions, in a large house with birdbaths in the backyard and a mobile home in the driveway. She contacted Child Protective Services at the time and asked to meet her birth mother. The office arranged for the mother to visit the foster family.

They sat down at the dining table. 16-year-old Nicole. Her mother, a stranger, small and fragilely thin. And the foster mother. "It was weird," Nicole Kluemper says. "It was like a tennis match, they were outdoing each other in complimenting each other." She says her foster mother told her how smart Nicole was, how pretty, what good grades she had in school. Her birth mother emphasized how sweet she was as a baby, how quick-witted she was even as a five-year-old.

Then came that moment, she says, which she thinks about to this day. "My mother stroked my back with her hand while telling me, and my skin began to tingle strangely. It was as if my body was signaling to me: Something's wrong with this touch, there's danger here." It was just a moment, she ignored him.

In the following months, her mother sometimes picked her up, then they went shopping together. Her mother also came to the funeral of Nicole's father, who died during that time. At that time, when daughter and mother were in the process of building something like a relationship, Nicole received a call from David Corwin.

Nicole couldn't remember ever meeting Corwin, but she knew her father had trusted him, so she trusted him, too. Corwin was a psychiatrist. All she knew about him was that he had made "the videos" of her as a child. What those videos were about, she didn't know. "I thought there were videos of every kid." When Nicole had been five, her parents had started fighting over custody of her. It was pretty ugly. The court appointed David Corwin as an expert witness. While he talked to little Nicole, he ran a video camera. In the years that followed, he sometimes played the recordings at psychiatrists' conferences. He always asked permission beforehand. Until now with Nicole's father. Now, in 1994, he asked her directly for the first time. She said yes, just as her father had always said yes. At the end of the phone call, Nicole asked the psychiatrist, as they both remember today, if she could

I would be allowed to watch the videos. A long silence followed. Whether she could wait until he could be there, Corwin then answered.

He lived far away at the time. A year later, he was in California and invited Nicole to a colleague's office. Again, he had set up a video camera. Nicole sat down in front of it.

If you look at the recording of that scene today, you'll see a confident teen-ager with wild black hair, gold studded ears and black dungarees. They talk for a while, then Corwin asks, "Do you remember any possible sexual abuse?"

"No," Nicole says quickly. But then she closes her eyes. Breathes in deeply. Grabs her head. "Wait ... yes, I remember. My goodness. That's really strange ..."

She begins to cry. "I remember her hurting me." Nicole speaks of her mother. Corwin

hands her a tissue.

"One time she gave me a bath, she put her fingers in too far where they shouldn't be." Corwin now shows 17-year-old Nicole the videos he made of her twelve years earlier. She sees herself, five years old, in a blue and white dress, her thick black hair tied in two braids, kneeling in front of a wooden table and drawing with

crayons on a piece of paper. She hears Corwin ask, "How

is your mother?"
 "Mean."
 "Why is she mean?"
 "She's hurting me."
 "How does she hurt you?"
 "She puts her finger in my vagina. Un-dangerous so far." Little Nicole points to her finger.
 "When did she do that?"
 "Every time she gives me a bath."

After watching the video of that time, 17-year-old Nicole says to the camera she had no memory of it all these years, but when Corwin asked her about sexual abuse, it all came flooding back. Then, when she saw the videos of herself as a child, it was confirmation, she says.

Today, she says, "That day was terrible." In the time that followed, she cried a lot. But finally she had an explanation for the chaos in her life so far: Her mother had inflicted sexual violence on her. Her father had gotten custody and saved her, but now he was dead. It wasn't worth looking back. She was on her own. Three days after her 18th birthday, she enlisted in the Navy. She left her foster mother's house and never came back.

Nicole enjoyed basic training in the Navy; every day had structure. It was like breathing a sigh of relief, she says. Once during that time, David Corwin called and asked if it would be OK if he wrote an article about her case. No problem, she said, as long as she remained anonymous in it. A while later, an old friend got in touch. The friend said that a private detective had rung her doorbell. He had

asked about Nicole.

"I got really scared," Nicole Kluemper recalls. "What did this man want from me?" She called David Corwin because she felt it might have something to do with the videos. Corwin told her he thought he knew who had sent the private investigator. A woman named Elizabeth Loftus.

In February 2023, Elizabeth Loftus enters a seminar room at the University of California at Irvine, south of Los Angeles. Twenty-one psychology students are waiting for her, handwritten name tags in front of them. One student will later say she only chose the course because Loftus was teaching it.

Elizabeth Loftus is 78 years old and a luminary in her field, a leading memory researcher worldwide. On this day, she teaches for three hours without a break. It's about how eyewitnesses often misremember a crime. She talks about serial killer Ted Bundy, whom she once met, and actor Kevin Spacey, whom she recently zoomed in on because he is accused of sexual assault. Students hang on her every word. A few rooms down, Loftus has her office. Next to the door, she has hung a postcard. It reads, "Kind women rarely make history."

In the early 1970s, after completing her doctorate in psychology, she decided that her research should be significant, she says the morning after the seminar at her home on campus. Loftus was later assailed with criticism of all kinds, attacked in journal articles and threatened with death in e-mails, booted, insulted, sued and disinvented from events, once on an airplane a seatmate slapped her on the head with a rolled-up newspaper after Loftus introduced herself - but she can't recall anyone calling her work irrelevant.

Back then, as a young researcher, she raised money from the Ministry of Transport and came up with an experiment. She showed people a video of a rear-end collision and then asked a group: "How fast was the car going when it *hit* the other one?" Another group asked them, "How fast was the

car when it *hit the* other car?" The second group mentioned an average speed of almost 15 kilometers per hour higher. When people were asked to recall the accident again a week later, those who had been asked about the car hitting the car were more likely to say they had seen broken glass in the accident video. In truth, there had been no broken glass given.

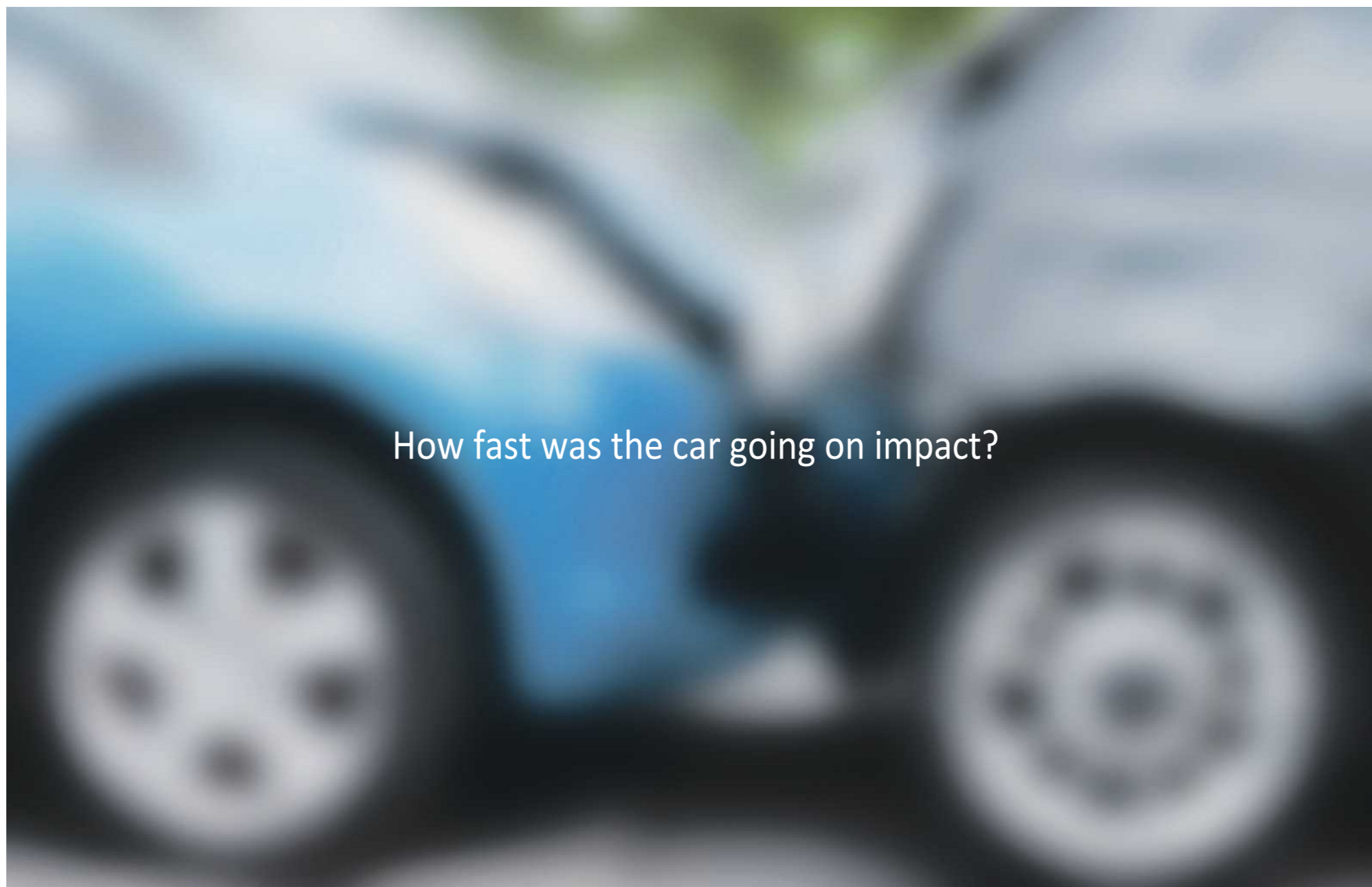
All had seen the same video. Nevertheless, some remembered a fast car and a broken window. And the others remembered a slow car and an intact window. The only difference between the two groups was the verb Loftus had used in her question. She tried other verbs: "collide," "bounce," "bump." The answers differed reliably by a few miles per hour. It was as if Loftus was turning a knob, controlling people's memories.

The prevailing opinion at the time was that human memory works like a kind of video recorder, incorruptibly recording reality and storing it in the brain as a memory. Even if you don't have access to everything later, the things you remember are an accurate reflection of past experiences. How could Loftus' findings be explained?

Their study caused a sensation. A phase of intensive research began. It soon became clear that the human memory is highly selective in what it stores. Of the thousands of impressions and information that reach our brain every second, we consciously perceive only a tiny fraction. And most of it soon disappears again. Only a fraction remains, namely everything to which we actively direct our attention. Again, only a small part of this is stored in the long term as an experience. Namely, everything that is new to us, surprising, of great importance or associated with strong feelings. What we ate for dinner on Thursday or what number our hotel room had on vacation is not usually one of them.

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Cover story



How fast was the car going on impact?

People remember differently to an accident video - depending on how you ask for it

Symbol photo (M): opac, small photo: Balazs Gendri for DIE

What was there? Continuation from p. 15

Forgetting protects our brain from overload by deleting irrelevant content - just as it is better to close open browser windows from the previous week on the computer every now and then. What remains are the things that are important: the first kiss; the goal we scored to win the championship for our team; the birth of our child; the argument that led to our breakup; where we were when the planes hit the World Trade Center. We usually remember these things forever - and very clearly. Do we?

On January 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after takeoff. People all over the world saw the images on the news and were shocked. The American psychologist Ulric Neisser and his colleague Nicole Harsch hurriedly thought up an experiment. The day after the explosion, they asked their students five questions about the moment they learned of the tragedy: How did you learn about it? Where were you? What were you doing? Who was with you? How did you feel?

Two and a half years later, the same students were asked the same questions again. A quarter did not answer a single question as they had the first time. For half of them, the answers to only one question were the same. And when the researchers wanted to know whether the subjects had answered these questions before, 75 percent said no. Even after seeing their original answers in their own handwriting, they swore it couldn't be.

The memories were still there, but they had changed. In the meantime, the test persons had seen and read news reports about the explosion, they had had conversations about it or had listened to it or had simply thought about it. They had overwritten the original memory with other impressions without realizing it. The old state was gone.

Researchers are increasingly adopting the model of "reconstructive memory," i.e., a memory that does not reproduce an event exactly but reconstructs it after the fact. And the longer the event took place, the more distorted this reconstruction often is. This revolution in psychology was driven by Elizabeth Loftus, who in the meantime had taken over a chair at the University of Washington in Seattle.

In the summer of 1990, Loftus got a call from a lawyer who said he had a really bizarre case. He represented a man, George Franklin, who had been charged with murder. His daughter had suddenly accused him after twenty years. She claimed that she had looked her own six-year-old daughter in the eye while she was playing, and all of a sudden a memory came up. In it, she is eight years old and watches as her father rapes her best friend Susie in his van, then kills her outside in a wooded area with a rock and hides her body under a mattress.

Susie had indeed been murdered, but the police had found no fingerprints of Franklin at the crime scene, no blood, no DNA. Nothing linked him to the crime, only his daughter's testimony. Franklin's attorney now asked Loftus what she knew about repressed memories

know. Because that was the theory of the prosecution: witnessing the murder had been so traumatic for the daughter that she had unconsciously kept the event from herself until it suddenly came back twenty years later.

Loftus immersed herself in the research literature. She knew that the concept of repressed memories went back to Freud, to his idea that they could be brought back into consciousness with the help of psychoanalysis. But was there any evidence that this could even be done? Loftus found nothing. Of course people sometimes forget things and remember them later, of course they sometimes repress things. But an experience that shakes a person to the core? Research rather suggested something else: that people, by and large, remember traumatic events very clearly, often to their chagrin. After all, they are associated with particularly strong feelings.

Could it be, Loftus wondered, that Franklin's daughter had not only added details like a broken window to an existing memory, but had unknowingly created the whole scene - the car, the forest, the stone, the mattress? All these things had also been reported in the media. Did she therefore believe that she had been there? Or had someone persuaded her to remember? Was that even possible? Loftus couldn't find an answer to that question; no one had researched it.

Loftus gave interviews; on Oprah Winfrey's talk show, she debated with Franklin's daughter. She gained a reputation as a skeptic. In the trial of George Franklin, she testified as a defense witness, talking about how memories are not always what they seem. Franklin was nevertheless sentenced to life in prison. The jury trusted his daughter's experience. Loftus says today that she thought at the time that such a strange case would not happen a second time.

Less than a year later, on October 7, 1991, *People* magazine featured an actress on its cover, Roseanne Arnold, of *Roseanne* sitcom fame. The article said that she had been abused by her parents as a child, but had known nothing about it all her life. Until she was in her mid-thirties.

Three weeks later, *Time* magazine reported on a woman who claimed to remember being abused by her grandfather on the changing table as a baby - yet babies are neurophysiologically incapable of forming memories that last into adulthood. Elizabeth Loftus, known for her interviews, then received letters from a woman in Michigan, an 80-year-old man in Georgia, a retired couple in Colorado and a woman in California. All wrote that their sons and daughters were suddenly accusing them of sexual violence. Reading the letters, Loftus noticed a commonality: Almost all of the alleged victims had discovered their memories during therapy. Just like George Franklin's daughter.

In Loftus' study, there is a bookshelf. At eye level, she has her own books, 24 of them. Plus the ones she particularly likes. At the top, accessible only by a wooden ladder, are the titles she condemns. Among them, *The Courage to Heal*. The book was published shortly before George Franklin's daughter accused her father, and was later published under the title *Defiance*.

especially also translated into German. It says:

"Many women can't remember, and some will never be able to remember. That doesn't mean you haven't been abused." And:

"It's important to trust your inner voice." And, "Even if you think, 'I must have made it up,' you have to come to terms with the fact of your abuse." One woman is quoted as saying, "The more I worked on the abuse, the more I remembered. First my brother came to mind, then my grandfather. About six months after that, I remembered my father. And then about a year later, I remembered my mother."

In the book *Secret Survivors*, also from that time, there's a checklist, "Do several things apply to you? Then you may have survived incest." The list includes: Fear of being alone in the dark, nightmares, headaches, arthritis, guilt, shame, low self-esteem.

The books were read hundreds of thousands of times, including by therapists who worked according to these principles. Compared to this, the questions that Loftus asked the experimental therapists



Elizabeth Loftus, 78, is a memory researcher

persons had put in their studies, a sub-tile drop of suggestion. This here was a torrent.

Loftus' problem was that she could not possibly check in each individual case whether a memory that had come up in therapy was true or not. She was not, after all, a detective or an investigator. But she was a researcher. What she could do was to prove by scientific means that it is possible in principle to create a supposed memory of a traumatic experience that never existed. It was the birth of her most famous experiment - and the beginning of the *Memory Wars*.

Loftus invited subjects to the lab after hearing three true stories from their childhood from relatives, parents or siblings, for example. She added a fourth - which was made up: that the person had been lost in a shopping mall at the age of about five. She then told the subjects all four stories as if they came from the family, asking about their memories several times over a period of weeks. At the end, one said

quarter of the participants actually remember being lost as a child.

Thus, memory works not only *reconstructively*, but also *constructively*. It not only falsifies existing memories. It can also create illusory memories. A person can believe things to be true that he never experienced. This realization was an attack on the many therapists who claimed that memories recovered after decades must be true.

The therapists countered that it was quite different to get lost in the mall than to experience brutal sexual violence. Loftus and other psychologists followed up. A group in Tennessee created the memory of nearly drowning as a child in one-third of the subjects. In Canada, researchers convinced half of their study participants that they had been attacked by an aggressive animal as a child.

The opposing side criticized that, purely by chance, something like the attack by an animal or getting lost in the shopping mall could actually have happened. So Elizabeth Loftus convinced people that they had shaken hands with a Bugs Bunny figure during a visit to Disneyland as a child. There is no Bugs Bunny at Disneyland. When her opponents asked where the trauma was, Loftus made study participants believe they had been licked on the ear by a Pluto on drugs at Disneyland.

Elizabeth Loftus can be obsessive - professionally and personally. In the 1980s, she and her husband had trouble conceiving a child. Her gynecologist recommended surgery. She disliked the thought of not being able to work for days so much that she turned the procedure into an experiment. While she was being operated on under general anesthesia, the anesthesiologist read words to her. Later, she checked to see if she could remember; she could not. She published the case in a professional journal.

Loftus remained childless. In 1991, her husband divorced her because she had refused for years to interrupt her research for a vacation. Since then, she has lived alone.

In the memory wars, public opinion slowly turned in her favor thanks to all the studies. She received fewer threats, she no longer needed bodyguards at appearances. In 1996, George Franklin was released after six and a half years in prison. His daughter had remembered two other murders he had allegedly committed - which wasn't possible because his DNA didn't match that of the perpetrator. It looked like Elizabeth Loftus and her allies were winning the memory wars.

Then suddenly there was this psychiatrist with his videos.

Loftus heard from him before she saw the videos. His name was David Corwin. Apparently, so the story went, after all the back-and-forth in professional articles and in front of television cameras, he was now providing definitive proof of the possibility of bringing a repressed trauma back into consciousness. Corwin had allegedly filmed an anonymous girl, whom he called Jane Doe, at the exact moment when the memory of sexual violence had returned.

Loftus says she eventually saw the videos in her living room in Seattle; a former colleague brought the videotapes.

A teenager with wild black hair, gold stud earrings and black dungarees.

The dispute of a father and a mother over custody.

The allegations against the mother.

"Do you remember any possible sexual abuse?"

- "No. Wait ... yes I do, I remember. My goodness.

That's really weird ..."

That was supposed to be the proof? The memory remained vague.

Elizabeth Loftus also watched the older videos in which little Nicole, recognizable to Loftus only as Jane Doe, talks about her mother's alleged actions. The child seemed coached to her, Loftus says. As if a script had been drilled into him. Had the girl just been talked into the abuse? Even as Loftus watched the videos, she says today, she decided to get to the bottom of it. Loftus, the researcher, now became

but Loftus, the detective.

Elizabeth Loftus' new Mercedes SLK is parked in her garage today, with filing cabinets against the wall behind it and, on a broken plastic table, a hinged box full of photos, letters, files, handwritten notes, addresses, phone numbers - her documents from the Jane Doe investigation. Using clues in the video, documents from court cases, articles from local newspapers and other leads, she set out then to find the people behind the case.

In the box in her garage there is also a four-page letter from a psychologist who, on behalf of the court, spoke with Nicole, then five years old, and her parents. His verdict: "It's not clear exactly what the abuse is - whether it's physical and sexual abuse on the part of the mother or whether it exists only in the father's imagination and has been talked into the daughter." When she read it, Loftus says she felt vindicated.

She was helped in her search by two private detectives. One of them was the man who would later ring the doorbell of Nicole's friend.

The other tracked down Nicole's mother. He reported to Loftus that she had cried a lot when he talked to her. She had said that finally someone believed her. Loftus flew to California. Nicole's mother told her how bad it had been for her to have her ex-husband and his new partner take her daughter away. He had been a drinker and a thug, she said. Nicole's mother described that she had not abused Nicole.

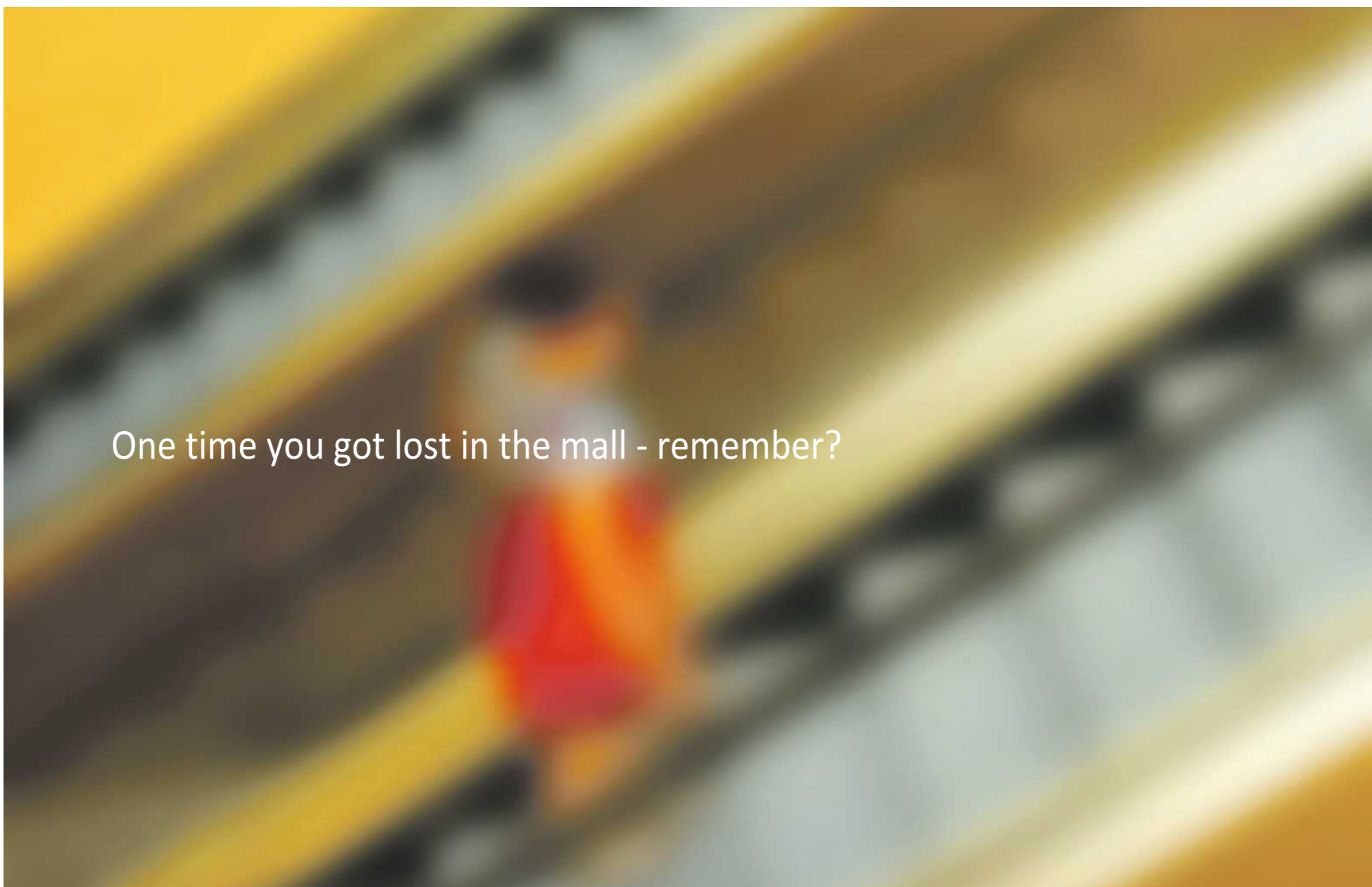
Loftus also found Nicole's foster mother. She interviewed her and noted with a quick hand on lined paper that the foster mother had repeatedly talked to Nicole about the abuse. According to Loftus' notes, the foster mother said of Nicole, "She knew it had happened. But as she got older, she started doubting, Could I have made this up?"

Then Loftus met the woman Nicole's father had married after the breakup; according to the notes, she said, "I helped Bill get Nicole. We did that over the sex thing. This woman abused her own child."

The conversations did not give Loftus any final clarity. But proof of the return of repressed memories, she was now certain, was not this case.

She flew back to Seattle and wanted to publish her findings. But shortly thereafter, in late 1999, a university employee stood in her office and confiscated her papers. She was allowed to stay until

The memory deceives



One time you got lost in the mall - remember?

With the help of leading questions planted, researchers give people false memories of bad experiences one

Symbol photo (W): Plainpicture; N. photo: Brandon Tauszik for DIE ZEIT

not talk about the case for the time being. After Nicole learned from psychiatrist David Corwin that it was probably Loftus snooping on her, she had complained to Loftus' employer. "I wanted it to stop," Nicole Kluemper says today. "To me, it had nothing to do with science. I felt it was a personal attack."

Asked if Loftus can understand that, she says, "No, no. Nicole herself brought her case into the public eye by allowing Corwin to tell her story. She has my research to answer for herself. It's not just her story, after all; it's her mother's story, too."

And, one might add, it's a case that reached far beyond one family. Across the country, prosecutors referred to Nicole when they wanted to send people accused decades later to prison. For Loftus, as for her opponents, it was the divisive battle of the memory wars.

While the University of Washington was investigating Loftus' behavior, she developed a friendship of sorts with Nicole's mother. Since she wasn't officially allowed to talk to her, she often went to a phone booth. In her garage, Elizabeth Loftus flips through papers. A note from Nicole's mother, March 9, 2000: "Dear Elizabeth, I want to thank you for your interest, your warmth, your friendship and your faith in me. You are the best friend I have."

Loftus finds poems written by Nicole's mother. Many are about her daughter. Loftus begins to read one aloud.

*I see the trees, the flowers and the sky
It makes me think of the times you and I
Would walk in the grass and play in the yard
Pick flowers and laugh with no regard.*

Loftus begins to cry. She continues to read, but can no longer get the verses past her lips.

*I'll hug you again and hold you near
And tell you, "I love you Baby Dear"*

Elizabeth Loftus' own mother was floating dead in the pool when Elizabeth was 14 years old. She had suffered from depression and was, it seemed, actually on the mend. For over sixty years, the question of why has hovered over the family - was it a suicide or an accident? Elizabeth Loftus is particularly preoccupied with this question. Her brother always says, "It's best not to mention the M-word to Beth."

The thought suggests that Loftus also knelt so deeply into Nicole's case because it involved a broken mother-daughter relationship. Asked about it, she says, "No, really, it didn't matter." Later, though, she adds, subconsciously it may have played a role. "I had a fantasy for a while that I could get Nicole and her mother back together."

After two years, the university found Loftus had done nothing wrong and returned her records. Because she felt the investigation was an expression of distrust toward her, she transferred to the University of California. Around the same time, she published her research in a popular science journal under the title "Who Abused Jane Doe?" The answer Loftus suggested: probably no one.

Nicole read that in Florida, where she was learning to fly Navy helicopters, at a bookstore. Even though her name didn't appear anywhere, she felt "like a big hand grabbed me, stripped me and put me naked in a street intersection for everyone to stare at." She sued Loftus.

They talked to each other once during this time, the only time in their lives, on the phone. It was an attempt to shorten the complicated court proceedings. It did not go well.

Nicole says she is not allowed to tell what was discussed.

Loftus says she warned Nicole that her fate was being used for the interests of others. Nicole then became angry and ended the conversation.

The case took six years and went all the way to the California Supreme Court. Loftus brought her students to the hearing. All charges but one were dropped. To avoid a lengthy trial on the remaining count, Loftus paid \$7500 in a settlement. Nicole Kluemper had to pay \$250,000 in court costs and attorney fees. She couldn't. In 2009 she filed for personal bankruptcy, and in return she had to resign from the Navy. She lost her pension benefits. Her car was towed away in front of her neighbors. She was 30 years old and starting all over again.

All we know about the world is memory. Montreal is the capital of Canada. Snow falls in winter. How does it feel to be in love? Everything we know about ourselves is also memory. Where do I come from? Who am I?

People quickly adjust some of their memories when they encounter contradiction. Montreal is not the capital of Canada at all, but Ottawa? Oh, interesting. That vacation to Spain was not three but four years ago? Quite possibly.

People cannot say goodbye to other memories so easily. These are the ones that are important to us, that make up our deepest self. Elizabeth Loftus' realization that even such memories may not belong to us, that they can be changed or even completely created by external influences, is a painful knowledge. It often triggers not adaptation, but defense. Perhaps even an identity crisis.

Nicole Kluemper says for a time she almost went crazy. "One day I was sure that my mother had abused me. The next day I wasn't, and then the guilt kicked in. And on and on." Loftus questioned that clarity that had sustained her from the age of 17: Her mother had hurt her, her father had saved her. Suddenly, however, her father now seemed to be the villain and her mother the victim. It felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath her feet.

At some point, Nicole Kluemper says, she managed to push that feeling to the back of her mind. "I resigned myself to not knowing. I'll never know." She created a new identity for herself: she now saw herself as a survivor of trauma - and she doesn't mean the possible sexual violence of her childhood. "I was a survivor of Elizabeth Loftus. That was a given, and it gave me a foothold."

Perhaps there is also something in the recognition that traumatic memories can be false.

Liberating - you are not at their mercy. You can detach yourself from them.

Nicole Kluemper got married, but it didn't work out with children. She began studying psychology, of all things. She became a therapist and now works at a small hospital with children, including those who have been sexually abused. She follows Loftus' activities in the media; sometimes another Loftus hater sends her links to articles. Nicole Kluemper says she wonders what people Loftus has been advocating for lately. "She's not doing herself any favors."

Over the course of her career, Elizabeth Loftus has testified in more than 300 court cases. Not only in cases of sexual violence against children, in which the prosecution based its case on recovered memories. Also in many murder trials in which witnesses claimed they saw the defendant at the scene. Loftus was certain: sometimes overzealous investigators had just talked witnesses into a memory. In fact, since DNA testing became available, hundreds of convicts in the U.S. have gone free because it suddenly became clear they had to be innocent. About 70 percent of



Nicole Kluemper, 44, sees herself as a "survivor"

They had been in prison because eyewitnesses had accused them.

As in the case of George Franklin, Loftus almost always testified as a defense witness. Most of the time, as in Franklin's case, she spoke not about the specific case, but in general terms about her studies and scientific findings. Never did she claim that every single recollection of a victim or eyewitness must be false. But she sowed doubt. The memory can be wrong. And doubt actually always serves in court: the accused. This gave the impression that Loftus was taking sides with potential violent criminals.

Elizabeth Loftus says she knows the horrific consequences childhood sexual violence can have on a person's life. Of course she wants to see such acts severely punished. But she also says, "I'd rather let ten guilty people go than convict one innocent person. The idea of locking up someone who hasn't done anything is horrible to me."

Early in her career, she says, she mainly took cases where she felt the defendant or defendants might actually be innocent. Sometimes she was successful and carried

to the acquittal, sometimes not. In the meantime, this is the impression you get when you interview her for a few days, she is no longer so choosy about who she stands up for.

She advised Michael Jackson's defense attorneys in the child molestation trial. Also, those of comedian Bill Cosby, who was accused of sexual assault. She testified in court for Ghislaine Maxwell, who was convicted of child trafficking, among other charges. And she appeared in the trial of Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood producer whom numerous women accused of sexual assault. Again, as a defense witness.

In court, she did not say a word about Weinstein or about the women. She said, "When you're pushed to remember something you can't remember, a thought or a conceit can come out that can feel irrationally like a memory."

She also said, "The more time goes by, the fainter the memory becomes."

Weinstein's defense attorney asked her, "If an er-ination is vivid, with lots of detail - does it have to be true?" Loftus replied, "No."

On the one hand, these sentences are covered by scientific knowledge. However, in a trial that is largely based on the memories of witnesses, Loftus also questioned the credibility of the women. Their testimony was intended to help Weinstein, and Loftus knows it. She says she was paid \$14,000 by Weinstein's team to do so.

Everyone has the right to science, says Loftus, including Weinstein. But she also has to admit that it's exciting to work on cases that the whole country is watching. Asked whether she thinks Weinstein is guilty, she replies that the case is complicated.

Over decades, she has worked herself into a role from which she can no longer escape. But she doesn't want to get out of it either. She is on the road against the current. Always for the accused. No matter how many statements from victims, no matter how overwhelming the facts.

After Loftus got hired by Weinstein, the hostility she had known for a long time reached a new level. A colleague at her university's law school no longer speaks to her. A man who apparently he- d out that she was Jewish emailed her a picture of a swastika. A woman with whom she had been friends for 35 years broke off contact. New York University, which had planned an event with her, disinvited her again. The *Washington Post* asked for a guest editorial on McToo, Loftus sent a text and never heard from the paper again.

On the phone last Saturday, Elizabeth Loftus says she fears Donald Trump will call her every day right now. Trump is facing impeachment over his handling of an affair a decade and a half ago. He could plead that the woman in question is not telling the truth.

She hopes, Loftus says, Trump will not come forward.

Would she accept? "Probably not," she says, laughing. It sounds anything but certain.

In recent years, something interesting has happened to the person of Elizabeth Loftus. While she herself has become increasingly controversial, her work has become more mainstream. First-year students around the world read about her experiments on the fallibility of memory in textbooks.

She won just about every major award in her discipline. She was elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and among the hundred most important psychologists of the 20th century. Loftus was the highest ranked woman on the list.

Researchers can now observe the process of remembering in the brain scanner, and what they see there seems to confirm Loftus' studies. The brain does not have a place where memories are stored like videocassettes, well sorted and neatly labeled. Instead, almost all 86 billion neurons are involved in remembering, coordinated by the hippocampus. For example, if you witness a car accident, the visual cortex is responsible for processing what you see. The auditory cortex will register the sound of one car crashing into another. The paleocortex will perceive the smell of the spilled gasoline on the road. Thinking back to the event later, the same brain cells that were involved in the original processing will fire. It is a highly complex neuronal pattern - and that is one of the reasons why it is so unstable.

In court today, cases are still being tried in which the charges are based on allegedly resurfaced trauma. The dispute in research has not been settled: There are experts who are convinced that repressed memories may well be real. Loftus says she has no reason to believe it, but cannot prove otherwise. The question of how credible a witness' testimony is can only be answered on a case-by-case basis, she said. Looking back, psychiatrist David Corwin, now a professor at the University of Utah, says of Nicole, "I found her convincing because what she said was so clear."

On an evening in February 2023, Elizabeth Loftus is sitting in a restaurant on campus. She's eaten half of her burger, leaving the other half wrapped up as usual; it's her breakfast for the next morning. She's talking about Nicole Kluemper. With anger in her voice, she exclaims, "She destroyed her mother's life!" A few minutes later she asks, "Do you think it would be possible to reconcile the two? Maybe you could convince them to meet."

For the past year, Nicole Kluemper has sat at her desk in the evenings and on weekends, surrounded by models of the helicopters she flew for the Navy, writing down her life. The book has just been published. Her publisher wanted her to give Elizabeth Loftus a pseudonym. She named her Dr. Malvonia East, after the Wicked Witch of the East in the book *How the Wizard Came to Oz*.

It's been 25 years since the lives of these two women crossed. It's been almost 15 years since the court case ended - and they're still working off each other. Both lost their mothers as teens. Both wanted children as young women and couldn't have them. Both became psychologists and as such deal with sexual violence against children. Loftus as a researcher, Kluemper as a therapist. But of course that's the big difference.

Nicole Kluemper's primary goal is the health of her patients. She supports them, even if she sometimes has doubts about what they tell her. Elizabeth Loftus' ultimate goal is the truth. Even if it sometimes hurts.