
TARGET ARTICLE

Toward an Explanation of the UFO Abduction Phenomenon: Hypnotic Elaboration, Extraterrestrial Sodomasochism, and Spurious Memories

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Autobiographical memories are often suspect. For example, a surprisingly large number of people report having been abducted by extraterrestrials. We offer a prototype of the abduction experience and an assessment of the frequency of such reports. These accounts are hard to dismiss on the basis of mendacity or insanity, but there are ample reasons to doubt their literal accuracy. We offer a cognitive-motivational explanation for how spurious memories of unidentified flying object (UFO) abductions can be created and maintained. The motivational roots lie in the desire to escape from ordinary self-awareness, and this explanation is supported by parallels between UFO abduction accounts and masochistic fantasies. The cognitive bases involve the integration and elaboration of hallucinations, general knowledge, and contextual cues into full-blown accounts, usually with the aid of hypnosis. Due to the pitfalls of hypnosis, people develop a high degree of confidence in the veridicality of spurious UFO abduction memories.

Much of what we know about other people is based on the stories they tell us about themselves. Unfortunately, sometimes what they tell us is not true. Some such stories are outright fabrications. Other autobiographical memories are simply difficult to believe, although the storyteller might be convinced they are real. According to one very large set of first-person accounts, our planet is frequently visited by aliens from outer space. At least several hundred (and more likely several thousand) Americans are said to be abducted every day by these aliens, who take the hapless individuals into their spaceships, perform painful and sexually tinged medical experiments on them, try with mixed success to erase their memories of the incident, and then return them to Earth in the approximate vicinity of the site from which they were abducted. Needless to say, many people are skeptical that these events are actually occurring, but this skepticism is quite often accompanied by a sincere desire to understand what could possibly lead someone to construct and accept a false memory of this kind.

Psychologists have been slow to devote their thoughts and research efforts to these phenomena. One reason might be a kind of defensive skepticism. According to evidence reviewed by Bem and Honorton (1994), psychologists are significantly less willing than other scientists (and even other social scientists) to take paranormal phenomena seriously. Coon (1992) traced this state of affairs back to the turn of the century, when many psychologists believed that the survival of the discipline as a respectable science hinged on their distancing themselves from then-fashionable topics such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and communication with the dead. Yet, if these recent startling accounts are to be believed, they suggest a large and increasing scope of intervention by extraterrestrial aliens into human affairs, which might soon amount to one of the most spectacular and important developments in human history. And, if these accounts are not to be believed, then they constitute a widespread and rising form of fascinating delusion that calls for explanation on the basis of accepted cognitive and motivational principles.

In either case, people who claim to have experienced abduction by unidentified flying objects (UFOs) might require expert intervention to help them recover. A handful of mental health professionals are therefore now arguing that psychotherapists should be educated about the UFO abduction phenomenon so that they will recognize the symptoms and be able to help the victims (e.g., Clamar, 1988; Mack, 1992b; Sprinkle, 1988; see also Huyghe, 1993). Abductees, they argue, are suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (or a variant of that condition, "experienced anomalous trauma"—see J. P. Wilson, 1990), and so they should get the same treatment as anyone else meeting the relevant diagnostic criteria. In other words, their problems should be handled like those of victims of other brutal experiences, such as warfare, rape, or physical abuse. A more radical approach is taken by those who argue that the problems of abductees are not just similar to other problems of adjustment but that, quite often, repressed memories of UFO abductions might be causing many of those other problems. As described by a skeptical Klass (1988a), this "skeleton key theory" suggests that recognizing the reality of UFO abduction has the potential to unlock the causes of many kinds of psychological abnormality, such as unexplained fears, phobias, and panic disorders. Proponents of this theory also caution that the vast majority of psychologists and psychiatrists are not equipped to help abductees, so people who feel that they have had such experiences should avoid those professionals. Instead, victims would be better off seeking help from experts familiar with the phenomenon. Some of these experts can even provide advice on techniques one can use to resist becoming an abductee (Druffel, 1993).

We do not mean to mock the efforts of those who seek to provide comfort to people who are unhappy and confused due to what they believe is a UFO abduction. But we do believe that these people are better served by a more complete understanding of the sources and psychological significance of their disturbing memories. In this article, we attempt to contribute to that understanding. Randles and Warrington (1985) characterized UFO abduction reports as "a remarkable phenomenon which one feels must have a psychological explanation" and declared that, given how its "eerie consistency comes through in case after case ... it is difficult to justify its continued neglect by social scientists" (pp. 153–154). The purpose of this article is to offer a possible explanation of the motivational and cognitive processes that might cause people to believe that they have been abducted by aliens. It is necessary to admit at the outset that we do not believe in the literal reality of these experiences, and so our explanatory efforts are devoted to explaining them as fantasies and false memories. We hope thus to also make a more general contribution to the ongoing debate on both the

fallibility of autobiographical memory (e.g., Halverson, 1988; Neisser & Harsch, 1992) and the processes involved in distorted reconstructions of the past (e.g., Baumeister & Newman, 1994; E. F. Loftus, 1993; Ross, 1989).

An observation made by Jacobs (1992), another UFO investigator sincerely worried about the effects of extraterrestrial intrusions on abductees, foreshadows our main argument. Jacobs noted an odd characteristic of these people. Due to the traumatic nature of their experiences, he lamented, their sexuality has been affected; in particular, many have confessed to "fantasies involving masochism and bondage" (p. 253). We concur with Jacobs's hypothesis of a link between masochistic fantasies and UFO abduction accounts. Rather than suggesting that the fantasies are a result of an actual abduction experience, however, we believe that both spring from a common source—the need to escape the self. Both masochistic and UFO abduction fantasies might derive from the excessive demands and stresses associated with the modern construction of selfhood (Baumeister, 1991a; Cushman, 1990). We present evidence supporting the hypothesis that UFO abduction accounts express the goal of escaping from awareness of the self's most burdensome aspects, such as its needs for esteem and control. In addition, we review in detail the many ways in which UFO abduction accounts resemble another set of accounts hypothesized to express the desire to escape the self—the fantasies of sexual masochists. As perceptively put by David Langford, a science-fiction writer,

Why should people fantasize such unpleasant experiences as some of those reported? Well, I am sure that being raped by the alien equivalent of a telephoto lens would be a jolly nasty experience, but if you don't actually have to undergo it but only "remember" undergoing it, suddenly it can be seen in a new light as a partly masochistic—or not so masochistic—fantasy. (Hough & Randles, 1991, pp. 41–42)

Unlike masochistic fantasies, however, accounts of UFO abductions are typically believed (by the individuals involved) to have really happened. To explain this, we invoke what is known about the fabrication of spurious memories, especially under hypnosis.

The UFO Abduction Experience: An Overview

Although no two UFO abduction reports are exactly alike, a large number are structured in a similar enough way that it is possible to construct a general or typical version of the experience. What follows is a brief synopsis of the prototypical abduction story, derived primarily from the detailed abduction reports presented

by Bullard (1987b), Fiore (1989), Hopkins (1987), Jacobs (1992), Lorenzon and Lorenzon (1977), and Steiger (1988). (Note that we use the terms *story*, *narrative*, and *account* interchangeably, as in Baumeister & Newman, 1994).

It is important to note that abduction memories rarely emerge unaided. Those who learn that they might be abductees commonly seek out help for any of a number of reasons—vague anxieties, specific phobias, bad dreams, fragmentary and disturbing memories, or what seems like an inexplicable episode of “missing time” (Hopkins, 1981). It is usually only after consultation with a psychotherapist or some sort of UFO investigator that these people can articulate a specific memory of being abducted by aliens.

UFO abduction accounts often start with the sight of a flying saucer or spaceship, although abductees sometimes remember only being aware of a bright light. Such details are frequently absent, however, and it is quite common for the abduction episode to begin with the appearance of strange beings, who are presumed to be extraterrestrial aliens. Typically, the victims are paralyzed or otherwise immobilized at this point (often in their cars or homes) and then taken onto the aliens’ craft. Occasionally, people remember being carried on board or otherwise transported there, but more commonly abductees cannot recall how they ended up inside the UFO.

Once on board the UFO, abductees typically find themselves in a strange, brightly lighted room, often filled with complicated machinery. What appears to be a physical examination of some sort then commences. Often, abductees are fastened to and stretched out on a table or bed. Sometimes they are undressed, but almost always they are subjected to painful procedures of an ostensibly medical nature. Cuts are made, blood is often drawn, and various orifices of the body are probed and even violated. Needles and physical restraints might be involved. Genitals receive special attention, and reports of sexual activities between the aliens and their victims have become increasingly common in recent years. The aliens who perform the examinations are grim and businesslike, and others stand around and watch. The examiners and other occupants of the craft almost never look quite like normal people, but they are generally humanoid in appearance.¹ Throughout the experience, abductees feel powerless and externally controlled.

At the end of the examination, victims’ memories for the entire episode are erased, or the victims are otherwise programmed to keep their experiences a secret. Sometimes, abductees are explicitly asked in a postexamination conference with the aliens to refrain from telling anyone what happened. This communication more often than not is telepathic in nature. Finally, some accounts describe tours of the spaceship, discussions of ecological and geopolitical crises on earth, and

even journeys to other worlds. These parts of the story are far from universal, however, and the exact details are very inconsistent across cases (e.g., a wide variety of “home planets”; Rimmer, 1984).

One of the first experiences of this kind was claimed by Betty and Barney Hill (Fuller, 1966); their story was later made into a television movie aired in 1975. While driving through New Hampshire, the Hills reported, they were stopped by a UFO. The two were then forced to board the aliens’ ship, where they were subjected to painful, examination-like procedures like the ones already described. Although subsequent research has turned up earlier cases with some similarities to their alleged experiences (see Bullard, 1987a), the Hills’ story is essentially the “Rosetta stone” of UFO abduction lore. When it first became public, the impression among most observers was that they had never heard anything quite like it before (Hough & Randles, 1991; Klass, 1988b).

The Hills are no longer alone. To emphasize this point and to better convey the nature of the UFO abduction experience, we present two brief examples from Bullard’s (1987b) catalogue of abduction cases:

Under hypnosis, he remembered that two lights descended from the sky and landed nearby. He felt a foreboding that something would happen if he stopped, but his car suddenly veered off the road as if pulled by a magnet, and when he got out he saw a light all over the area. A sound like leather rubbing together attracted his attention to four or five beings who apparently came over a fence along the roadside and approached him, at which time he was unable to move. ... A clamplike device seized him by the shoulders, causing him pain in the back. The beings turned him towards the craft. ... He entered a white room, rounded and domed and seemingly without an angle, and glowing with a misty luminosity. Though he did not remember

¹Remarkable similarities in the appearance of the aliens have also frequently been emphasized (e.g., Hopkins, 1987; Jacobs, 1992). Most frequently encountered are said to be the “grays,” familiar to readers of Whitley Strieber’s (1987) *Communion: A True Story*. The complete text of the abductee story beginning on this page (“Under hypnosis, ...”) also contains a classic description of this type: “The beings were hairless humanoids with heads like inverted teardrops, large black walnut-shaped eyes, small nose, slit mouth and no ears. The skin was whitish and putty-like, the height below his shoulder. The beings were extraordinarily skinny, with no muscular definition and an apparent weight of 50 lbs.” However, readers of the UFO literature will encounter a bewildering variety of other beings, including some with “golden, strawlike hair,” others that look like “a combination of earth animals,” “creatures with wrinkled skin, crab-claw hands, and pointed ears,” and a woman with “long red hair and violet eyes” (all from Steiger, 1988, pp. 59, 62, 71, 175, respectively). Mack (1994) further noted that “abductees overseas seem to have contact with a greater variety of entities than Americans” (p. 12). Cosculluela (1993) argued that such differences in appearance are often glossed over by those seeking to emphasize the commonalities between different stories.

undressing, he next found himself seated on a table wearing only a diaper-like cloth. A large and intricate device like a planetarium projector came down from the ceiling and ran a needle-like device along his back. Two beings seemed in control of the examination while others waited in the room. ... He assumed various positions on his stomach, back, and side as the beings examined him all over. After the beings applied a clamplike device to his hip region and poked his stomach with a rod, they flexed his legs with another rodlike device. ... He felt that they did not care that they hurt him. (pp. 39-40)

When hypnotized she remembered a light and a voice calling her out of bed. She obeyed against her will and went to a muddy field as a saucer-shaped craft neared the ground. Through the windows she saw beings and a piercing sound prevented her from moving. A warm beam of light then pulled her inside the craft. She found herself inside a white hospital room. Two small beings with tiny mouths and compelling eyes, dressed as if in motorcycle jackets, told her without speaking to undress and lie down on a table. She resisted but eventually gave in. ... At last the doctor entered and gave her an injection (?). He then inserted a needle into her navel. The beings only admitted to being from far away and said she would not care who they were. One being wore a scarf and seemed to be the leader; he remained in the room after the others departed, undressed himself and rubbed her with a jelly. It warmed her, whereas the leader's touch was cold, his skin grey-white. The being, who had human sexual organs, then raped her. (p. 69).

How Many Abductees?

It seems safe to say that most people in this country now have some familiarity with the UFO abduction phenomenon. Eberhart (1986) listed 30 books on the topic, but the more successful ones have only appeared since he compiled his comprehensive bibliography of the UFO literature—that is, those by Hopkins (1987), Mack (1994), and Strieber (1987). Whitley Strieber's (1987) *Communion: A True Story*, a prototypical abduction story, made an especially significant impact on the public. It was the third-best-selling paperback non-fiction (sic?) book in 1988 (McDowell, 1989) and was made into a movie the following year (a major release by a large studio).

The number of people coming forward to report that they have fallen prey to the aliens' deeds seems to have grown in proportion to the number of books, movies, and sensationalistic television programs that have been devoted to the topic. Early commentators' claims about the extent of the problem were quite modest. Greenberg, writing in 1979, noted "some 200 reported cases" (p. 106). Rimmer (1984), on the other hand, claimed that about 500 episodes had been reported between 1970 and 1980, and Hopkins (1981)

provided a similar estimate. Subsequent publicity, and especially the publication of *Communion*, triggered a quantum leap in the apparent magnitude of the abduction phenomenon. According to Conroy (1989), shortly after *Communion* came out, Strieber announced that he had received 700 letters from people "this has happened to" (p. 139). By 1988, the figure was said to be 5,000, with about 40 to 50 more letters arriving each day ("Q & A: Whitley Strieber," 1988). Even more recently, in an appearance on *Larry King Live*, Strieber (1993) claimed to have received a total of 55,000 letters from people reporting such experiences, with approximately 200 a week still being sent to him.

Although these many tens of thousands of UFO abduction experiences might seem a remarkably large number, many students of these phenomena believe that they might be merely the tip of the iceberg. Many people would presumably be embarrassed or afraid to admit to having been subjected to such an ordeal (see Westrum, 1979), and so the actual number of people who believe they have been abducted might be much higher—not to mention the aliens' putative efforts to erase memories or enjoin their victims to secrecy. For example, based on a confidential survey of students at Temple University, Jacobs (1992) estimated that 15 million people in the United States might have had abduction experiences.

The most ambitious effort to specify the number of abductees in the United States was a survey conducted by the Roper organization and reported by Hopkins, Jacobs, and Westrum (1992) in a booklet that was recently mailed to many members of the American Psychological Association. Hopkins et al. claimed that directly asking people about such experiences is pointless, because most people will either not remember them directly or will not admit to having had them for fear of ridicule. Therefore, the survey questions focused on five experiences said to be strongly associated to the phenomenon. Respondents (5,947 randomly sampled American adults) were asked whether they recalled ever "waking up paralyzed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room," "experiencing a period of time of an hour or more in which you were apparently lost, but you could not remember why or where you had been," "feeling that you were actually flying through the air although you didn't know how or why," "seeing unusual lights or balls of light in a room without knowing what was causing them or where they came from," or "finding puzzling scars on your body and neither you nor anyone else remembering how you received them or where you got them." Hopkins et al. used the working assumption that people who reported having at least four of these five experiences—2% of all those surveyed—were probably abductees. Based on this indirect method, Hopkins et al. estimated that 3.7 million Americans have been abducted by UFOs.

Critiques of this survey and of its conclusions have quickly appeared. Stires (1993) pointed out that no adequate evidence had been presented for the validity of the questions and none at all for the "four-of-five" rule (see also methodological and psychometric critiques by Dawes & Mulford, 1993; Goertzel, 1994; Hall, Rodeghier, & D. A. Johnson, 1992). Klass (1993) calculated that if Hopkins et al.'s (1992) conclusions are accurate, then, since the fall of 1961 (when the Betty and Barney Hill case ushered in the abduction era), an average of 340 Americans have been abducted every day. This high frequency seems especially implausible in light of the fact that no physical evidence exists for any UFO abduction. Baker (1992a), meanwhile, argued that the survey probably does identify a special group of Americans, but not abductees. Baker suggested that they are more likely to be people with various sleep disorders (to be discussed).

Although the figures reported by Hopkins et al. (1992) strike many as incredible, the fact remains that thousands of people now count themselves among the legion of abductees. Gordon (1991) reported that 190 of them recently trekked to Wyoming to attend a conference held exclusively for abductees.

Explaining UFO Abduction Reports: A Review of Some Parsimonious Explanations

Perhaps the most straightforward account for UFO abductions would be that they actually occur. According to this account, alien beings do in fact visit our planet and snatch unfortunate Earthlings at will, but, because the aliens possess a technology so far beyond ours, they always manage to evade detection. For many reasons, we find the "extraterrestrial hypothesis" difficult to accept. Not least among them is the illogical, irrational, and internally contradictory nature of many UFO abduction stories. For example, even if extraterrestrials did land on Earth, it is unlikely that they would be able to float people through solid walls—and yet events of that kind are commonly reported by abductees. Also characteristic are jarring discontinuities in the stories. As already noted, few abductees remember entering the aliens' craft (Jacobs, 1992). Typically, the aliens appear, and then one is suddenly inside the UFO. Randles (1988) called this kind of strangeness the "Oz factor." This is an apt label, for only in the files of an abduction investigator would one find a story like the following: "Two beings stood guard while the leader and two others examined the witness, removing his shirt and trousers and placing a skullcap on his head. He then heard a voice from inside screaming, 'I am Jimmy Hoffa'" (Bullard, 1987b, p. 63).

One kind of abduction story that would be seemingly impossible to accept would be an urban abduction. Clearly, if people were being snatched in the middle of cities, millions of people would see what was going on, and there would by now be an established consensual validation that extraterrestrials visit our planet to abduct and molest American citizens. Apparently, though, many abductees fail to see any incongruity in reporting that they were abducted from crowded urban settings without attracting any notice. One speaker on the topic of UFOs recently stated that, in New York City "there have even been cases where people have been taken right out of their apartments by a beam of light. ... Why it goes unnoticed, I don't know" ("Mysteries," 1991, p. 31).

On strictly logical grounds, then, UFO abduction memories are difficult to accept. As with everyone else, though, our initial reaction to the stories people tell—including bizarre ones such as these—is to assume that they reflect some real experience and to believe them (see Gilbert, 1991). At present, however, there is no compelling evidence that extraterrestrial aliens have actually abducted American citizens (for thorough, if now slightly outdated reviews, see Klass, 1988b; Rimmer, 1984). For example, an important source of support for the extraterrestrial hypothesis would be the testimony of third-party witnesses to UFO abductions. Jacobs (1992) claimed that a person can be abducted even when he or she is part of a small group engaged in some mutual activity. In such cases, the abductors are said to be able to "switch off" or somehow distract the nontargeted people. As a result, unfortunately, only one person, the alleged abductee, can provide testimony about the incident. In other cases, more than one person has been supposedly abducted at once (see Bullard, 1987b). But, as Baker (1992b) noted, such "multiple" abduction reports fall short of being the kind of independent corroborating evidence so eagerly sought by those believing in the objective reality of UFO abductions. Almost without exception, the alleged victims have a close relationship of some sort with each other and have had a chance to communicate and influence each other before any investigation takes place. In addition, they might be motivated to back each other up so that neither can be accused of being dishonest or insane.

In sum, uninvolved witnesses to alien abductions are lacking. Even Jacobs (1992), a prominent advocate of the literal reality of these events, conceded that "no abductions have surfaced that took place in the middle of a very large group of people, in full view at a public event" (p. 50). Furthermore, in those few cases in which witnesses were physically present during the putative abduction, the witnesses' accounts have tended to contradict or undermine the account of UFO abduction. Randles (1988) described a case in which an alleged

