

ABDUCTED!

Scientific Explanations of the Alien Abduction Experience

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In 1998, an important study by psychologist Susan Blackmore was published in the *Skeptical Inquirer*,¹ titled “Abduction by Aliens or Sleep Paralysis? (Skeptical).” Professor Blackmore began by referring to a Roper poll released in 1992 that purported to show that nearly four million Americans had been abducted by space aliens. The Roper organization provides a service by which other questions can be appended to the main polls. This supplemental part of the survey was designed and analyzed by self-identified UFO experts Budd Hopkins and David Jacobs. A representative sample of adults were given a card listing eleven experiences and were asked to say how often each had happened to them. The five main “indicators” were:

1. waking up paralyzed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room
2. feeling that you were actually flying through the air although you didn’t know why or how
3. 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
4. seeing unusual lights or balls of light in a room without knowing what was causing them, or where they came from
5. finding puzzling scars on your body and neither you nor anyone else remembering how you received them or where you got them.

Answering “yes” to at least four of the five questions was considered to be strong evidence of an alien abduction. Of the 5947 people interviewed, two percent reported four or five of the indicators. Since the population represented by the sample was 185 million, the prorated estimate was 3.7 million.

To challenge Hopkins’ and Jacobs’ conclusion, Blackmore had 126 school children and 224 university students listen to a typical abduction story, draw pictures of the aliens, and then fill out a questionnaire based on the Roper survey questions including one about false awakenings (that is, dreaming you have woken up) as well as questions about amount of television viewing.



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To summarize Blackmore's results:

Large numbers of both adults and children reported having had most of the experiences. For each person, an "alien score" from 0 to 6 was given for the number of "correct" answers to the questions about the alien..., and another score for the number of Roper Poll indicator experiences reported (0-4).

For the children, the mean alien score was 0.95, and the mean number of experiences 1.51.... The drawings of aliens were roughly categorized by an independent judge into "grays" and "others."... Twelve (12 percent) of the children drew grays and 87 did not. Not surprisingly, those who drew a gray also achieved higher alien scores, but they did not report more (supposed) alien experiences.

Those children who drew grays did not report watching more television. Nor was there a correlation between the amount of television watched and the alien score. Oddly, there was a small positive correlation between the amount of television watched and the number of experiences reported.

IF ALIENS HAVE A BREEDING PROGRAM TO COLLECT THE BEST GENES AND SKILL SETS, WHY HAVEN'T THEY ABDUCTED OUR TOP SCIENTISTS, MILITARY LEADERS, OR THE HEADS OF MICROSOFT, GOOGLE, FACEBOOK, AND AMAZON?

For the adults, mean alien score was 1.23 and mean number of experiences 1.64. Again, there was no correlation between the two measures. Seventeen of the adults drew grays, and 103 did not. And again, those who drew a gray achieved higher alien scores...but did not report more experiences.

Among the adults, those who drew grays were those who watched more television, and the amount of television watched correlated positively with the alien score.

Blackmore noted that "the results provide no evidence that people who reported more of the indicator experiences had a better idea of what an alien should look like or what should happen during an abduction. If real gray aliens are abducting people from Earth, and the Roper Poll is correct in associating the indicator experiences with abduction, then we should expect such a relationship." The results also suggest that "the popular stereotype is obtained more from television programs than from having been abducted by real aliens." Thus Blackmore results argue against the validity of Roper survey results.

Fantasy Prone Personality

Research has shown that at least some supposed abductions by aliens were due to overactive and uncontrollable imaginations of individuals with Fantasy Prone Personality disorder (FPP). According to SKEPTIC contributor Robert Bartholomew,² there is an entire class of persons who "are prone to experiencing exceptionally vivid and involved fantasies. Such people often have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality....

Based on preliminary research by J.R. Hilgard and subsequent work by Wilson and Barber, approximately four percent of the population falls into the FPP category, ranging in degree from mild to intense." This led to the working hypothesis that FPP individuals are in large part responsible for the reports of interactions with space aliens. Bartholomew and his co-author

Howard relied on their own extensive database and performed a content analysis of the biographies of 154 so-called "abductees," and found that over 85 percent exhibited symptoms of FPP. Based on this analysis, it seems plausible that FPP is a major source of alien close contact and kidnapping stories.

Another study³ found that over half of FPP people spent a large part of their childhoods "playing" with imaginary friends and animals, as well as with actual dolls and stuffed toys that they thought were alive.

Some reported interacting with leprechauns, elves, angels, fairies, and the like. The vast majority spent at least half their waking hours fantasizing. These fantasies can be so intense that many could actually feel, hear, and smell the imaginary phenomena. Similar physiological reactions can also occur when not fantasizing. It happens to some while watching movies or television. One subject reported shivering when watching winter scenes from the film *Dr. Zhivago*. While fantasizing, FPP individuals exhibit actual emotions such as laughing, crying, and sexual arousal. Nearly all have sexual fantasies which are so real to them that 75 percent experience orgasms. The FPP person has trouble distinguishing their fantasies from external reality, and in some cases cannot do so at all.

So-Called Medical Evidence

True believers counter that UFO abductees sometimes “present” with skin burns, rashes, nausea, headaches, dry mouths, etc. Sometimes (mostly with women) the injuries are blamed on sexual/medical invasive procedures performed by the alien captors. This was interpreted as overwhelming objective evidence that the stories were true and not fantasies. It was thought that people could lie but not cause themselves to suffer such injuries or illnesses.

In the famous 1967 case of Stefan Michalak from Falcon Lake, Manitoba, Canada, the burn marks from the alien spaceship were more like what occurs if one falls on a barbecue grill. Other “evidence” was equally dubious, and alcoholic intake was sometimes a factor. For details, photos and the original police report see the posting⁴ of Aaron Sakulich, who holds a PhD in Materials Science and Engineering. The information is entertaining, and at times comical. For example, the alleged “tracking implants” have turned out to be mundane objects the person did not realize had penetrated their bodies.

As for the other cases of “alien experiences,” they show a lack of knowledge of psychology and psychiatry. According to Bartholomew and Howard:⁵

The most frequently reported symptoms in our sample involved rash-like facial and body marks, itchiness, headaches, dizziness, and burning, or watery eyes. These symptoms typically occur in cases that report medical examinations by aliens

where the subject is often stuck with a needle-like device and blood is extracted, or the subject is exposed to bright lights or X-rays. In a similar manner, psychosomatic reactions reported during mass hysteria outbreaks correspond with the prevailing social norm. According to investigators, psychosomatic symptoms occurring in cases of hysterical conversion and mass hysteria in general likewise include: skin rashes, fainting, trance states, dizziness, bad mouth taste, blurred vision, stomach complaints, sleepiness, headache, vomiting and dry mouth. Note that similar symptoms were associated with “witches” and their victims during the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century.

False Memory Syndrome and “Screen Memories”

Many of the so-called abductees studied by Hough and Kalman in their 1997 book *The Truth About Abductions* were highly imaginative in a negative, paranoid way.⁶ The book has a useful chapter on False Memory Syndrome. Earlier research⁷ pointed out the many similarities between alien abduction memories and those of Satanic abduction. For the client or patient, the influence of a hypnotist combined with our cultural fascination with sci-fi and UFOs facilitates reaching an easy conclusion of a kidnapping by extraterrestrials. So-called “retrieved” memory details may be fantasies provided by the subject, or memories of other events reinterpreted as alien abductions.

In my own book on the subject,⁸ I hypothesized that instead of earthly events being “screen memories” to cover memories of alien abductions—as UFOlogists commonly assert—the opposite is sometimes true; namely, a victim of sexual assault invents a “screen memory” of being abducted by space aliens to cover the trauma of having been assaulted. Regarding the classic Betty and Barney Hill “abduction” of 1961, after seeing lights in the sky (most likely Saturn and Jupiter, the latter being especially bright then), the Hills may have been attacked by a group of men; probably men who followed them from the restaurant where, being a mixed race couple, the Hills were subjected to hostile, threatening stares. In his book *Alien Abductions*, Terry Matheson noted⁹ that the psychiatrist’s transcripts from the hypnosis sessions show that what Barney Hill reported blocking the road were *men* (dressed as “Nazis” with dark jackets), not aliens. On returning

to their car after the incident, Hill's wife Betty asked him "Do you believe in flying saucers now?" to which he replied, "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I don't."

The hypothesis that alleged memories of alien abduction are "screen memories" for actual human sexual assault was independently proposed by S.M. Powers.¹⁰ She posited that the claim of having been experimented on by aliens may serve to mask a traumatic memory of human sexual abuse. The pseudo-memory of an alien abduction is more bearable, as it does not involve a breach of trust by a relative, neighbor, or other familiar person. The victims of the assaults thus employed two coping mechanisms—amnesia and the creation of a "screenings memory" of a fictional abduction by extraterrestrials (ETs). Bias of the hypnotist colors the nature of this pseudo-memory, whether traumatic or uplifting. A recent study¹¹ supports most of these earlier hypotheses:

Previous research has shown that people reporting contact with aliens, known as "experiencers," appear to have a different psychological profile compared to control participants. They show higher levels of dissociativity, absorption, paranormal belief and experience, and possibly fantasy proneness. They also appear to show greater susceptibility to false memories.... The present study reports an attempt to replicate these previous findings as well as assessing

ALIEN KIDNAPPINGS ARE NOT REAL, ARE A PRODUCT OF HUMAN CULTURE, AND MAY BE MANIFESTATIONS OF SLEEP DISORDERS OR MENTAL PROBLEMS.

tendency to hallucinate and self-reported incidence of sleep paralysis in a sample of 19 UK-based experiencers and a control sample matched on age and gender. Experiencers were found to show higher levels of dissociativity, absorption, paranormal belief, paranormal experience, self-reported psychic

ability, fantasy proneness, tendency to hallucinate, and self-reported incidence of sleep paralysis. No significant differences were found between the groups in terms of susceptibility to false memories.

"Experiencers" tend to have higher levels of absorption and disassociation. In the book *The Omega Project*, "abductees" were reported to experience greater childhood trauma and stress, including abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect) than a control group.¹²

Critique of the Big Three: Hopkins, Jacobs, and Mack

After reading his book *Alien Abductions*, I contacted Professor Terry Matheson. In his email reply, he noted that while Jacobs (author of the Roper poll referenced in the opening section of this essay) is a very bright person, he might be suffering from a form of Stockholm Syndrome as a result of his long immersion in the world of the abductees. Matheson also noted (personal communication, March 2013):

Jacobs apparently believes that ET aliens can somehow manipulate our DNA to create hybrids, for purposes that he can only speculate on, while not entertaining the alternate scenario that, if they are that sophisticated, why bother with us at all, as intermediaries? Why not just take a few of us, get our DNA, and duplicate it on their Mother Ship, or wherever, and do all the hybridizing off-shore, as it were?

Surely beings who could create such hybrids would do it much more efficiently. Indeed, it was this mutually exclusive combination of apparent technological sophistication and sheer stupidity and ham-fistedness that eventually convinced me

that the entire narrative was nonsense. Not to mention the inconsistency between the way they are able to enter our homes and permeate solid walls, etc.—which suggests technological sophistication beyond our wildest dreams—while telling the abductees they won't remember anything (but

they always do), or that they won't feel pain (but they always do), is just beyond belief. They are ahead of us enough to travel light years to get here, but they haven't discovered painkillers as effective as those we've had around for the past several hundred years.

One also wonders if the aliens have a breeding program to collect the best genes and skill sets, why haven't they abducted our top scientists, military leaders, or the heads of Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Amazon etc., who would appear to have more to offer them than the typical abductee.

In my own book, I am very critical of Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and John Mack. The latter was a psychiatrist who should have realized that his patients had peculiar mental problems, rather than simply believing their wild stories about being abducted by space aliens, and then crediting himself with creating a scientific revolution. His first two subjects were a visual artist and a history professor, respectively, before they became writers of best-selling "true" alien abduction stories. Neither had any formal training in hypnosis (the "tool" they relied on to gather "evidence" to support their hypotheses). Their use of leading questions and suggestions was guaranteed to elicit the responses they desired. Hopkins' main motivation seems to have been to sell books. (SKEPTIC publisher Michael Shermer tells the story of meeting Budd Hopkins in the Green Room of Bill Maher's ABC television series *Politically Incorrect* when both were guests. When Shermer asked Hopkins what he does for a living, he replied "I write science fiction and fantasy.")

Jacobs' reputation took a hit due to the Emma Woods (a pseudonym) controversy, wherein Jacobs was "treating" Ms. Woods by hypnotizing her over the phone for her trauma of having been forced to have sexual intercourse with aliens (the crossbreeding program), and he asked for her used underwear to test for alien sperm residue. He also recommended the use of a chastity belt to prevent further intrusions. In 2016, Jacobs posted a lengthy, detailed defense online.¹³ The following excerpt exemplifies its tone:

Between September 27, 2005 and December 9, 2006 violence against her and threats against me increased. Security for the abduction phenomenon increases enormously when abductees help hybrids who might or might not be living

here. By June 2006, her abductors were seriously attempting to stop her from talking with me. Rather than simply telling her not to deal with me, which they did many times, they also engaged in increasingly physical and sexual violent behavior against her when she continued to disobey.

Another highly relevant excerpt states:

Within a few months of discovering that her sleep disorder had dictated her behavior, Emma suddenly changed her theory entirely. She now concluded that she was not and never had been an abductee. Everything she had ever said about her abductions was because my leading questions had forced her into false memories. I had made her believe that she was an abductee. Years later she would marvel that I "actually believed" abductions were real.

The above is ironic because it shows that layperson Woods had over the years become educated about the dangers of using leading questions in hypnosis and that she was aware of sleep disorders as an explanation of "abductions." She was now much more knowledgeable than Jacobs, who still believed in aliens attacking women for a crossbreeding program, and even writing threatening emails to him.

Hopkins' reputation also took a hit during roughly the same period when in January 2011, his wife Carol Rainey (a professional filmmaker with university degrees who, inter alia, helped scientists obtain millions in research funding and was thus familiar with the scientific method) wrote an online article¹⁴ debunking abductions and criticizing the methodology of Jacobs and her husband. Rainey accused Hopkins and Jacobs of ignoring any evidence or logic that contradicted their views, and of not following up on obvious ways to test claims, while arrogantly asserting that "the evidence" kept mounting in favor of abductions and the presence of alien-human hybrids. She accused Jacobs of practicing medicine without a license when he told Woods that she suffered from multiple personality disorder and should take medication for it. Because Rainey was present for many of Hopkins' sessions, co-authored a book with him, and knew Jacobs and Mack personally, her evaluation must be given considerable weight. In her article, she proposed a scientific way in which the hybrid and rape claims could be corroborated or falsified—DNA testing.

In contrast to Hopkins and Jacobs, John Mack was an MD and a psychiatrist and for years head of the Psychiatry department at Harvard University. In the preface to the revised edition of his book *Abduction*,¹⁵ he does distinguish between what his patients believed they saw and what he believes happened, but elsewhere he is quoted as believing aliens are abducting humans, and five times in the paperback edition of *Abduction* he clearly expressed that opinion. For example, he wanted all abductees brought to him for treatment lest they suffer at the hands of therapists, whose “ignorance and denial” of the truth of the abduction renders them incompetent. Using conventional approaches, he stated, will result in “wrong diagnoses and inappropriate treatment.” Unless the therapist is “willing to consider the possibilities of [abductees’] realities,” he argued, child abductees will have their trauma compounded.

In *Abduction*, Mack reveals the crudeness of his methodology and his own gullibility when he stated that the evidence for the existence of alien abductions depends largely on how the so-called abductee reports his experiences, the emotional appropriateness and intensity involved, and the investigator’s assessment of the reporter’s credibility. In the case of one subject “Dave,” Mack admitted that he was “quite convinced.” In the same book, he discussed the purposes of alien-human interaction, saying that his hybrid (crossbreed) patients are playing a vital role for future history, by changing our consciousness and perhaps breeding a race which will survive future cataclysms. My conclusion: there seems to be no difference between Mack and his patients in terms of their belief systems. But to be completely fair, during one of my radio appearances in 2016, a former research assistant of the late Dr. Mack called in to say that Mack and his team were very careful to rule out normal mental illness before considering the patient to have been in actual contact with space aliens.

In my book, I presented several cases right out of *Abduction* that document there was a great deal of evidence of paranoid schizophrenia, sexual abuse, sexual problems, sexual fantasies, and of sad and/or traumatic family backgrounds that could have accounted for the symptoms displayed.

This analysis was difficult to accomplish because the parties in charge of the late Dr. Mack’s estate would not allow me to quote from the book.

Sleep Disorders to Explain “Abductions”

Research into sleep disorders has experienced recent advances. Many abduction experiences may be due to hypnogogic or hypnopompic states (the person has such a vivid dream just before waking up or falling into normal sleep that they believe it was real, or it can be conceptualized as the person is partly awake but hallucinating) or sleep paralysis (which often accompanies the state or hallucination). I have experienced sleep paralysis a few times and found it truly terrifying, wanting to scream and move but being unable, but I thought that there was a burglar rather than an alien in the room.

Generational Abductions

Over the years it has become common in UFOlogy to hear about abductees whose parents and children were also abducted. The fact that some families claim to have experienced generational abduction extending over decades should be an obvious clue to any behavioral scientist or mental health professional that a shared belief system and/or problematic family dynamics and/or a genetic factor related to mental disorder or inheritance of FPP is involved. In simple terms, this is a shared delusion, (a “folie à trois” instead of a “folie à deux”); but the abductee writers and advocates in UFOlogy, ignoring the relevant scientific and medical findings, instead offer it as evidence confirming the abductions.

Ethical Issues: “Abductees” as Victims or Celebrities

Some people like to play the victim role as it provides rewards. A few years ago, on a popular radio program called *The Conspiracy Show*, a caller phoned in hoping to get help. He was an adult male who believed he was being abducted, probed, and hurt every single night

for years. He was a mental and physical wreck and dreaded going to sleep. (He did not mention asking the neighbors if they saw any flying saucers in his back yard every night, from whence he insisted he was beamed up.) It is a shame that such people do not receive competent psychiatric and psychological help, instead having their delusions reinforced, and in several cases having their problems exploited by authors.

Alternatively, in some cases the “experiencers” enjoy their new status and go on speaking tours at UFO conventions, and otherwise promote the books written about them (e.g., Travis Walton, Betty Hill, Betty Andreasson). Since this has become a sizeable business, a small industry like Roswell tourism, the people who earn money “counseling” abductees and writing books about them have a vested interest in perpetuating the abduction mythology. Also, the phenomenon has strong religious aspects, and no one likes having their faith attacked. Those who believe they have been possessed by the devil or spirits want to be seen by healers who share their belief system—and so seek exorcists, rather than psychiatrists.

Proper Treatment

While it is often recommended that a therapist establish sympathetic rapport with a patient, a mental health professional (or academic “expert”) who buys into the abduction scenario reinforces the patient’s beliefs. Instead, I believe that the therapist should explain that alien kidnappings are not real, are a product of human culture, and may be manifestations of sleep disorders or mental problems. Rather than being supported, some patients need to be confronted and deprogrammed in the manner similar to those who have been “brainwashed” into cults. For the normal case of a UFO “abductee” I recommend, along with verbal therapy, standard tests for mental disorder and personality, and testing for sleep disorders. If the person seems rational and healthy according to the tests (as many are), then I propose a new diagnosis of “UFO Neurosis.” **S**

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