

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

SINCE ROBERT A. BAKER'S PIONEERING ARTICLE appeared in *Skeptical Inquirer* (Baker 1987–1988), a controversy has raged over his suggestion that self-proclaimed alien abductees exhibit an array of unusual traits that indicate a fantasy-prone personality. Baker cited the “important but much neglected” work of Wilson and Barber (1983), who listed certain identifying characteristics of people who fantasize profoundly. Baker applied Wilson and Barber's findings to the alien-abduction phenomenon and found a strong correlation. Baker explained that whereas a cursory examination by a psychologist or psychiatrist might find an “abductee” to be perfectly normal, more detailed knowledge about the person's background and habits would reveal, to such a trained observer, a pattern of fantasy proneness.

For example, Baker found Whitley Strieber—author of *Communion*, which tells the “true story” of Strieber's own alleged abduction—to be “a classic example of the [fantasy-prone personality] genre.” Baker noted that, in addition to being a writer of occult and highly imaginative novels, Strieber exhibited such symptoms as being easily hypnotized, having vivid memories, and experiencing hypnopompic hallucinations (i.e., waking dreams), as well as exhibiting other characteristics of fantasy proneness. A subsequent but apparently independent study by Bartholomew and Basterfield (1988) drew similar conclusions.

Wilson and Barber's study did not deal with the abduction phenomenon (which at the time consisted of only a handful of reported cases), and some of their criteria seem less applicable to abduction cases than to other types of reported phenomena, such as psychic experiences. Nevertheless, although the criteria for fantasy proneness have not been codified, they generally include such features as having a rich fantasy life, showing high hypnotic susceptibility, claiming psychic abilities and healing powers, reporting out-of-body

experiences and vivid or waking dreams, having apparitional experiences and religious visions, and exhibiting automatic writing. In one study, Bartholomew, Basterfield, and Howard (1991) found that of 152 otherwise normal, functional individuals who reported that they had been abducted by aliens or had persistent contact with extraterrestrials, 132 had one or more major characteristics of a fantasy-prone personality.

Somewhat equivocal results were obtained by Spanos and colleagues (1993, 631), although their “findings suggest that intense UFO experiences are more likely to occur in individuals who are predisposed toward esoteric beliefs in general and alien beliefs in particular and who interpret unusual sensory and imagined experiences in terms of the alien hypothesis. Among UFO believers, those with stronger propensities toward fantasy production were particularly likely to generate such experiences.”

A totally dismissive view of these attempts to find conventional psychological explanations for the abduction experience is found in the introduction to psychiatrist John Mack’s *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994). Mack states unequivocally: “The effort to discover a personality type associated with abductions has also not been successful.” According to Mack, because some alleged abductions reportedly take place in infancy or early childhood, “Cause and effect in the relationship of abduction experiences to building of personality are thus virtually impossible to sort out” (Mack 1994, 5) But surely it is Mack’s burden to prove his own thesis that the alien hypothesis has a basis in fact beyond mere allegation. Otherwise, the evidence may well be explained by the simpler hypothesis of abductees being fantasy-prone personality types. (Because such people have traits that cut across many different personality dimensions, conventional personality tests are useless. Some “abductees” who are not fantasy prone may be hoaxers, for example, or exhibit other distinctive personality traits or psychological problems.) Mack’s approach to the diagnosis and treatment of his “abductee” patients has been criticized by many of his colleagues (e.g., Cone 1994).

Methodology

To test the fantasy-proneness hypothesis, I carefully reviewed the thirteen chapter-length cases in Mack’s *Abduction*, selected from the forty-nine patients

he most carefully studied out of seventy-six “abductees.” Since his presentation was not intended to include fantasy proneness, certain potential indicators of that personality type—such as a subject’s having an imaginary playmate—would not be expected to be present. Nevertheless, Mack’s rendering of each personality in light of the person’s alleged abduction experiences was sufficiently detailed to allow the extraction of data pertaining to several indicators of fantasy proneness. They are the following.

1. *Susceptibility to hypnosis.* Wilson and Barber rated “hypnotizability” as one of the main indicators of fantasy proneness. In all cases, Mack repeatedly hypnotized the subjects without reporting any difficulty in doing so. Also, under hypnosis, the subjects did not merely recall their alleged abduction experiences: all of them *reexperienced* and *relived* them in a manner typical of fantasy proneness (Wilson and Barber 1983, 373–79). For example, Mack’s patient “Scott” (No. 3) was so alarmed at “remembering” his first abduction (in a pre-Mack hypnosis session with another psychiatrist) that, he said, “I jumped clear off the couch” (Mack 1994, 81); “Jerry” (No. 4) “expressed shock over how vividly he had relived the abduction” (112); similarly, “Catherine” (No. 5) “began to relive” a feeling of numbness and started “to sob and pant” (140).

2. *Paridentity.* I use this term to refer to a subject’s having had imaginary companions as a child (Wilson and Barber 1983, 346–47) or, by extension, claiming to have lived past lives or having a dual identity of some type. Of their fantasy-prone subjects, Wilson and Barber stated: “In fantasy they can do anything—experience a previous lifetime, experience their own birth, go off into the future, go into space, and so on.” In addition, “While they are pretending, they become totally absorbed in the character and tend to lose awareness of their true identity” (Wilson and Barber 1983, 353, 354).

Thus, as a child, “Ed” (No. 1) stated: “Things talked to me. The animals, the spirits . . . I can sense the earth” (Mack 1994, 47); “Jerry” (No. 4) said that he had had a relationship with a tall extraterrestrial being since age five (113). At least four of Mack’s subjects (Nos. 5, 7, 9, and 10) claimed to have had past-life experiences (160–62, 200, 248, 259), and seven (Nos. 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12) said that they had some sort of dual identity (92–93, 173, 200, 209, 243, 297, 355–56). For example “Dave” (No. 10) considered himself “a modern-day

Indian,” while “Peter” (No. 11) under hypnosis said that he *becomes* an alien and speaks in robotic tones (275, 277, 297). In all, eleven of Mack’s thirteen featured subjects exhibited paraidentity.

3. *Psychic experiences.* Another strong characteristic of fantasy proneness, according to Wilson and Barber (1983, 359–60), is having telepathic, precognitive, or other types of psychic experiences. All of Mack’s thirteen subjects claimed to have experienced one or more types of alleged psychical phenomena, with most of them reporting telepathic contact with extraterrestrials. “Catherine” (No. 5) also claimed that she could “feel people’s auras,” “Eva” (No. 9) said that she could perceive beyond the range of the five senses, and “Carlos” (No. 12) claimed to have “a history of what he calls ‘visionary’ experiences” (Mack 1994, 157, 245, 332).

4. *“Floating” or out-of-body experiences.* Wilson and Barber (1983, 360) state: “The overwhelming majority of subjects (88 percent) in the fantasy-prone group, as contrasted to few (8 percent) in the comparison group, report realistic out-of-the-body experiences” (which one subject described as “a weightless, floating sensation” and another called “astral travel”). Only one of Mack’s thirteen subjects (No. 2) failed to report this; of the other twelve, most described, under hypnosis, being “floated” from their beds to an awaiting spaceship. Some said that they were even able to drift through a solid door or wall, a further indication of the fantasy nature of the experience (more on this later). Also, “Eva” (No. 9) stated that she had once put her head down on her desk to nap and saw herself “floating from the ceiling. . . . My consciousness was up there. My physical body was down there” (Mack 1994, 237). In the case of “Carlos” (No. 12), “flying is a recurring motif in some of his more vivid dreams” (338).

5. *Vivid or “waking” dreams, visions, or hallucinations.* A majority of Wilson and Barber’s subjects (64 percent) reported that they frequently experienced a type of dream that is particularly vivid and realistic (Wilson and Barber 1983, 364). Technically termed *hypnagogic* or *hypnopompic* hallucinations (depending on whether they occur while the person is going to sleep or waking, respectively), they are more popularly known as waking dreams or,

in earlier times, as night terrors (Nickell 1995, 41). Wilson and Barber (1983, 364) reported that several of their subjects “were especially grateful to learn that the ‘monsters’ they saw nightly when they were children could be discussed in terms of ‘what the mind does when it is nearly, but not quite asleep.’” Some of Wilson and Barber’s subjects (six of twenty-seven in the fantasy-prone group, compared with none in the comparison group of twenty-five) also had religious visions, and some had outright hallucinations (Wilson and Barber 1983, 362–63, 364–65, 367–71).

Of Mack’s thirteen selected cases, all but one (No. 13) reported some type of especially vivid dream, vision, or hallucination. For example, “Scott” (No. 3) said that he had been having “visual hallucinations” since age twelve; “Jerry” (No. 4) recorded in his journal “vivid dreams of UFOs” as well as “visions”; and “Carlos” (No. 12) had the previously mentioned “visionary” experiences and dreams of flying (Mack 1994, 82, 112). Almost all of Mack’s subjects (Nos. 1–11) had vivid dreams with strong indications of hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucination (38, 56, 80, 106, 132, 168–69, 196, 213, 235, 265–67, 289).

6. *Hypnotically generated apparitions.* Encountering apparitions (which Wilson and Barber define rather narrowly as “ghosts” or “spirits”) is another characteristic of a fantasy-prone personality (found in only 16 percent of their comparison group). A large number of the fantasizers also reported seeing classic hypnagogic imagery, including such apparition-like entities as “demon-type beings, goblins, gargoyles, monsters that seemed to be from outer space” (Wilson and Barber 1983, 364).

Mack’s subjects had a variety of such encounters, both in their apparent waking dreams and under hypnosis. All thirteen subjects reported seeing one or more types of outer-space creatures during hypnosis.

7. *Receipt of special messages.* Fifty percent of Wilson and Barber’s fantasizers (contrasted with only 8 percent of their comparison subjects) reported the feeling that some spirit or higher intelligence was using them “to write a poem, song, or message” (Wilson and Barber 1983, 361).

Of Mack’s thirteen abductees, all but one clearly exhibited this characteristic, usually in the form of receiving a telepathic message from the extraterrestrials. The message was usually similar to the one given to “Arthur” (No. 13)

“about the danger facing the earth’s ecology” (Mack 1994, 381). Interestingly, many of these messages just happen to echo Mack’s own apocalyptic notions (3, 412), indicating that Mack may be leading his witnesses. In the case of “Eva” (No. 9), the aliens, who represented a “higher communication” (243, 247), purportedly spoke through her and described her “global mission.” “Jerry” (No. 4) produced a “flood of poetry” yet stated, “I don’t know where it’s coming from”; “Sara” (No. 7) had been “spontaneously making drawings with a pen in each hand,” although she had never used her left hand before; and “Peter” (No. 11), who has “always known that I could commune with God,” stated that the aliens “want to see if I’m a worthy leader” (99, 192, 288, 297).

Results

One of Mack’s subjects (“Sheila,” No. 2) exhibited four of the seven fantasy-prone indicators, and another (“Arthur,” No. 13) exhibited five; the rest showed all seven characteristics. These results are displayed in figure 62.

Although not included here, healing—that is, the subjects’ feeling that they have the ability to heal—is another characteristic of the fantasy-prone personality noted by Wilson and Barber (1983, 363). At least six of Mack’s thirteen subjects exhibited this trait. Other traits not discussed by Wilson and Barber but of possible interest are as follows (with the number of Mack’s thirteen subjects that exhibit it): having seen UFOs (9), New Age or mystical involvement (11), Roman Catholic upbringing (6 of 9 whose religion was known or could be inferred), previously being in a religio-philosophical limbo or quest for the meaning of life (10), and involvement in the arts as a vocation or avocation (5). For example, though apparently not an artist, a healer, or a UFO sighter, “Ed” (No. 1) had “a traditional Roman Catholic upbringing” and, as a bit of a loner, feels “lost in the desert”; in addition to “talk[ing] to plants,” he has “practiced meditation and studied Eastern philosophy in his struggle to find his authentic path” (Mack 1994, 39, 41–42). “Carlos” (No. 12) is an artist, writer, and “fine arts professor” involved in theatrical productions; he has seen UFOs, has a “capacity as a healer,” was raised a Roman Catholic, is interested in numerology and mythology, and calls himself “a shaman/artist teacher” (Mack 1994, 330, 332, 340–41, 357).

Also of interest, I think, is the evidence that many of Mack’s subjects fan-

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

Case Number from Mack's <i>Abduction</i>														
Fantasy Proneness Markers		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Susceptibility to Hypnosis		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
2. Paridentity (Imaginary Companions, Past Lives, Dual Identities)		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
3. Psychic Experiences		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
4. 'Floating' or Out-of-Body Experiences		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
5. Vivid or 'Waking' Dreams/Visions/Hallucinations		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
6. Hypnotically Generated Apparitions		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
7. Receipt of Special Messages		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Figure 62. Alien encounter cases from John Mack's *Abduction* were studied for fantasy proneness. (Courtesy of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine)

tasized while under hypnosis. For example, in addition to aliens, “Ed” (No. 1) said he saw earth spirits that he described as “mirthful little playful creatures” (Mack 1994, 48). “Joe” (No. 6) saw “mythic gods, and winged horses” and also “remembered” being born (170, 184). “Catherine” (No. 5), “Sara” (No. 7), “Paul” (No. 8), and “Eva” (No. 9) said they had past-life experiences or engaged in time travel while under hypnosis. Several said they were able to drift through solid doors or walls, including “Ed” (No. 1), “Jerry” (No. 4), “Catherine” (No. 5), “Paul” (No. 8), “Dave” (No. 10), and “Arthur” (No. 13). “Carlos” (No. 12) claimed his body was transmuted into light. In all, eleven of Mack’s thirteen subjects (all but Nos. 2 and 3) fantasized under hypnosis. Of course, it may be argued that there really are “earth spirits” and “winged horses” or that extraterrestrials truly have the ability to time travel or dematerialize bodies or that any of the other examples I have given as evidence of fantasizing are actually true. However, once again, the burden of proof is on the claimant, and until that burden is met, the examples can be taken as evidence of the subjects’ ability to fantasize.

Conclusions

Despite John Mack’s denial, my study of his best thirteen cases shows high fantasy proneness among his subjects. Whether the same results would be

obtained with his other subjects remains to be seen. Nevertheless, my study supports the earlier opinions of Baker and of Bartholomew and Basterfield that alleged alien abductees tend to have fantasy-prone personalities. Certainly, that is the case for the very best subjects selected by a major advocate.

References

- Baker, Robert A. 1987–1988. The aliens among us: Hypnotic regression revisited. *Skeptical Inquirer* 12, no. 2 (Winter): 147–62.
- Bartholomew, Robert E., and Keith Basterfield. 1988. Abduction states of consciousness. *International UFO Reporter*, March–April.
- Bartholomew, Robert E., Keith Basterfield, and George S. Howard. 1991. UFO abductees and contactees: Psychopathology or fantasy-proneness? *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 22, no. 3, 215–22.
- Cone, William. 1994. Research therapy methods questioned. *UFO* 9, no. 5, 32–34.
- Mack, John. 1994. *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Nickell, Joe. 1995. *Entities: Angels, Spirits, Demons and Other Alien Beings*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Spanos, Nicholas P., Patricia A. Cross, Kirby Dickson, and Susan C. DuBreuil. 1993. Close encounters: An examination of UFO experiences. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 102, no. 4, 624–32.
- Wilson, Sheryl C., and Theodore X. Barber. 1983. The fantasy-prone personality: Implications for understanding imagery, hypnosis, and parapsychological phenomena. In *Imagery, Current Theory, Research and Application*, ed. Anees A. Sheikh, 340–90. New York: Wiley.