

A More Parsimonious Explanation for UFO Abduction

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Newman and Baumeister have written a well-researched and carefully considered target article on a subject, the alien abduction experience, that has heretofore suffered from a lack of serious scientific attention. However, their discussion of the subject is skewed due to a lack of firsthand clinical information and to cultural biases to which we are all vulnerable. Their search for the most “parsimonious explanation,” given that they do not “believe” in alien abduction, fails to consider information that leads us to the most parsimonious explanation of all—that the abduction phenomenon might not be reducible to psychological processes with which we are now familiar and that we do not have enough information to formulate definitive answers at this time. Because of the extraordinary nature of abduction reports, Newman and Baumeister, like the majority of the scientific community, have felt obliged to declare their belief in the nonreality of the phenomenon before they have conducted careful, firsthand study of these experiences—the source of which, we argue, remains very much in question. Disbelief in the validity of the content of abduction experiences is understandable given that the content challenges fundamental shared beliefs in our culture. In the interest of science, however, abduction experiences should be a matter of investigation rather than belief. By choosing to discuss the phenomenon in terms of certainties, rather than in terms of questions, we clearly do a disservice to the individuals who are having these extraordinary experiences as well as to the process of science.

We present evidence that abduction experiences cannot be readily explained by constructs such as hypnotic elaboration, masochism, and fantasy proneness. Abduction accounts cannot be dismissed as hypnotic elaboration because approximately 30% of these accounts are obtained without hypnosis. Unlike masochists, the vast majority of individuals reporting abduction experiences do not seek to reexperience them, and abduction experiences interfere with, rather than facilitate, sexual arousal. Finally, there is evidence that individuals reporting abduction experiences are not more hypnotizable or fantasy prone than the general population. Newman and Baumeister’s arguments are so speculative that they would not be considered adequate except for cultural biases and for the fact that firsthand clinical knowledge is widely unavailable to psychologists and other psychologically sophisticated audiences.

As members of a culture that defines reality in a very structured way, scientists are motivated to embrace a

simplification of anomalous data like abduction experiences. This minimizes our own cognitive dissonance and allows us all to dismiss this phenomenon before we are forced to examine more closely the data involved. Were it not for clinical contact with individuals who demand of us compassion and careful evaluation, the authors of this commentary would also find it expedient to dismiss the phenomenon.

Therefore, before addressing directly the arguments regarding fantasy proneness, masochistic fantasy, and hypnotic elaboration, we first propose to name some of the biases and prejudices of the culture that all of us, as scientists, must face as we begin to ask questions about this unusual phenomenon. Second, we propose to define the alien abduction phenomenon in terms of its characteristics rather than in terms of its purported source, which is unknown. Third, we present elements of subjective human experience that support the notion that some kind of extraordinary, traumatic event has occurred. In the final section, we discuss the differentiation of these traumatic experiences from masochistic fantasy, fantasy proneness, and hypnotic elaboration. It is our hope that a broader treatment of this phenomenon will invite and encourage other researchers to investigate with open minds this fascinating area.

Abduction Experiences and Cultural Bias

The content of the abduction phenomenon challenges shared social knowledge, and therefore it is difficult to observe. Westrum (1982) noted that, if a person perceives a phenomenon that the person’s society deems impossible, then the socially determined implausibility of the observation will cause the observer to doubt his or her own perceptions, leading to denial or misidentification of the event. As an example, Westrum cited that child battering was long denied to be anything but a minimal problem. Fearing condemnation and ridicule, and motivated by a desire to believe a socially sanctified myth that no parent would seriously harm his or her child, physicians long misdiagnosed injuries that would now be recognized as the results of beatings.

Similarly, elements of the abduction phenomenon challenge very basic tenets on which Western civilization is based—tenets that we, as Western scientists, are personally invested in defending. Both the content of abduc-

tion experiences and the form that abduction data take are challenging to our present scientific worldview and might lead us to dismiss data that have investigative merit.

Challenge to Our Sense of Predominance in the Universe

The content of abduction stories is outrageous. It challenges our sense of reality and our very place in the universe. Could there exist beings so alien and so technologically superior to us that their actions cannot be described by our current understanding of reality? If such technologically advanced, nonhuman beings were to exist, how would we know whether they can or cannot move through walls? Lacking a frame of reference, who are we to decide what kinds of physical evidence they should leave? How are we to understand the motivations and predict the actions of what is alien? If there are beings that are technologically superior to us, by the rules of our culture, are they not more evolved than we? Might we play a less central role in the cosmos than we want to believe? With these questions, we revisit the role of children who wonder at a more complex and sophisticated universe that we can only begin to understand. Serious consideration of the content of abduction reports dethrones us from our position of mastery and predominance in the universe.

Challenge to Our Sense of Safety

Abduction reports threaten our personal sense of safety. Individuals reporting abduction recount experiences of being treated as we treat animals, by beings with vastly superior technology whose motives are unknown. What motivation could any of us have to “believe” in beings before whom we are as helpless as animals—knowing that we ourselves have cultivated, controlled, manipulated, eaten, and experimented on animals for generations? Superior technology has long served as an excuse to exterminate less technologically advanced cultures and to hunt animals to extinction. What if this very reasoning could be used to exterminate or exploit us? Abduction reports bring us face-to-face with our worst human behaviors and fears.

Challenge to Dualistic Thinking

The very content of abduction stories is so far outside the realm of socially shared reality that it seems “crazy.” But, to make the situation more complex, evidence in the field of abduction research yields no quick or easy answers. Abduction reports consist of

subtleties that might not easily or quickly be resolved into the duality of reality versus nonreality. This might not be a popular position to take within sectors of the unidentified flying object (UFO) community, but it does reflect the data we have encountered. The investigation of abduction experiences are complex for two main reasons.

First, characteristics associated with the abduction phenomenon itself are puzzling. For example, some abduction experiences seem to occur very much in the physical world; an individual clearly appears to be missing, as reported by external observers. In other cases, related experiences seem more like out-of-body experiences or even encounters with strange forms of light, sound, vibratory, or other energies capable of creating strong tactile sensations but without the occurrence of anything that could be called an abduction in any literal sense. The phenomenon appears to operate in subtle, elusive, even strange ways. We have come to the view, after years of involvement in this work, that the subtlety is intrinsic to the phenomenon and must be embraced if we are to understand its mysteries.

Second, the form that evidence for abduction experiences takes—subjective report—is also complex. Considerable psychological data exist on distorting elements such as cultural myth, hypnotizability, cognitive dissonance, postevent suggestion, motivated elaboration, and social pressure. In the face of these factors, a thorough evaluation of an abduction report can occur only through the examination of the context of the experience in an individual’s life and the culture in which it is reported. Such an evaluation requires clinical sensitivity to the whole life of the person. This process cannot be reduced to a single statement.

The complexities involved in studying abduction conflict with a basic human desire for simple explanations. Most of the information about the abduction phenomenon has been disseminated by the popular press, which is neither educated in psychological complexities nor motivated to present subtleties. The press tends to sensationalize and polarize issues in order to gain readership.

This has real ramifications for the study of the abduction phenomenon. Because most disseminated information about the abduction phenomenon is polarized and sensationalized, few serious scientists are interested in pursuing it. People who are educated in the social sciences are aware that the information as presented does not prove the existence of aliens, as the public would be led to believe. Those scientists who are interested in investigating alien abduction are careful to report that they do not believe in the reality of the reports. This is a wise precaution for maintaining a career, because funding and grants and university tenure depend on the scientist’s ability to maintain an identity linked to the tenets of mainstream science.

However, when investigating a subject, it seems unwise to decide the outcome of the investigation before gathering data, because crucial evidence can be overlooked in the desire to fit data to a confirmatory set. Furthermore, in the case of studying alien abduction, it is unlikely that a scientist with such a stance will be able to recruit willing, sane subjects; what person in his or her right mind, having had a frightening extraordinary experience, would seek help from a person who has decided a priori that the experience is unreal?

The study of the abduction phenomenon also reveals a dichotomy between research psychologists and psychotherapist/clinicians—two subgroups of a shared discipline that hold two different worldviews. Research psychologists tend to study and evaluate psychological events separate from the individual who reports them. Clinicians evaluate psychological events within the context of the person who is speaking. This dichotomy is most evident in the current climate in which psychotherapists find themselves under fire for believing stories of sexual abuse. Some researchers with experience from laboratory experiments on the social influences on memory claim that a large proportion of these stories are examples of “false memories” implanted by therapists (Loftus & Ketcham, 1994). But clinicians who believe their clients’ images and feelings of abuse do so because the imprint of this abuse is visible in other areas of the clients’ lives. The “memory” is connected to a web of behaviors and beliefs that are currently active and damaging to the client’s life (Terr, 1994). In clinical psychology, the reality of what happened is less important than the whole constellation of behaviors associated with the abuse. In research psychology, the absolute answers, separate from the context of the individual person, are stressed.

From the truncated view of the research psychologist, the abduction experience is hardly worth studying. The content is “crazy” because it significantly deviates from our understanding of shared reality—the common definition for craziness. From the view of the clinical researcher, the content of the abduction material is interesting because of its role in a person’s life story. The balanced investigation of abduction experiences will require that clinical expertise in evaluating individual, subjective report be tempered and informed by the expertise of researchers studying memory and memory processes in many different individuals.

Thus, the process of studying alien abduction is highly controversial because it collides with several social phenomena, including (a) our sense of our dominant position in a hierarchical, materialistic worldview, (b) our sense of personal safety, (c) our tendency to prefer black-and-white, simplistic answers, (d) our desires for a secure livelihood and good professional reputation as serious scientists, and (e) a split in the discipline of psychology itself.

Definition of Abduction Experience

The process of science often collides with socially accepted truths. For example, 80 years ago, based on the observations of consistencies in the coastlines of continents and the fossil record, Alfred Wegener proposed that, at one time, the continents of the Earth were united in a land mass he called *Pangaea*. His theory was almost unanimously rejected because the Earth was thought to be rigid and because he could not explain how the continents were scattered from their original positions. Supported by subsequent unexpected findings in marine geology, paleomagnetism, geophysics, and seismology, Wegener’s proposal is subsumed into a theory of plate tectonics, now the accepted view of the Earth explaining a vast array of observable phenomena (Uyeda, 1971). Wegener’s theory made no sense in terms of what was thought to be true in the world of his time. Yet technological progress and ongoing scientific observation changed the understanding of what was possible.

It seems clear that abduction experiences do not make sense in terms of how we think of the world at this time in history. Newman and Baumeister’s description of abduction experiences are replete with comments decrying the illogical, irrational, and unreasonable aspects of abduction phenomena. Newman and Baumeister argue that, because these aspects cannot be true in the physical world as we know it, the experiences must be fantasy. However, in defining the abduction phenomenon in terms of its impossibility, we are unable to observe its strong coherence as well as the variations in reports that do exist, consistent with individual interpretations of perceived events. For example, many individuals reporting this experience do not conclude that the aliens are from “outer space.” Initially, many of these people do not describe being taken into a “flying saucer” or UFO but instead describe a strange room or enclosure. Some people do not ultimately feel that the abduction experiences are harmful. In fact, some people even refuse to call the nonhuman beings that they experience *alien*.

As mentioned by Westrum (1982), it is infeasible to observe an event that is defined as an impossibility. In an effort to improve our ability to observe this phenomenon, Rodeghier (1994b) and Mack (1995) delineated the most consistent and relevant elements of the abduction experience as follows. An abduction experience includes the following elements:

1. Being taken against one’s will to an unfamiliar environment by a being described as technologically superior and nonhuman.
2. Being subjected to intrusive medical procedures.
3. Expressing appropriate emotion in relation to this experience.

We propose to defer decisions about the source of these experiences until more complete observations have been made. Because we are unsure exactly what is occurring to individuals reporting alien abduction, we call them *abduction experiencers* or *experiencers*. This population should be differentiated from *contactees*, who report alien contact and who often feel more positive and in control than experiencers. The anomalous experiences of contactees are usually more ego syntonic and thus might represent a completely different experience or a different defensive structure on the part of the reporter.

The Beings

A *technologically superior nonhuman being* is defined as an entity that appears intelligent and that apparently makes use of technologies currently unavailable to us. Abduction reports consistently include elements that seem nonsensical—moving through walls, levitation, the ability to “freeze” a person into immobility, and mental communication. Indeed, contrary to Newman and Baumeister’s implications, such unlikely aspects are defining characteristics of the experience. Experiencers tend to explain these anomalies as resulting from superior technology.

Experiencers also describe contact with at least one being that is identified as nonhuman, although usually humanoid. Across countries and cultures, and in children as young as 3 years of age, these beings are most commonly described as short, gray, with large black eyes, and devoid of individual characteristics. Contrary to Newman and Baumeister’s claims, the phenomenon, whatever its source, does not seem limited to Western cultures. For example, Credo Mutwa, a Zulu *sangoma*, or shaman, recently spoke of his lifelong encounters with the *mantinda*, or “star monkeys” (C. Mutwa, personal communication, November 1994). Mr. Mutwa’s social and cultural background is vastly different from that of most Westerners, in that he has a sixth-grade education and limited access to the Western press. Yet, his description of both the beings and their activities, as well as his reactions to his experiences, were amazingly similar to the accounts of experiencers in the United States. Reports from Brazil, Chile, and other countries all have the same, startling similarities—from individuals who have never heard of one another or the abduction phenomenon. More cross-cultural research is needed to clarify how cultural myths, social pressures, and proximity to investigative resources affect reports of the phenomenon.

Lack of Control

Experiencers do not initially enjoy contact with these beings, and many people report taking extraordinary

precautions to prevent an abduction experience. Experiencers report struggling consciously against a sense of physical paralysis that prevents them from running or defending themselves from the beings. This experience of paralysis is usually not associated with sleep, according to the reports we have heard. Continued struggles to gain control of the situation are usually not successful. In order to avoid further experiences, individuals avoid being alone or avoid locations associated with the experience. They often report sleeping with all of the lights on or trying to sleep only during the day. These precautions are usually ineffective, and many abduction experiencers report being taken against their will more than once.

Biological Procedures

Procedures that seem to involve biological research are the focus of most abduction experiences. The procedures are routinely completed on some kind of a table, with a bright light overhead. They tend to focus on the pelvic region, particularly the reproductive system, and the head, particularly the sinus cavities. Being paralyzed on some kind of an examination table is a defining aspect of these experiences. Consistent with the reproductive organs involved, women tend to report having their legs spread; men do not. A comparison of these biological procedures with present (human) medical practice reveals consistent significant differences, contradicting the notion that these reports originate from an experiencer’s past medical experience or knowledge (Miller, 1994). Lights, holograms, and mental imagery are reported to play a part in invasive psychological procedures as well. In our research, contrary to popular belief, sexual stimulation and imagery are not central, defining elements of abduction experiences.

Affect

The accounts of these extraordinary experiences are accompanied by fear, disbelief, and a shattered worldview; it is not uncommon for an experiencer to prefer to be diagnosed with a mental illness rather than believe that the experience happened in a physical sense. Thus, the affect observed is appropriate to such an intrusive, terrifying, and threatening experience, whatever its source.

Physical Evidence

Some of the strongest evidence for the coherence of the abduction phenomenon is the remarkable consistency of abduction accounts, discussed at length by Carpenter (1993), Hopkins (1987), and Jacobs (1992). There are several forms of circumstantial physical evi-

dence that accompany the abduction phenomenon, including cuts, scars, scoop marks, rashes, and implants consistent with abduction narration (Mack, 1995). Similarities in the kinds, shapes, and locations of marks have been noted (Jacobs, 1992). Corroborative evidence, in the form of independent UFO sightings corresponding to the time of a reported abduction experience, has been reported. Experiencers' absence from expected locations at the time of the purported abduction has been verified independently in a few cases (Mack, 1995). However, there is no "smoking gun" evidence that proves conclusively the existence of aliens. But is this the best evidence to be seeking?

In focusing attention on obtaining physical proof of alien contact, it might be that substantial evidence is being overlooked. A focus on physical evidence presumes the external, physical existence of aliens who act and think as humans and whose technology is limited in the same ways that ours is. Are these useful presuppositions? Are the scientists of today similar to 19th-century doctors who ridiculed the notion of germs and who were blind to the observation that patients were becoming sick from diseases transmitted from patient to patient by the doctors themselves?

Perhaps it is time to pay attention to the substantial number of individuals who are reporting abduction experiences. More than 3,000 individuals have contacted Dr. Mack and the Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER) seeking help and looking to provide information about the phenomenon. Although the Roper poll data remain to be validated in terms of the abduction experience, it seems clear that a large number of Americans report anomalous phenomena of consciousness that constitute unexplored territory for science. In the face of such data, it is the job of scientists to observe and ask questions about these anomalies rather than to come to conclusions based on inadequate categories of knowledge. In the case of alien abduction, the data lead us back to questions about experiencers, their motivations, and the place of the experience in their lives. In short, we are forced to examine subjective experience for an understanding of the abduction phenomenon.

Subjective Experience

A responsible and encompassing study of the abduction phenomenon calls for the development and application of a science of subjective experience, such as that described by Stolorow (1992). As personal reports are the principal source of knowledge of abductions, investigators must be rigorous in evaluating authenticity, affective intensity, and consistency in comparing abduction accounts with one another. Furthermore, the motivation, skepticism, believability, and sincerity of

the reporter must be ascertained relative to his or her experience. This kind of evaluation of subjective accounts without corroborating physical evidence is the principal data of psychoanalysis and psychodynamic psychiatry. A correct psychodynamic formulation explains past memories and current behaviors and predicts future behaviors. Similarly, an adequate analysis of subjective abduction experience should be corroborated across reporters, should predict the form of future reports, and should predict the general future behaviors of the persons involved.

In this context, we discuss some of our observations about the experiencer sample with whom we have worked. In this case, we are speaking about a sample of experiencers who have been screened for major psychopathology and who are likely to consist of the most self-assured and proactive members of this population, because experiencers who are less self-assured are unlikely to come forward in the hostile social climate now present.

Social Aspects Related to Reporting Alien Abduction

Let us first examine the social aspects confronting a person who has had an extraordinary experience. The vast majority of experiencers are, understandably, reluctant to come forward with their experiences. Experiencers who disclose their experiences face ridicule, loss of respect and social status, loss of employment, and increased relational stress. Furthermore, there is a considerable internal burden of fear that comes with the acknowledgment of an uncontrollable, terrifying event that has every possibility of recurring. Experiencers who publicly talk about their experiences relinquish an important coping mechanism—the ability to live as if such an experience never occurred. In short, the social consequences of coming forward with a possible abduction experience are considerable; going public with such experiences is an act of true courage. Motives such as masochistic needs, the need to play the role of victim, and the need to belong to a special group seem more easily met by a variety of alternatives that are less costly in the social realm.

What would motivate an experiencer to seek help from a researcher or investigator? It seems that experiencers are trying to make sense of some extraordinary experience occurring outside shared reality. First, experiencers suffer from extreme social isolation regarding their experiences. Their inability to be frank about their experience without negative social consequences has an impact on their ability to have faith in a shared social worldview. This can be a profound source of pain. Second, an inability to reflect on and speak about this extremely stunning experience discourages

people from evaluating their internal status. They are likely to be subject to anxiety and intrusive images related to their experiences—symptoms that are disruptive enough to force experiencers to seek explanations. This distress is sometimes associated by the experiencer to a gap in memory. This unexplained “lost time” is distinct from the experience of unaccounted-for time associated with the absorption of attention. For the experiencer with such a memory gap, the continuity of personal consciousness is disrupted—and with it a sense of peace and well-being. This kind of memory gap is consistent with that described by therapists treating trauma victims (Davies & Frawley, 1994). Thus, experiencers seek to talk about their experiences in order to be able to reflect on and understand them.

Finally, by coming to an investigator, an experiencer is taking an active role in an experience that has, to this point, been characterized by helplessness. Experiencers want someone to do something about the phenomenon to make it better known, to reach out to others with the experience, and to make sure someone investigates it.

Experienced Anomalous Trauma

In our conversations and interactions with experiencers, we find that their thoughts and behaviors fit a pattern of a response to some kind of traumatic event that is beyond our society’s current explanation of human experience. Before experiencers have had a chance to talk about their experiences, they often suffer from symptoms similar to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Experiencers show phobic avoidance of stimuli linked to their experience, sleep difficulties, intrusive affect and images, and autonomic hyperarousal. J. P. Wilson (1990) christened this traumatic reaction to an unknown event *experienced anomalous trauma*. Persons reporting alien abduction avoid the location of the abduction experience, sleep, written and video material related to abduction phenomena, and doctors’ and dentists’ examinations that involve examination scenarios and bright lights. Although initially attracted to UFO material as a way to make sense of their experience, most experiencers report that they have been unable to complete reading such books because of the feelings that were stirred up. Some experiencers report a decreased interest in sex due to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability in their experiences.

Other symptoms related to PTSD include nightmares and an inability to sleep. Experiencers report being flooded by feelings and occasional flashes of images related to the experience. They often carry a sense of a foreshortened future and a sense of detachment from the normal course of human affairs. They might have difficulty concentrating. When initially telling their

story, they show signs of extreme physiological arousal and fear. Exposure to related material can retrigger such reactivity.

After experiencers speak to a neutral listener about their experiences, many of the most distressing acute symptoms of PTSD fade (Carpenter, 1994). At this point, some experiencers avoid talking or thinking any further about the experience because they feel that there is nothing they can do about the situation. Other experiencers seem to move into an obsessive information-gathering mode accompanied by urgency. These polarized behavior patterns of extreme exposure or extreme avoidance seem to be similar to patterns observed in other forms of trauma. For example, individuals traumatized by early sexual abuse often show sexual promiscuity or avoidance, whereas individuals suffering war trauma might show extreme preoccupation with thrill seeking or avoidance of any kind of risk (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 1987). Experiencers in the obsessive information-gathering mode tell us that they are trying to find some kind of control over their experience by learning all they can about it. They actively seek support from those they feel they can trust. They struggle to find a way to feel safe, and they do this by speaking to other experiencers who have found some measure of peace. They have an urge to make sense of what has happened, and anticipation of the trauma of future experiences brings with it a sense of urgency, anxiety, and unique suffering. It is out of this motivation that we see experiencers congregate with one another. Out of this sense of urgency and anxiety, many experiencers forge a sense of self and a reality that transcends a materialistic worldview.

Most of the experiencers we have known move out of this stage to become involved or overinvolved in other activities. As one person told us,

I can’t really do anything about my experiences.
... I understand now that they can be a source of growth rather than injury for me, but I can’t focus on them because I have the rest of my life to get on with.

Abduction experiences, although initially profoundly life changing, become peripheral to daily life. Participation in experiencer research and support groups seems to take second priority to childrearing concerns, pursuit of career goals, and the responsibilities of daily life. Many people seek to channel their concerns of ecological destruction related to their abduction experiences into concrete social action, and this is the primary reason we see a small subset of experiencers move into the public sphere with their experiences.

If an abduction experience recurs, we see a return to extreme anxiety and fear, as it seems again that the

individual must work to reconstruct a safe world. Recurrence of these experiences does not seem linked to life stress or psychodynamic issues, although, clearly, more structured research needs to be done in this area.

Fragmentation of Information

Fragmentation of the kinds of information that researchers receive fits with a traumatic-experience hypothesis. For many experiencers, retrieving information that places an alien reality in the context of daily life is more threatening than anything else; a puzzling fragment of an experience aboard a ship or an extremely vivid series of images about an alien seems to be more easily reported than transitions such as entering a ship from a familiar environment. The latter material links the experience directly to normal, waking-state reality, and reporting it directly challenges the adequacy of the experiencers' sense of reality.

Distortion of Abduction Material Related to Researcher Bias

Because the abduction experience, whatever its source, seems outside the social constructs by which we order and define reality, it seems inevitable that some distortions will occur as an individual, in conversation with the researcher, makes meaning of the experience. Paradoxically, an "objective, skeptical" stance might seriously undercut a complete investigation. Experiencers are well aware that what they have to say sounds crazy, and they will simply restrict information if they sense that the researcher cannot be open to listening to it. That a clinician's attitude can limit the kind of information received from a client is common knowledge among clinicians. In our experience, abduction material cannot be retrieved unless the experiencer feels supported and respected by the researcher. For this reason, it is important to maintain empathic connection with our informants while maintaining a critical attitude toward the content of the material received. Empathic connection can occur in the absence of leading questions and other specific communications of expectations. Under these conditions, we do find variations in the ways that people make sense of their experiences, although many of the basic elements of the experience remain consistent across experiencers.

No Culture of Agreement

In our experience, we have not seen the development of a cult or a culture of agreement, perhaps because accepting the physical reality of an abduction experi-

ence means accepting the possibility of future traumatic experiences. Thus, experiencers seem extremely ambivalent about having their stories confirmed by other experiencers. Early in their search to understand their experiences, they are relieved to hear that others are coping with the same phenomena. In their search to understand, they are careful to differentiate between their own experiences and media reports of the experiences of others.

However, after experiencers have learned what they can about the phenomenon, they, we observe, are not eager to hear about others' experience, because this seems to trigger feelings of anxiety associated with their own. In our sample of about 40 experiencers with whom we have ongoing contact, 3 to 5 years after initially reporting their experience, they remain in distant contact—willing to support our research efforts but without an ongoing investment in their identity as experiencers. We see no "increased fervor" to maintain their beliefs. We see no congregation to reaffirm these beliefs but rather an ambivalence about meeting. Therefore, very much unlike the Seekers mentioned by Newman and Baumeister, experiencers have no special contact or special information that gives them power. Instead, we observe that this common experience is the basis of a club to which no one seems to want to belong. We see a willingness to puzzle over abduction experiences and to disagree with researchers over interpretations of abduction material. Contrary to Newman and Baumeister's beliefs, the disavowal of an abduction memory would not occur at high cost because most individuals do not dare speak freely about their experiences. Cognitive dissonance might play a role in those few situations in which public disclosure has occurred. However, cognitive dissonance cannot account for the initial report of the experience or for the majority of experiences, which are kept secret. Clearly, longitudinal research is needed in order to observe how people's reactions to extraordinary experiences change over time. Furthermore, accuracy of report could be encouraged by decreasing the stigma and high-profile, circus atmosphere associated with abduction reports.

Sleep Paralysis

Abduction experiences can be differentiated from traumatic reactions to simple sleep paralysis for several reasons. First, a portion of abduction experiences occur in the waking state, during the day, and these daytime reports show clear similarities to reports that occur at night. Second, experiencers report similar details and similar procedures that go unreported in the media, and these details are present in the reports of individuals across cultures and among many young children. Sleep paralysis cannot account for these common details. Third, ex-

perencers show similar phobic reactions to events and material symbolically linked to abduction material that are not linked to sleep alone. Fourth, in experiencers, insomnia, anxiety symptoms, and nightmares tend to resolve with the conscious processing of abduction material, which would seem unlikely if the traumatic experience were not directly linked to the material. Although it is possible that abduction reports are the result of some altered-state experience, the common symbolic structure of the reports and their links to symptoms of anxiety require an explanation other than sleep paralysis.

Furthermore, sleep paralysis and hypnogogic hallucinations of such long duration tend to be symptoms of *narcolepsy*—a neurological disorder characterized by an overwhelming desire to sleep at any time. Individuals with narcolepsy also suffer from *cataplexy*—a sudden loss of voluntary muscle tonus with full consciousness, often during emotional events (Carlson, 1994). Individuals in our sample of experiencers deny such symptoms. Those experiencers who have undergone electroencephalograph (EEG) testing in an attempt to find a neurological cause for their experiences report no significant findings. Thus, there is no evidence that sleep paralysis can account for the abduction phenomenon.

Thus, in our data, abduction experiencers act and behave in a manner that is consistent with exposure to a traumatic event that is outside socially shared reality. Their symptoms of anxiety are linked to details of their narratives. Furthermore, the details appear in stories of children as young as 3 years and in individuals living in different cultures. This consistency of detail across reporters is not explicable by exposure to television and movies. Attempts to link abduction experiences to abnormal neurology such as sleep paralysis have not been successful.

Differentiating Traumatic Experience From Fantasy

Most individuals interviewing experiencers will recognize that experiencers seem to be traumatized by something. Newman and Baumeister postulate that the traumatic event might actually be sleep paralysis, and the rest of the abduction story is a confabulation constructed to meet the masochistic needs of the individual, who tends to be fantasy prone and suggestible. The data are inconsistent with sleep paralysis, and, furthermore, there appears to be no masochistic motivation for an experiencer to create such an abduction story. Most important, the fundamental difference between masochists and abduction experiencers is that most experiencers do not choose to repeat their experience. Additionally, there is considerable evidence that experiencers are not fantasy prone or suggestible.

Masochistic Fantasy

Abduction experiences do not fit the rubric of masochistic fantasy. Masochism is a syndrome that associates sexual pleasure with at least one of the following—receiving pain; relinquishing control through bondage, rules, commands, or other means; and embarrassment or humiliation (Baumeister, 1989). The fantasy of the experience and the experience itself are desirable and are actively sought. The experience unfolds according to roles and symbols understood in our culture in general, and the course of action is enacted according to the specific wishes and desires of the masochist. Masochistic sex games rarely reach intense levels of pain, and extensive precautions are taken to ensure that no actual injury occurs.

Baumeister's notion of the "deconstruction" of an overly rigid self-concept through the use of fantasy is congruent with theories that promote the use of fantasy and hypnosis as therapeutic tools. Fantasy is useful to the self when it allows a person to expand beyond overly rigid learned patterns and explore new ones without exposure to overwhelming affect or failure. Thus, ego strength and active mastery grow with exposure to a bearable level of anxiety and uncontrollability (Brown & Fromm, 1986).

Understood from this perspective, masochistic fantasy allows individuals to approach their fears within bearable constraints; according to Newman and Baumeister, "most masochists are very careful to avoid injury or genuine danger, and they tend to prefer limited, carefully measured doses of pain rather than extreme ones." Masochists thus seek controllable exposure to that they fear most—loss of control and loss of esteem. Confronted by these things in a situation with clear boundaries, roles, and expectations, they master the fear in a situation that allows them some control. Thus, masochistic fantasies might allow individuals to "deconstruct" overly rigid aspects of the self.

Abduction Experiences Are Not Masochistic Fantasies

Although Newman and Baumeister present an important and interesting theory for masochism, abduction experiences do not have the same structure or the same impact as masochistic fantasies. Initially, most experiencers do not report or show pleasure in the telling of the experience, in the apparent reliving of the experience in hypnosis, or in the anticipation of possible future experiences. Initially, the details of the experience are often told with extreme reluctance, physical shaking, trembling voice, and deep anxiety. With extremely rare exception, reported forced sexual union is

a source of deep distress. In men, the release of sexual tension associated with the gathering of sperm is associated with ongoing feelings of helplessness and anguish. Both men and women report that abduction experiences interfere with rather than facilitate future sexual arousal. Years after the initial telling of their stories, many experiencers in our sample are reluctant to speak of what happened, because in the retelling is the restimulation of the feelings associated with the initial experience.

Contrary to a masochistic fantasy, the abduction experience is an extreme experience of powerlessness and lack of control. The beings do not act according to well-understood roles or expectations, and, in initial experiences, individuals report that they feel that their very lives are in danger. Terror and pain can sometimes be quite severe, at a level that produces dissociation—a splitting of consciousness from physical sensations and the restrictions of the physical world that are painful and stunning. The experience of missing time is usually considered a sign that the ego has compromised its sense of continuity—a high price paid to keep disturbing material from consciousness (Davies & Frawley, 1994). When asked to rate the level of their upset at the time of their experience on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = *not upset at all*, 10 = *as upset as they could possibly imagine*), experiencers rated their distress 10 to 100—or “off the scale.”

Unlike masochistic fantasy, physical pain is usually not an ongoing concern within the abduction experience. Experiencers typically report that initial pain associated with medical procedures is removed by the beings. Gender differences in the report of pain, noted by Newman and Baumeister, are not statistically significant and could well be due to gender roles; women are known to be more willing than men to report distress.

Newman and Baumeister also find gender differences in the “display” of experiencers and attempt thereby to link abduction to masochism. Yet, such gender differences are also common to known medical procedures involving reproductive organs. Women are more likely than men to have their legs spread apart during such procedures, which do not necessarily constitute masochistic acts.

In summary, abduction experiences do not fit masochistic fantasy for several reasons. First, abduction experiencers do not find the experience pleasurable and do not typically seek to repeat the experience. Second, unlike the controlled exposure of a masochistic fantasy, the abduction experience involves an extreme exposure to helplessness and lack of control. Third, contrary to masochism, sexual arousal is hindered, not enhanced, by an abduction experience. The feelings of humiliation and helplessness found in abduction experiences do not serve the psychological needs of our inter-

viewees in ways that would be expected of a masochistic personality or of a masochist.

Fantasy As a Means to Reframe Traumatic Anomalous Experiences

It might be that masochistic fantasies are one way that people master traumatic experiences such as purported alien abduction. Fantasy and myth have traditionally been a way that humans make meaning of pain and suffering in a human, relational context. From this perspective, Strieber’s (1986) fictional story about prostitutes who introduce the protagonist to the positive aspects of pain could be seen as a reworking of the most traumatic elements of abduction experience, reframing pain and loss of control as an opportunity for growth. The existence of the story does not prove that Strieber created his account of abduction (Strieber, 1987) to meet masochistic needs. Rather, it shows that issues of control and pain have long been on the mind of this highly unusual, very public individual who is somewhat atypical of the sample of experiencers we have interviewed. In order to study the phenomenon in a balanced way, his account must be considered together with the reports of other individuals.

Strieber’s preoccupation with the theme of transcending helplessness and pain reveals an important paradox; the best outcome for individuals recovering from traumatic anomalous experiences may involve the reworking and distortion of data related to the event. This complicates matters for researchers who are trying to understand what happened. In our sample, individuals who come to reframe their experiences as opportunities for transformation have the best outcome. This does not mean that the individuals found pleasure in the experience initially. An abduction researcher must therefore question how much of abduction accounts are adaptive (but inaccurate) reworkings of traumatic occurrences and how much is material directly related to the anomalous event. The reworked, distorted material can be differentiated from the raw experience itself through (a) the level of affect involved in the initial telling of the story, (b) careful clinical interviews of the experiencer, and (c) observations of responses to future experiences. Because the construction of memory is always a motivated, active process, comparisons of abduction stories over time and across individuals are absolutely necessary to the study of abduction phenomena.

Fantasy Proneness

Because the content of abduction experiences seems fantastic, it is easy to postulate that experiencers have an inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Anecdotal observations about difficulties in distin-

guishing reality from fantasy and unspecified personality peculiarities in experiencers could well be traced to the experiencer's efforts to make sense of some extraordinary experience. Actually, there is no good evidence that experiencers are more fantasy prone than the general population.

Bartholomew, Basterfield, and Howard (1991), utilizing secondhand biographies, found fantasy-prone characteristics in a group of 152 individuals reporting alien contact. Bartholomew et al.'s study, however, had several major flaws—the measure of fantasy proneness was not validated; there was no comparison group; and the sample included alien contactees, whose experiences are more ego syntonic than those of abduction experiencers. The interpretation of the data is also flawed, because abduction experiencers might be more likely than other people to be frank about unusual experiences.

There are fantasy-proneness studies indicating that experiencers are no more fantasy prone than the general population. In their firsthand study of 27 abduction experiencers, Rodeghier, Goodpaster, and Blatterbauer (1991) found that levels of fantasy proneness—as measured by the Inventory of Childhood Memories and Imaginings (ICMI), a validated measure of fantasy proneness (S. C. Wilson & Barber, 1983)—were no higher than fantasy-proneness levels in the general population. In a related study of alien contactees, Ring and Rosing (1990) found no difference in fantasy proneness between alien contactees and near-death experiencers (NDEers), as measured by a 10-item questionnaire developed for the study. However, this finding does not prove low fantasy-proneness because (a) the measure was not validated, (b) NDEers might be fantasy prone, and (c) abduction experiencers were a subsample of the contactee sample.

Spanos, Cross, Dickson, and DuBreuil (1993) compared a group of individuals reporting UFO sightings and alien contact and a group of individuals not reporting such experiences. Utilizing the ICMI and other measures of imaginal properties, including the Betts Questionnaire on Mental Imagery and the Absorption scale of the Differential Personality Questionnaire, Spanos et al. found no differences between UFO experiencers and nonexperiencers. Spanos et al. wrote:

These findings clearly contradict the hypothesis that UFO reports—even intense UFO reports characterized by such seemingly bizarre experiences as missing time and communication with aliens—occur primarily in individuals who are highly fantasy prone, given to paranormal beliefs, or unusually suggestible. (p. 629)

From Spanos et al.'s (1993) study, 40% of intense UFO experiences (i.e., experiences involving seeing a UFO close up, contact with aliens, missing time, or abduction) were not associated with sleep—contradict-

ing a sleep-paralysis hypothesis. The people reporting these intense experiences showed average fantasy-proneness scores when compared to a community sample but showed a greater tendency to report unusual thoughts and beliefs—higher fantasy-proneness scores, higher magical-ideation scores, higher Schizophrenia subscale scores, and more paranormal experiences—compared to individuals reporting UFO sightings alone, who showed depressed scores in these areas. It is possible that, as Spanos et al. claimed, an anomalous experience occurring randomly in the population could be interpreted and reconstructed by individuals with unusual thoughts and beliefs as abduction and by less unusual individuals as a UFO sighting.

Alternatively, might individuals reporting UFO sightings alone, who show lower scores than normal on fantasy proneness and other measures of unusual thoughts, be disinclined to report unusual experiences? Might an individual who is more concrete be significantly more traumatized and therefore have less access to memories of an anomalous occurrence? These data do not support the idea that abduction experiences are explained by fantasy proneness.

Fantasy Proneness As Indicated by Sexual Abuse

It is true that the incidence of people willing to report sexual abuse is higher in experiencers than in the normal population (Ring & Rosing, 1990). To cite this as evidence for fantasy proneness in experiencers seems misguided for two reasons. First, it might well be that the high incidence of sexual abuse is a reporting effect; individuals willing to admit to a socially unacceptable event such as being abducted by aliens are much less likely to balk at admitting sexual abuse, to themselves or to others. Second, correlations between fantasy proneness and sexual abuse are in the .30 range (Lynn & Rhue, 1990), so individuals who are highly fantasy prone make up only a small percentage of people who have been sexually abused. Sexual abuse has been reported by fewer than one fourth of abduction experiencers (Rodeghier, 1994a). It seems extremely unlikely, based on these relations, that fantasy proneness can account for reports of alien abduction.

Hypnotizability

Hypnotizability does not account for abduction etiology for several reasons. First and foremost, approximately 30% of accounts meeting abduction criteria are obtained without hypnosis (Bullard, 1989; J. E. Mack, personal communication, June 1995). In addition, in those experiencers who do undergo hypnosis, 60% to 70% of information gathered by Dr. Mack is obtained before hypnosis (R. Colasanti, personal communica-

tion, June 1995). Second, previous studies have shown that experiencers are not highly hypnotizable. Rodeghier et al. (1991) found that levels of hypnotic suggestibility as measured by the Creative Imagination Scale (S. C. Wilson & Barber, 1978) were no higher in abduction experiencers than in the general population. In related work, Spanos et al. (1993) found that individuals reporting alien contact and other intense UFO experiences did not show higher levels of hypnotizability when compared to students or a community control group.

Newman and Baumeister make a good point: Because it has been shown that material recovered under hypnosis can be inaccurate, abduction material recovered by this method should not be accepted literally on its own. For this reason, researchers compare hypnotically recovered material with material reported in the waking state. Such comparisons have revealed that hypnotically recovered material does not differ in basic structure from material reported by individuals with a clear waking memory of abduction events. Furthermore, material recovered from altered-state work often seems more developmentally and psychodynamically accurate than material consciously remembered. For example, one conscious abduction narrative from adolescence tended to be glossed over in ways that were more syntonetic with the self-image and desires of a young adolescent male than what was painfully recalled during a hypnotic session. Many embarrassing details relating to powerlessness and loss of control were unavailable to this informant except in the altered state. In particular, the initial report of a happy outcome of pleasurable sexual intercourse with a cooperative, sexually active female alien gave way under hypnosis to the forced, quite humiliating taking of a sperm sample. This second scenario, recounted in the absence of leading questions by the researcher, is more typical of male abduction scenarios (Mack, 1995).

Most abduction researchers are aware that suggestibility is an issue in hypnotically recovered material (Bullard, 1989). The transcript presented by Newman and Baumeister is not representative of all hypnotic work done by abduction researchers who are aware of the confounding influences of leading questions.

Newman and Baumeister ask, "Why seek out a hypnotist?" The tendency of the experiencer to recover abduction material in an altered state might be due to several factors. First, hypnosis might provide a safe social role to present crazy-sounding material. Hypnotically recovered narration can always be disavowed or held in doubt and is therefore more comfortable for the experiencer to report. When asked, experiencers will clearly differentiate between "conscious memories" and memories recovered under hypnosis. Second, memories of an abduction experience might be encoded in a high state of arousal corresponding to terror and

disbelief, so that abduction material might need to be recovered under a similar state of consciousness. Thus, the altered state involved might be a result of state-dependent memory. Third, trauma specialists have found that memories encoded under situations of extreme trauma might be dissociated and laid down by a memory system different from the semantic memory system. The traumatic memory system tends to encode memories as fragmented body sensations and images. Dissociated material might need to be "relived" in order to symbolize and place it in semantic memory (Davies & Frawley, 1994; van der Kolk, 1994). It is unclear whether the process of symbolizing material initially stored as traumatic memory results in distortion according to present expectations, or whether traumatic memory is more accurate because it is less vulnerable to the same reconstructive but distorting tendencies of normal memory processing (Brown, in press). For these reasons, abduction material recovered under an altered state must be compared across individuals and with material reported in the waking state.

Implications for Psychology

To summarize, abduction experiences cannot be explained by a masochistic fantasy based on hypnotic elaboration of sleep paralysis. Unlike masochists, experiencers do not seek to repeat their abduction experiences and do not derive pleasure from the experiences. Because 30% of abduction accounts are retrieved without hypnosis, hypnotic elaboration cannot account for these stories. Experiencers have been shown to be no more fantasy prone or hypnotically suggestible than the general population. Finally, abduction experiences cannot be explained by sleep paralysis because many abduction experiences are not associated with sleep. We concur with Newman and Baumeister that abduction reports cannot be dismissed by other simple psychological interpretations such as lies, attention-getting ploys, mental illness, traumatic birth experiences, or a desire for victim status.

It seems that the most parsimonious explanation at this time is that science is not able to explain the strange consistencies and unbelievable aspects of the abduction phenomenon. Because abduction reports challenge our sense of reality and our sense of safety, and because serious examination of the strange phenomenon could threaten our livelihood as respected scientists, it is tempting to dismiss the phenomenon without careful attention to the issues it presents. Newman and Baumeister's target article is a much needed first step in a discussion about the subject. We think that further examination of the phenomenon will prove fruitful, for the study of abduction experiences reflects issues that are central to the field of psychology today.

The study of abduction experiences will lead us to explore aspects of the human mind, such as the accuracy of memory encoded under situations of extreme emotion. Studying abduction experiences will also bring us to examine the uses and misuses of hypnosis and other altered states in the exploration of the psyche. Although there appear to be ways that hypnosis seems to increase the believability of reports, hypnosis can also confound memory and the interpretation of events.

The study of abduction experiences should allow us to help what might be a substantial number of individuals who suffer from these experiences and who now feel unable to seek help for fear of being diagnosed with a thought or personality disorder. We cannot tell how many people are being affected by the phenomenon, although the prevalence might be quite high. Dismissing high estimates as being impossible due to time/space limitations on alien travel is reductionistic because it assumes that the phenomenon is based solely on the physical appearance of aliens—an assumption that is too simplistic to explain the data we have at this time.

The study of abduction experiences brings us to the center of the problem of intersubjectivity. As researchers, who we are and what we know will influence the information we elicit from experiencers, for we are dealing with material that is outside shared, socially constructed reality. If experiencers feel uncomfortable with us, they will not tell us what they have experienced. The structure of our questions and of our interest will affect the process by which experiencers make meaning of their experiences. For this reason, it seems critical that we try to remain as open as possible to the material itself and that we encourage experiencers to refrain from placing their experiences into restrictive cognitive boxes such as real–unreal, objective–subjective, physical–spiritual, positive–negative, or belief–disbelief. In the same fashion, serious investigators should avoid use of these dichotomies, because they might prematurely restrict the view of this complex phenomenon.

Thus, the greatest benefit to arise from the abduction phenomenon will be to help us step outside the traditional dichotomizations of real–unreal and belief–disbelief, for it appears that this is the only means by which we can gather data on the subject. Our ability to investigate the characteristics of this complex phenomenon is severely hindered if we restrict our attention to what we have previously decided is “real.” Science moves by the examination of anomalies—whether the anomaly be the once inexplicable transmission of electromagnetic waves through a vacuum, the seemingly impossible drift of the continents across the surface of the earth, or the remarkably consistent, impossible stories of people who claim to be abducted by aliens.

Note

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“Memories” of Anomalous and Traumatic Autobiographical Experiences: Validation and Consolidation of Fantasy Through Hypnosis

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From the time of Freud and Janet, psychological science has grappled with the trustworthiness of so-called recovered memories of physically or psychologically traumatic experiences that are assumed, for some time, to have been repressed or dissociated from awareness. In a not uncommon psychotherapy scenario, an adult individual who seeks treatment for a current problem, such as an eating disorder or depression, might find that the therapist believes the presenting symptoms to be rooted in a history of childhood abuse or incest, of which the client was previously unaware. The two then embark on a course of “uncovering” therapy, typically using hypnosis or a similar suggestion/imagery-laden procedure, whereupon the heinous “evidence” is gradually dredged from the client’s unconscious. The legitimacy of remembrances obtained in such a context, in the absence of other corroborating evidence, is an issue that is being debated throughout the mental health professions and in courtrooms worldwide. It should be noted, however, that it was an explicit goal of the therapy to excavate the presumed repressed memories of childhood abuse in an effort to alleviate the patient’s current symptoms. Therefore, that the client confirmed

the therapist’s suspicions by reporting recollections consonant with such a history might mean that the events actually took place; alternatively, it is also possible that the therapeutic milieu served to set the stage for the creation of a false memory of childhood abuse.

In a slightly different vignette, the treatment of another individual results in his reporting an episode in which he was transported from his bed and deposited in a high-technology operating room aboard an alien space vessel, where he becomes the subject of an invasive medical examination. Certainly, any claim that this recovered memory represents a literal autobiographical experience would be greeted with skepticism. The memory concerns an occurrence that is so out of the ordinary—and that defies contemporary scientific validation—that it is likely not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the manner in which an alien-abduction memory is dealt with in therapy may not differ from the way recovered memories of childhood abuse, or any other autobiographical reminiscences, are treated. In the interest of maintaining a supportive therapeutic context, all such claims understandably receive at least a tentative or working acceptance by the therapist. Further, the tendency to accept a client’s recollections

