

## Distinguishing Memory From Fantasy

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In attempting to explain the unidentified flying object (UFO) abduction phenomenon, Newman and Baumeister touch on several themes important to contemporary psychologists. We examine one such issue. Many observers probably find it hard to believe that people of sound mind could suppose that they were abducted and assaulted by aliens. Why do the purported abductees apparently accept the validity of their memories, and why do Newman, Baumeister, and probably most other people presume the falsity of these recollections?

Our thesis is that both believers and skeptics use "truth" criteria to evaluate abduction memories. By differentially weighting these criteria, as well as relying on divergent assumptions, the parties come to different conclusions. Our discussion proceeds as follows. First, we observe that people generally believe their own and other people's retrospective reports. People's distrust of abduction memories is thus a fairly rare reaction. Second, we list truth criteria that people use to evaluate memories when their accuracy is called into question. Third, we detail evidence relevant to each criterion and point out how the abductees and Newman and Baumeister could use that information to come to opposite conclusions. Fourth, we offer some observations about the characteristics of abduction memories as well as their relation to a superficially similar phenomenon—"recovered" memories of childhood sexual abuse.

### People Believe Retrospective Reports

Rather than subjecting their memories to extensive evaluation, people usually accept them uncritically (Ross, in press). Even individuals who recognize that their memory of an episode conflicts with someone else's tend to assume the validity of their own accounts (Ross, Karr, & Buehler, 1992). A belief in the accuracy of many of one's own recollections is probably crucial to mental well-being. People's sense of their identity is intricately bound to their personal memories.

In our culture, individuals also generally assume the truthfulness of other people's accounts. Grice (1975) suggested that, in everyday conversation, listeners typically presume that others tell the truth. Social psychologists have reported dozens of experiments on the "correspondence bias" that indicate that people tend to accept another person's behavior and words at face

value (Gilbert, 1995). Even research participants who are informed that a speaker might deceive them are disposed to believe him or her (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985; Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990; Krauss, 1981). This propensity to trust communicators is one of the most consistent findings in the deception literature (DePaulo et al., 1985).

### Validating Memories

Sometimes people do not simply accept memories as true. If people's memories conflict, then rememberers and their audiences might be prompted to evaluate the accuracy of each recollection. People might also try to verify recollections that seem vague, incomplete, or unusual. People's tendency to seek verification presumably varies with the importance of accurate recall—individuals might be more inclined to document memories in legal than in social contexts.

Suppose individuals are motivated to assess the truth of either their own or someone else's personal memory. How might they do so? If feasible, they might try to use objective, external reality criteria for judging the validity of a memory. Dates, times, and other details of people's stories can sometimes be verified. Such reality checks are often impossible for personal memories, however, and people are forced to seek other standards for evaluating recollections. Research has revealed eight general criteria that people use to assess their own and other people's memories (Ross, in press):

1. *Source characteristics.* People might base their judgment of the accuracy of a recollection on attributes of the rememberer—such as expertise, gender, age, personality, reputation, and behavior (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993; Ross, in press; Undeutsch, 1988).

2. *Context.* People use the context of recall as a basis for evaluating memories. Employers might suppose that job applicants are inclined to exaggerate their past accomplishments. Many psychologists, including Newman and Baumeister, doubt the veracity of memories elicited under hypnosis or in response to leading questions.

3. *Memory qualities.* People assess the accuracy of memories by examining qualities of the memories. Actual memories contain more perceptual and contextual details, more information about subjective emo-

tional states, and less information about cognitive operations than fantasized events (Johnson, 1988; Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988; Johnson et al., 1993; Johnson & Raye, 1981; Steller, 1988; Undeutsch, 1988). Individuals use these properties in their attempts to distinguish reality from fantasy in their own and other people's accounts (Johnson, 1988; Johnson et al., 1988; Johnson et al., 1993; Johnson & Raye, 1981; Steller, 1988; Undeutsch, 1988). Memory qualities might have especially profound implications for people's assessments of their own recollections. If people cannot assume the accuracy of remembrances that contain abundant perceptual and context information, what can they believe about their pasts? People might feel that they are losing their sanity when such recollections are proved false.

4. *Memorability of event.* People deem some events to be more memorable than others. People are likely to accept the validity of a recollection if it seems to encapsulate an unforgettable event (Ross et al., 1992).

5. *Internal consistency.* It is often supposed that genuine memories are likely to be internally consistent (e.g., Johnson et al., 1993; Ross et al., 1992). Incoherence, internal contradiction, and discontinuities—the stuff of dreams and delirium—seem good reasons to deny the reality of recollections.

6. *Reliability.* Assessors can consider whether a memory remains consistent over time—judging reliable memories to be more valid than recollections that shift (Ross, in press).

7. *Congruence with other knowledge and experiences.* Individuals might examine a memory to determine if the details agree with their previous experiences and with their knowledge of the world and people. Individuals frequently invoke this knowledge criterion to evaluate the accuracy of their own and other people's memories (Johnson et al., 1993; Ross et al., 1992; Steller, 1988; Undeutsch, 1988).

8. *Consensus.* People might ask whether others remember the episode in the same way that the rememberer does. For audiences, the most important test of consensus might be the degree to which the rememberer's recollection corresponds to their own memories of the same event. The consensus criterion is often applied in legal settings to evaluate the accounts of various witnesses. In simulated trials, mock jurors take corroborated testimony more seriously than non-corroborated testimony (Duggan et al., 1989).

### Applying the Truth Criteria

The truth criteria have considerable face validity but offer no guarantee of success. Even if people apply these standards systematically and impartially, the criteria, singly or in combination, fail to provide a defini-

tive basis for accepting or rejecting a specific recollection (Ross, in press). Moreover, individuals do not tend to use these standards systematically. Rather, they tend to focus on some criteria and ignore others. Sometimes a selective focus is dictated by circumstances; for example, consensus information might be unavailable or perhaps less readily obtainable than internal-consistency or knowledge-congruence information. At other times, people evoke standards that tend to support their preferred position; for example, they argue for the accuracy of specific memories by stressing the importance of those criteria that support the validity of a recollection (e.g., memory quality) and by de-emphasizing standards (e.g., consensus) that would raise doubts.

Next, we consider how rememberers and their audiences might assess the credibility of UFO abduction memories on the basis of the truth criteria. As Newman and Baumeister do, we assume that abductees are not knowingly lying when they report their memories. It is entirely possible, of course, that all of the purported abductees engage in deliberate fabrication. If so, our analysis is superfluous.

### Why Might People Believe That Their Alien Abduction Thoughts Are Genuine Memories, Whereas Newman and Baumeister Do Not?

One obvious answer to this question is that the abductees are seriously disturbed individuals who cannot distinguish fantasy from reality. That would not explain the nature of the memory (why alien abductions?) but could help clarify why people might believe that such bizarre events have transpired. However, Newman and Baumeister cite evidence that suggests that the abductees are sane people with strange memories.

The alternative we wish to propose is that otherwise normal people believe the abduction memories because, from the rememberer's standpoint, the recollections satisfy important truth criteria. In contrast, Newman and Baumeister do not believe the abduction accounts because they see the accounts as failing to satisfy important criteria. Consider each standard in turn:

1. *The source.* The abductees are recalling their own memories, whereas the skeptics are witnesses of that recall. Individuals tend to judge their own accounts of the past as more credible than other people's accounts (Ross & Holmberg, 1990; Ross et al. 1992). Because they themselves are not recalling abduction episodes, Newman and Baumeister have less of a reason to assume the credibility of the source.

2. *Context.* Many of the memories are elicited under hypnosis during therapy. Rememberers tend to assume that the recollections that they retrieve under hypnosis are highly accurate (Dywan & Bowers, 1983). It is likely that the abductees use the fact that they recovered their memories under hypnosis as support for the validity of those recollections. In contrast, Newman and Baumeister review studies indicating that memories obtained under hypnosis are susceptible to bias and error. Thus, the abductees and Newman and Baumeister might come to different conclusions on the basis of the same evidence.

3. *Memory qualities.* According to Newman and Baumeister, abductees often provide vivid, detailed accounts of their experience. These qualities should lead rememberers to suppose that the memories are genuine (Johnson et al., 1993). Newman and Baumeister remark on the vividness of the memories but do not consider this as evidence for the abductees' claims, because the details seem inconsistent with other truth standards (to be discussed).

4. *Memorability of event.* Abduction memories would seem to fit the intuitive criteria of an unforgettable event. On this basis, the abductees might conclude that their memories reflect an actual event. Newman and Baumeister do not remark on this characteristic of the memories.

5. *Internal consistency.* The stories, as depicted by Newman and Baumeister, seem fairly coherent. Newman and Baumeister, however, point to a seemingly serious gap. Most people do not seem to recall how they entered the alien ship. The abductees might cite the generally high internal consistency of the stories as evidence of their validity. Conversely, Newman and Baumeister emphasize the importance of the gaps. Interestingly, the abductees might claim that their failure to recall entering the ship lends credence to their account. They could say that they have not entirely recovered their memories because the aliens tried to "erase" their recollections for the event. Abductees could add that, if they were simply confabulating the entire story, they should be able to generate an account of how they entered the ship. Fiction tends to be coherent and seamless. Genuine memories often have gaps.

6. *Reliability.* Newman and Baumeister do not provide any evidence about reliability.

7. *Congruence with other knowledge and experiences.* Newman and Baumeister present evidence that many of the abductees have a long interest in and knowledge of UFO phenomena before their purported abduction experience. Conceivably, they perceive alien abduction to be a possible if not probable event. In contrast, the abduction accounts contradict Newman and Baumeister's conceptions of reality. For example, in some of the memories, the aliens transport people through solid walls—a happening that Newman and Baumeister judge improbable.

Newman and Baumeister also note that most reported abductions seem to occur in the United States and other Western countries; on a simple probability basis, one might assume that abductions should be more frequent in more populous areas of the world, such as Asia. Perhaps most important for Newman and Baumeister, there is no physical evidence that the abduction episodes occurred; the lack of films, pictures, or telltale marks on individuals or the landscape obviates the possibility of an external reality check. Again, abductees might draw quite different conclusions from the same evidence. The ability to float through walls might be within the technical capacities of advanced societies. Asians might not report abductions in part because, in that part of the world, there is a shortage of therapists who are capable of alleviating repression. Also, external, physical evidence seems less necessary when one has detailed memories of an episode.

8. *Consensus.* Some people recall being snatched while in the presence of others, but no one else seems to have noticed the kidnapping. Therefore, corroborative testimony is lacking—a fact that troubles Newman and Baumeister. Abductees, however, are able to achieve a weaker form of consensus. According to Newman and Baumeister, abductees engage therapists who themselves tend to believe in alien abduction. Abductees also participate in support groups and attend conventions for victims of alien abduction. Thus, although abductees might know that many other people are skeptical, they apparently have no trouble locating individuals who can validate their experiences. To abductees, the responses of skeptics (their disbelief of abduction stories in principle) might seem to reflect prejudice and ignorance; in contrast, the support of other abductees might seem to represent well-informed judgment.

We recognize the highly speculative nature of our analysis. Our purpose is to show that abductees could use the truth criteria to derive support for the reality of their memories. Our point is not that the abductees' assessment of the validity of their accounts is as likely to be accurate as that offered by Newman and Baumeister. Rather, we propose that both skeptics and believers could derive support for their inferences from the truth criteria. Perhaps the strongest psychological evidence against the validity of these memories is that most were elicited under hypnosis. As Newman and Baumeister observe, research suggests that people should be suspicious about recollections generated under hypnosis. There is little reason to suppose, however, that the abductees are aware of this research evidence. Therefore, there is correspondingly little reason for abductees to doubt the accuracy of recollections that are vivid, detailed, congruent with their prior knowledge, and consensually validated.

### Similarity of Abduction Memories to Other Personal Memories

Like many other personal recollections, abduction memories lack external, corroborating evidence. Unlike many recollections, however, abduction memories seem to possess the quality of "irrefutability." Largely because aliens presumably possess superior technology, the possibility of external verification is precluded for some aspects of UFO abduction events. This renders skeptics' appeals to the dearth of external evidence ineffective. If a skeptic points to the fact that people who should have witnessed the abduction saw only the abductee lying on the ground, the abductee can reply that the aliens used their superior abilities to make the witnesses "think" they saw the person lying on the ground.

Finally, consider the similarities between abduction accounts and "recovered" memories of childhood sexual abuse. Repression plays a central role in explanations of both phenomena. In recovered memories of child abuse, the repression is self-generated; in UFO abductions, amnesia is induced by aliens. In many instances of both phenomena, the memories are later recovered by a professional who usually believes that the incident has taken place. In both cases, there is good reason to be concerned that people might confabulate the memories during therapy.

It is important also to emphasize differences between accounts of childhood sexual abuse and tales of alien abduction. Many people who experience childhood sexual abuse do not repress the memory. Indeed, episodes of abuse often produce spontaneous, repetitive, and intrusive recollections (Loftus, 1993; Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983). In addition, some instances of child sexual abuse yield physical as well as psychological scars. As a consequence, childhood sexual abuse is viewed as a major problem in our society, although estimates of its frequency vary widely. The situation is quite different for memories of alien abduction. These recollections apparently arise almost exclusively during therapy, often while the rememberer is hypnotized. Moreover, the abduction experience leaves no physical residues. Finally, alien abduction is not generally recognized as a major problem in our society. Most people who have not shared the experience probably suppose that UFO abduction never occurs.

As a result of differential acceptance, the social consequences of reporting the two types of recollections are quite divergent. Individuals who recount memories of child abuse—whether previously repressed or not—can expect to receive sympathy and understanding from many others. People who report UFO abduction can expect to be greeted with widespread derision. The very unpopularity of abduction memories makes them particularly intriguing targets

for the type of psychological analysis proposed by Newman and Baumeister. Our purpose, in this commentary, is more fundamental—we have sought to explain why individuals might believe that they have experienced events that most people in their society would judge to be fantastical.

#### Note

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## Abduction Tales As Metaphors

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At the outset of their target article, Newman and Baumeister state that they find the “extraterrestrial hypothesis” difficult to believe because it defies logic, runs in the face of modern science, and generates stories that contain many internal contradictions. If the abduction stories are difficult to believe as reports of real-time adventure, perhaps they can be better understood as metaphors for an ongoing cultural crisis. The quiet desperation that Thoreau suspected lay hidden in the life of the average 19th-century citizen seems to be surfacing more and more frequently in current accounts of the cultural and political scene (Cushman, 1991; Langer, 1994; Lasch, 1978). As the modern individual, for a wide variety of reasons, feels less empowered, more alienated, and less able to predict the course of the next 2, 5, or 10 weeks (much less years), he or she might become aware of feelings that no one can reasonably explain or acknowledge. Some of these concerns might become transformed into stories of imaginary aliens.

I make this suggestion because the abduction stories, as Newman and Baumeister make clear, are dominated by feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and alienation. “In the typical account,” they write, “the person is a helpless pawn of powerful, superior beings who inflict degrading and painful experiences on him or her.” What is more, as noted in the article, the stories are dominated by the loss of self. In any number of stories, the individual feels that, after being abducted, he or she has lost a sense of individuality or uniqueness—a “sense of destiny and of individual achievement.” What better metaphor to describe our current condition? As established structures such as family and church are losing their influence, the nature of present life and future existence becomes increasingly unpredictable. As new diseases emerge or threaten to emerge, and as established drugs and other medical procedures seem to lose their effectiveness, our sense of mortality is significantly affected. As warfare changes its pattern from the traditional clash by night of massive armies into unpredictable outbursts in the middle of commuter

trains and shopping malls, our vulnerability necessarily increases. Could it be that many of these fears are encapsulated in the standard unidentified flying object (UFO) abduction and return?

One reason to suspect that these reports might be an outgrowth of our present sense of vulnerability and alienation is the notable difference between current stories and what was being claimed in the 1950s and 1960s. As Newman and Baumeister make clear, the earlier reports were more benevolent, all-knowing, and supportive: “None of these early contactees was kidnapped or assaulted, as today’s abductees claim to have been, and the aliens the earlier contactees met have even been characterized as ‘jolly fellows.’” Even if many of these early “victims” were deliberate hoaxers, as Newman and Baumeister assert, their stories can still be read as projections of the cultural and political conditions obtaining at the time. The Eisenhower and early Kennedy years were marked by a strong sense of certainty about the future and the reassuring feeling that America was still the strongest nation on Earth. The dollar was still dominant; inflation had been kept in check; the population was still relatively small; and the established structures of church and family were still intact. As the political and cultural climates have changed in the intervening years, the abduction stories have become more ominous and more focused on helplessness and loss of identity.

Both sets of stories, then and now, can be seen as metaphors for the current condition. At the same time, the stories seem to have a surprising stability and degree of uniformity that make them reassuring in their own right.<sup>1</sup> After people identify themselves as survivors,

<sup>1</sup>It would make an interesting study to carry out a detailed and systematic linguistic analysis of a sample of abduction reports to establish just how much repetition and stereotyping actually occur. There might be more sameness in the range of stories than meets the eye. Even though details tend to dominate the accounts, as noted by Newman and Baumeister, they might tend to be more similar than different.

