

Irrespective of the answer to this question, we argue that these are the kinds of questions to be asking with regard to space alien abduction memories—questions about the workings of the mind. This is where we will find the pay dirt in alien abduction stories.

Notes

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Escaping the Self or Escaping the Anomaly?

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Newman and Baumeister are to be commended for their courage in facing this perplexing phenomenon and seeking a plausible explanation, and *Psychological Inquiry* is to be commended for seeking public discussion of the complex issues involved. Unidentified flying object (UFO) reports are an emotion-laden topic in science. Simply by studying reports of UFOs and UFO abductions, one risks ridicule and damage to one's reputation. Yet, the basic behavioral facts are rather well documented and have persisted over decades.

Newman and Baumeister correctly point out that reports of UFO abductions occur regularly by the hundreds, and certain themes are found repeatedly in these accounts. No one who has looked into this and interviewed self-reported abductees doubts the sincerity of the subjects' beliefs in the great majority of cases. Although many who have this experience show psychological symptoms that resemble posttraumatic stress disorder, they do not show any symptoms of delusional illness other than claiming to have had this

bizarre experience. How should we approach the task of explaining this phenomenon and providing evidence? Very carefully.

Background on UFO Reports

As few behavioral scientists are familiar with this phenomenon, except at the superficial level of newspaper reports and biased secondary sources, it is important to provide some context before commenting on Newman and Baumeister's target article. Persistent reports from all kinds of people from all over the world make this at least an important social-psychological phenomenon. Many reports are not simply of a fleeting light source in the night sky. The better reports involve structured objects seen over a period of time by multiple witnesses, and they have systematic recurring patterns. In short, they would meet the standards of credible courtroom testimony.

UFOs have been a controversial subject for scientific inquiry since they entered public awareness. When the Board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science proposed a symposium on UFOs, emotional controversy forced postponement for more than a year (the symposium was eventually held in December 1969, and its papers were later published; Sagan & Page, 1972).

With growing public awareness has come the proliferation of groups with strong systems of belief about UFOs—some groups feeling threatened, some seeing the “aliens” as saviors, some simply trying to gather systematic scientific evidence. The diversity of groups interested in UFOs has made it easy for skeptics to point to lunatic fringe groups and occasional hoaxes in order to justify ignoring the hard evidence that has continued to accumulate. The diversity of fighting groups itself adds to the social-psychological interest in this phenomenon.

In short, there is some solid evidence of an anomalous phenomenon, but it has become heavily encrusted with offbeat ideas and ungrounded claims from isolated groups defending their beliefs. There are devout believers and devout skeptics, and both select and distort evidence to maintain their positions. Simple citation of secondary sources is risky at best. The conduct of research in such a setting requires great care to discriminate between good sources and bad and great care to maintain the very highest standards of scientific evidence.

Background on UFO Abductions

Against this background, over the last decade or so there has been a growing interest in reports of alleged

abductions of people to be “examined” aboard a UFO. Numerous therapists (psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers) have encountered cases of persons reporting such abductions without other symptoms of delusional illness. What does this mean? How should these cases be treated? There have been several conferences at which therapists have tried to deal with these issues.

Clearly, we can approach this phenomenon with any one or more of these working assumptions:

1. *Abduction*. People really were abducted by alien creatures.
2. *Mass delusion* or *folie à beaucoup*. They are part of a social system of mutual support for deviant beliefs.
3. *Individual delusion* or *hallucination*. Each person has some unusual psychological characteristics conducive to delusion, hallucination, or false memories, which are expressed in a currently fashionable form (UFO abductions).
4. *Alternate realities*. Several writers have proposed that abductions, along with some other paranormal events, involve different realms of experience from those normally accessible to our senses (e.g., see Bullard, 1994b).

It is important to note that any of these working assumptions points to an important scientific anomaly. That is, if the reports are literally true, we are facing a collection of beings with a technology capable of things that our science cannot understand. If the reports are some form of mass delusion, it is decidedly different from known and documented cases, as I showed elsewhere (R. L. Hall, 1994). If each report is an individual delusion, the delusion is quite different from the forms we know and understand—as psychotherapists can generally find no symptoms of psychosis, and psychological testing of “experiencers” finds them to be “normal” (Bloecher, Clamar, & Hopkins, 1985; Rodeghier, 1994). Certainly, the notion of alternate realities upsets current scientific thought. No matter which working assumption we make, this is an area that deserves and needs serious research attention.

Proposed Explanation

Newman and Baumeister work primarily under Assumption 3—that is, they seek an explanation for claims of UFO abductions in the individual psychodynamics of the person reporting, perhaps boosted a little by social support for shared delusions. Briefly, Newman and Baumeister make two arguments—first, that certain cognitive factors lead to the development of false memories, and, second, that there are motivational factors that generate the specific content of the spurious memories.

In brief summary, their argument is that the process begins with a subject's having an unexplained experience, feeling, or dream—probably often a hypnopompic or hypnogogic hallucination (Hufford, 1982). In seeking an explanation, the subject turns to a UFO investigator, or to a therapist with UFO interests, for help in making sense of the experience. The therapist/investigator uses hypnosis, and pseudomemories are easily implanted under hypnosis. The subject's and therapist's prior knowledge of UFOs, together with science-fiction imagery, becomes intertwined with "true" memories. Subjects are probably fantasy prone, making them especially responsive to hypnosis and other suggestion.

But, Newman and Baumeister continue, the UFO information planted through hypnosis is not by itself sufficient to account for the content of the false memories and for the "striking consistency across most UFO abduction stories." There must also be motivational factors that help determine the content. From their previous research (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Newman, 1994), they argue that there exists in many people under certain circumstances a powerful motive to "escape the self." That is, the maintenance of a positive self-image becomes so burdensome that people quit attending to the implications of their own behavior and focus on "mere bodily processes and sensations." This is especially likely, for example, following some devastating calamity or in cases in which there is a grossly inflated self-image that becomes too burdensome to maintain. The motive to "escape the self" leads people to behave in ways that thwart self-esteem and control, including alcohol consumption, eating binges, spiritual and meditative regimens, and sexual masochism, among others—and now Newman and Baumeister add the fabrication of spurious memories of UFO abduction as another expression of this motive.

Before examining evidence, let us briefly look at the nature of this theory. A critique of the escape-from-self theory as a whole would be beyond the scope of this commentary. However, a theory that combines the construction of spurious memories and escape from self, as applied to UFO abduction reports, is not a very parsimonious theory, and it is not framed in a way that makes it clearly falsifiable by appropriate empirical evidence. Newman and Baumeister patch together a collection of theoretical notions, some of which are on shaky ground, but they also suggest alternative kinds of triggers to initiate the process, alternative ways in which subjects might be exposed to UFO material to predispose them to this content, alternative hypnosis-like interaction when hypnosis is not used, and so forth. Hence, evidence against any one link would not falsify the theory; other suggested links would fill in.

Evidence on the Proposed Theory

Putting aside concerns about the nature of the theory, let us look at evidence for the elements involved in Newman and Baumeister's theory. We start with the idea that the construction of a spurious memory is initiated by having some strange and puzzling experience, and very often that experience might be the kind of sleep-related hallucination known as hypnogogic or hypnopompic hallucination (Hufford, 1982).

In support of this, Newman and Baumeister cite Spanos, Cross, Dickson, and DuBreuil (1993), who wrote that almost 60% of "intense UFO experiences" are "associated with sleep" (p. 630). First, I note that that leaves room for more than 40% of the experiences to be initiated by things other than sleep-related hallucinations. Second, I note that the scale of intense UFO experience used by Spanos et al. is not at all equivalent to the usual abduction story. A subject is classified as having an intense experience if the subject answers positively any one of nine items, including seeing a craft close up, missing time, seeing an alien being, and so forth. It is possible that sleep-related hallucinations are involved in some way in some UFO reports or even abductions. However, as part of an effort to explain abduction reports, this is not very satisfying or helpful, as we understand very little about these sleep-related hallucinations. Using one ill-understood phenomenon to help explain another does not carry us very far. Perhaps if we attain some understanding of the etiology of one of these phenomena, we might begin to understand the other. Also, the claim that a "strange experience" initiates the process would be very difficult to falsify, at best.

The next step in Newman and Baumeister's theoretical argument is that our puzzled subjects are already interested in UFOs and that they are likely to seek help from therapists with similar views. No evidence is offered either for the idea that "abductees" are interested in UFOs before their abduction experience or for their preference for choosing someone with UFO interests to help them. I have no precise data, but some investigators have reported (R. H. Hall, 1993; M. Rodeghier, personal communication, May 1995) that many self-reported abductees deny having had any interest in UFOs before this experience, and some volunteer that they were definite skeptics about UFOs and were all the more upset by the experience for this reason. Although it seems plausible, it is not necessarily true that they seek someone with UFO interests to help them. In fact, some abductees say they thought they were "going crazy" when they had an abduction experience; they did not believe that it was real. Hence, they might actively avoid anyone with UFO interests and seek a therapist who was a skeptic. In short, we have no solid evidence about this crucial link in the theory.

The next step in the theory is the construction of a false memory under the influence of the therapist or investigator. There is much evidence that this could happen, especially under hypnosis. Newman and Baumeister argue that hypnosis is no truth serum, and pseudomemories might easily be generated under hypnosis. Granted. This is an important potential source of error in the collection of data about self-reported abductees. However, the only evidence that Newman and Baumeister offer is illustrations of poor hypnotic procedure by one or two UFO investigators. There is no question that some UFO investigators are not competent researchers and do not understand how they might influence subjects. However, Newman and Baumeister are off target in asserting flatly that “hypnosis continues to be seen by UFO abduction investigators as a robust pipeline to the truth.” Researchers in this area have become acutely aware of this risk and have begun to address it (Appelle, 1994; Bullard, 1989, 1994c; Carpenter, 1994; Randles, 1994; Webb, 1994).

Newman and Baumeister argue, “It is important to note that abduction memories rarely emerge unaided.” Depending on what is meant by *unaided*, this is a very questionable statement. Newman and Baumeister imply that hypnosis is an important key to these reports. The best estimate is one cited by Newman and Baumeister (Bullard, 1989)—71% of high-reliability cases “associated with” hypnosis. First, this leaves more than one fourth of the cases not associated with hypnosis. Second, Bullard (1994c) pointed out that most witnesses recalled parts of their encounters before hypnosis, and hypnosis served only to fill in some details. Hence, the cited figure overstates the significance of hypnosis in the collection of abduction data. Third, although Newman and Baumeister claim that details of abduction reports are consistent for subjects interviewed by the same investigator and show systematic differences among investigators, I have been unable to find any evidence to support this claim. In fact, Bullard (1994c) presented the only evidence I can find on this point. Comparing four hypnotists who contributed multiple cases, Bullard concluded, “The range and variety within each investigator’s body of cases was as great as the variety among the investigators” (p. 197). Bullard (1989, 1994c) also pointed out (a) that there are many cases in which the witness strongly resists deliberate efforts by the hypnotist to lead the witness in description of details (as a check on the research protocol) and (b) that the main features of the experience are the same in cases without hypnosis as in those with hypnosis.

Webb (1994) analyzed 129 cases that met explicit criteria of quality of report and found that the basic abduction scenario was remembered without hypnosis in about one third of the cases and that at least part of the abduction scenario was recalled before or without hypnosis in almost half of the cases. Appelle (1994) discussed reasons for questioning the applicability of some laboratory research

on hypnotic recall to the abduction cases and pointed out certain conditions (present for self-reported abductees and not in the laboratory studies) that enhance hypnotic recall. Carpenter (1994) suggested techniques for interviewing hypnotized “abductees” to enhance credibility of their reports.

In summary, any theory that assumes hypnosis is a crucial factor is on shaky ground. Many cases do not rely on hypnosis, and investigators have become increasingly sophisticated about protecting against errors introduced through hypnosis. Newman and Baumeister address the cases of recall without hypnosis, essentially saying that the same process of influence might be present through a kind of unintentional hypnosis. In the absence of evidence, this seems to me a very large escape hatch for the theory. How can one falsify such a claim? There is no direct evidence of a process of social influence from therapist/investigator to subject, but Newman and Baumeister try to bolster this weakness by arguing that self-reported abductees are especially fantasy prone.

Perhaps the most egregious weakness in Newman and Baumeister’s argument is the claim that abductees are fantasy prone. At one point, they say that evidence for the link between fantasy proneness and abduction reports “is admittedly scant,” but then they present quasi-statistical arguments as support. Abductees must be fantasy prone because (a) fantasy proneness is correlated with hypnotizability, and most abductees have been hypnotized; and (b) abductees are likely to report child abuse, and so are the fantasy prone. With only the simplest level of statistical knowledge, one can see that these are resounding non sequiturs. Two recent pieces of research, both cited by Newman and Baumeister, use objective measures, and both contradict Newman and Baumeister’s conclusion. Spanos et al. (1993) reported:

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)

And Rodeghier, Goodpaster, and Blatterbauer (1991) reported: “The abductees clearly cannot, as a group, be described as having fantasy-prone personalities” (p. 70). The evidence is not scant; it is negative.

The final element of the theory is motivational factors that are said to shape the content of the false memories if the influence of the therapist is not sufficient. Granting Newman and Baumeister’s underlying argument that motivational factors help to shape the content of personal narratives, let us look at what evidence is offered about the motivational factors in this instance.

According to Newman and Baumeister's theory, apparently any behavior that reduces self-esteem and control can be seen as an expression of the motive to escape the self. The examples cited include sexual masochism, alcoholism, eating binges, and spiritual and meditative regimens. Newman and Baumeister's evidence for this motive in abductions includes two general points: (a) Masochistic practices and fantasies are expressions of this motive, and some of the experiences of abductees during abduction are masochistic and involve loss of control; (b) abductees resemble the people who engage in other "self-escaping" actions like alcoholism.

The evidence offered for these points is entirely descriptive and anecdotal. For example, both abductees and masochists tend to be primarily of higher education and social class; the stories told by abductees often include themes of pain, humiliation, and loss of control, which are central themes in masochism; abduction is more common in hard-driving, individualistic, Western societies in which the burden of self is highest; and so forth. Correlation is not causation, and, even more emphatically, ecological correlation does not demonstrate individual-level causation. Also, sharing high socioeconomic status (SES) is a very weak similarity. Abductees and masochists might both be of high SES, but so are PhDs and senators and embezzlers. Does this mean that they also are escaping the self? Most of the "data" used in this argument are assumed data, because real data on the social backgrounds and characteristics of abductees are hard to get. It is clear, however, that more abduction cases are showing up in those societies that cannot easily be characterized as hard-driving and individualistic—Latin America, Russia, and Africa, for example (Bullard, 1994a; R. H. Hall, 1994; Moura, 1994).

Implications

If Newman and Baumeister are correct, their theory certainly has important implications—implications for the proper psychotherapeutic treatment of self-reported abductees and implications for the science of psychology, in that the theory identifies conditions that generate firmly held bizarre false memories about one's own past experiences without psychosis. That, in turn, has important implications for our legal institutions, if credible, "normal" persons can sincerely testify falsely about their own past experiences. If the theory holds true, the potential impact of systematically motivated false memories on our society could be immense—on litigation of claims of sexual abuse, on criminal convictions based on witnesses' recollections, on collection of personal history data for administrative or research purposes, and on writing and interpretation of history and biography, to mention only a few examples. Even if the proposed

theory is not correct, there is enough persistent testimony about personal experiences, such as UFO abduction, sexual abuse, and the Old Hag (Hufford, 1982), to point up the vital importance of research on the construction of false memories in normal humans.

Conclusion

Newman and Baumeister offer a theory that is courageous in tackling a controversial, emotion-laden topic and imaginative in its proposals to explain very complex phenomena. Evidence for elements of their theory ranges from slight to negative, and Newman and Baumeister seem, like most of us, to be wearing rose-colored glasses when evaluating evidence for their own theory.

Although there is much evidence that spurious memories and hypnotic elaboration do occur, there is only the faintest hint of evidence that they are in fact occurring in this context, and there is some contrary evidence. I hope that Newman and Baumeister (and others) seek more systematic evidence to test elements of this theory and propose further theories for these perplexing phenomena. The scientific and practical implications are immense.

Finally, from my reading of the history of science, I should note that, when the current beliefs of science are challenged by an anomaly, the task of defending those beliefs becomes especially burdensome. Under those circumstances, I have noted that there is, among scientists, a powerful motive to "escape the anomaly." That motive was evident among the astronomers who refused to look through Galileo's telescope because it showed (obviously impossible) moons around Jupiter. Even more apropos, when thousands of ordinary people kept reporting for centuries that stones were falling from the sky, the scientists of the highly respected French Academy of Sciences, moved by the motive to escape the anomaly, issued a solemn pronouncement that no stones were falling from the sky because there were no stones in the sky. This motive accounts for much of the behavior of scientists in denying and distorting evidence to protect their systems of belief. Only after centuries of resistance to popular reports did scientists accept the existence of meteorites. I suggest that we need to apply rigorous standards of evidence to theories that purport to explain away anomalies. Most of us have a strong motive to accept those theories without evidence.

Note

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