
COMMENTARIES

Fantastic Accounts Can Take Many Forms: False Memory Construction? Yes. Escape From Self? We Don't Think So.

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Newman and Baumeister's lengthy target article should be of considerable use to those interested in understanding why some people come to believe that they have been abducted by aliens. Newman and Baumeister begin with an overview of the existing literature on unidentified flying object (UFO) abductions. Then they present a reasonable set of arguments for doubting that most of these abductions actually occurred (although they cannot make the case that none of them actually occurred). If most UFO abduction accounts are false, then they must result from some set of psychological processes and serve some set of psychological needs. Newman and Baumeister therefore offer two types of explanations for these phenomena.

Factors Contributing to Construction of False Abduction Memories

Newman and Baumeister refer to the first type as *cognitive*, but their analysis also seems to involve motivational and behavioral components. The creation of UFO abduction accounts is posited to originate primarily under hypnotic suggestion after the abductee has suffered an episode of missing time or some other hallucinatory experience, perhaps involving lengthy drives or dreamlike states just before or after falling asleep. Combined with a fantasy-prone nature, an interest in UFO phenomena, knowledge of highly publicized abduction accounts, and biased hypnotists, such experiences might be falsely remembered under hypnosis as having actually happened. With the help of other writers (e.g., Baker, 1987, 1991, 1992) and psychological research on hypnosis and memory reconstruction, Newman and Baumeister build a well-reasoned explanation for how people could come to sincerely believe that they had been abducted by aliens. Newman and Baumeister also aptly employ cognitive dissonance theory to explain the processes involved in the mainte-

nance of such beliefs, including the formation of support groups.

The foremost problem with this cognitive analysis—a problem pervading the entire article—is that Newman and Baumeister continually rely on highly questionable sources of data without sufficient acknowledgment or consideration of their unreliable and biased nature. Of course, the dubious nature of much of the information available is not the fault of Newman and Baumeister, and, in some cases, the authors do acknowledge likely biases—but they typically proceed to draw strong conclusions anyway. If Newman and Baumeister want this work to be viewed as a serious scientific examination of these phenomena, they should be more cautious and tentative regarding drawing conclusions based on such data and make a greater effort to collect systematic data of their own.

There are too many instances of reliance on questionable data or others' questionable conclusions to go over each case. However, we can describe in general terms two recurrent problems. The first is a tendency to take as support for a particular point casual and unsystematic generalizations that are based on a small and most likely unrepresentative sample of abduction stories that, in turn, come from authors who are often true believers and/or are profiting either through their hypnosis practice or by reporting these stories.

The second problem is a tendency to pick out specific examples from this dubious literature in order to buttress a particular argument. The problem with heavy reliance on this anecdotal technique is that authors can easily select a particular example that seems to fit their point (creating an illusion of strong support), whereas one could probably just as easily pick out an example that would not support or that would actually challenge that same point. Whenever there is a mix of supportive and nonsupportive evidence, this selective approach to data creates a bias toward confirmation of the hypothesis being assessed (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980). As is

shown later, this confirmation bias seems to be particularly strong in the second part of the target article, where Newman and Baumeister argue for one specific motivational account of UFO abduction stories.

An Unnecessary Abduction

Despite these concerns about the data base, in the first half of the target article, Newman and Baumeister provide a conceptually compelling explanation for false memories of alien abductions that seems to fit what is known about the phenomenon. Newman and Baumeister (and their readers) might have been best served by finishing at this point, but instead Newman and Baumeister try to add a motivational account of these phenomena based on the idea of escape from self. Unfortunately, Newman and Baumeister never establish why this additional account is needed, they never clarify how this account fits with the more cognitive account, and they do not make a compelling case for the value or validity of the escape-from-self explanation.

Newman and Baumeister seem to think that additional explanation is needed to explain the specific content of the abduction memories, especially the unpleasant nature of the experiences reported and what the authors claim to be three dominant themes in UFO abduction accounts—pain, loss of control, and humiliation. Assuming for the moment that these features do characterize contemporary UFO abduction stories, can they be adequately accounted for by the cognitively oriented analysis offered in the first half of the target article?

We think so. If, as Newman and Baumeister argue, the content of these reports is greatly influenced by the hypnotist's biases, by science fiction in general, and by highly publicized UFO accounts such as Whitley Strieber's (1987) *Communion: A True Story*, and these influences often include or encourage such elements, then it is not at all surprising that many UFO reports involve abductions, physical examinations, and other unpleasant aspects. Given the evidence of the substantial influence of the mass media in everything from fashion to politics to murder to suicide (e.g., Phillips, 1982), it is not unlikely that a popular book like *Communion* would affect the content of many other UFO accounts.

It is also important to note that abductions comprise only one type of UFO encounter (probably a small percentage of UFO sightings), and they also may be viewed as just one type of paranormal experience among many that people report (e.g., ghosts, weeping Madonnas, saintly visions, demons, premonitions). From this larger pool of unlikely-to-be-real reported experiences, it is not improbable (especially

given media influence) that some of these fantasies involve being abducted by aliens. Inasmuch as being abducted inherently involves some loss of control, it follows that this would be a prevalent theme. In addition to the influence of portrayals of such experiences, it seems logical that, if one were abducted by extraterrestrials, the aliens would examine the human specimen—just as it would be logical that, if an alien were abducted by humans, it would be scrupulously and unmercifully examined (as suggested by media portrayals such as *ET*, Steven Spielberg's 1982 movie). So, it is not at all necessary to posit some deep or peculiar psychological need to explain either the prevalence of alien abduction reports (which seems to be exaggerated by Newman and Baumeister's sources) or why loss of control and unpleasant physical examinations are common components of such reports.

Escape From Self: Issues of Conceptual Clarity, Predictive Power, Applicability, and Scholarship

In addition to being unnecessary, Newman and Baumeister's motivational account does not strike us as either valid or useful. What are they suggesting people are trying to escape from? At times in the target article, it seems to be self-awareness; at other times, it is one's identity; at other times, it is one's sense of control, one's decision-making responsibility, one's concerns with self-worth, or one's problems. These are not all the same.

For example, if it is escape from self-awareness, as posited and studied by Duval and Wicklund (1972) and many others since, then any absorbing activity that draws attentional focus away from oneself could be used. This could include using alcohol; going to a movie, concert, play, or party; watching television; reading; or eating, playing video games, performing athletic activity, and so forth.

Many activities can accomplish this goal, but masochistic activity and reporting an alien abduction would not be particularly easy or useful options. Both phenomena are likely to draw attention to oneself, and memories for both types of events seem to be very self-focused. We grant Newman and Baumeister's expertise regarding masochistic activity, but it seems clear that it often involves being verbally criticized and humiliated, and reports of it tend to be quite self-referent. Similarly, these so-called abductions—with oneself being an intense focus of attention by others, sometimes in embarrassing positions, and with reports of such things likely to draw attention to oneself—seem like an odd and ineffective way to reduce or escape self-awareness.

If the concern is with escape from the responsibility of control and sustaining a positive self-image, masoch-

ism and perhaps even alien abduction make a little more sense in that they involve relinquishing control. However, the activities suggested here might still be commonly and effectively employed—why couldn't simple external focus work? Moreover, the desire to relinquish control can also be fulfilled in a multitude of additional ways—for example, by joining one of a variety of organizations (particularly ones with status hierarchies and uniforms), giving allegiance to a leader or a cause, going on vacation, moving, changing social roles, assuming fewer responsibilities in existing social roles, forming a relationship with someone who likes to make decisions, acting in theater groups, identifying with characters in literature and film, and so forth. All of these modes seem more direct, more socially acceptable, and more likely to be effective than masochism or alien abduction.

Alien Dismissals and Extraterrestrial Logic

There are additional issues as well. With regard to masochism, one has to wonder how the desire to give up control becomes transformed into becoming sexually aroused by being controlled, hurt, or humiliated. Many activities are pleasurable, gratifying, and need fulfilling without involving sexual arousal. Without a tenable answer to this question, this account of masochism seems implausible. With regard to alien abduction, because it is typically a one-time experience or fantasy, how valuable is it really for satisfying what is presumably not just a one-time desire to escape from self? This also seems like an especially ineffective way to relieve the pressures of selfhood because, as noted with regard to self-awareness, whenever the tale is recalled to oneself or told to others, it will draw attention to rather than away from oneself.

Interestingly, Newman and Baumeister spend a brief moment toward the end of their article considering and dismissing “rival hypotheses”—typically in a superficial manner and with reasoning that could just as easily apply to their own analysis. Our favorite example of this reasoning is characterized in the quote from Bullard (1991): “Substitution of a superscientific technology for magic restores the credibility of the fantastic in a secular age with little faith in things magical” (p. 5). It seems likely that many people want to believe in the supernatural—that there are fascinating things out there to be excited about that go beyond the known material world (perhaps accounting in part for the popularity of fantasy and science fiction in literature, television, and film).

Although more parsimonious and plausible than the escape-from-self view, the desire-to-believe-in-the-supernatural view is dismissed by Newman and Baumeister simply because “folkloric accounts cannot tell us why people would believe they personally experienced

the events described by the ‘UFO abduction myth,’ which is not typically true in the case of other popular traditional legends—or even contemporary ones.” Maybe it is because, for such people, lapsed time or dream experiences gave them an opportunity to believe something supernatural happened, and that helps them to sustain faith in the reality or at least in the possibility of such things. In any event, the same criticism can be lodged against the escape-from-self analysis—why believe one has actually been abducted by aliens rather than either simply fantasizing about such things when one feels like it or simply experiencing the feeling of giving up control or identity in any of the other more common and socially acceptable ways we have already noted?

Another example is Newman and Baumeister’s criticisms of the idea that abduction stories could serve as a public excuse for an individual’s deficiencies. We doubt this is commonly involved, but it probably is in some cases. Newman and Baumeister offer the criticism: “It would have the unwanted side effect of leading others to believe that one is deluded or insane.” First, that might sometimes be a wanted, useful consequence. Second, the same issue exists for Newman and Baumeister’s explanation—why suffer this unwanted consequence just to escape from self when there are so many other ways to do so? Newman and Baumeister also note that, if kept secret, abduction stories could not serve as public excuses. However, they could serve as an excuse to oneself. Additionally, we find it highly unlikely that people who believe they have been abducted by aliens tell only their hypnotherapists and not their spouses and close friends.

Do Alien Abductions Parallel Masochism?

To support their escape-from-self interpretation of abduction stories, Newman and Baumeister rely heavily on parallels they claim exist between these stories and masochism. We believe, however, that these claims result primarily from a confirmation bias in Newman and Baumeister’s consideration of the existing data, limitations in the data base, and some unremarkably common features that are far from being unique to abduction stories and masochistic activity. First, as noted earlier, it is logical that loss of control, examination, and unpleasant emotions would be likely components of an experience of being abducted by aliens (especially given mass media portrayals of such things). These are also likely components of the experience of going on a job interview, going to the doctor or the dentist, or joining the Armed Services or the Peace Corps. Thus, that a person reporting having been abducted by aliens also reports loss of control, being

examined, and being scared and embarrassed certainly requires no inference of masochistic desires. Although these are reasonable components of a plausible contemporary account of such an abduction, they are also reasonable components of many other experiences that do not necessarily serve escape-from-self or masochistic functions.

It seems to us that, to make a strong case for parallels to masochism, there would have to be a high prevalence of pain, sexual elements, gratuitous nonverbal or verbal attacks (as opposed to apparently scientific examination procedures), and the use of implements and activities typical of masochism. Unfortunately, Newman and Baumeister rarely present anything close to reliable systematic data on the relative prevalence of any of the claimed common features of the stories or storytellers (see, e.g., Newman & Baumeister's Footnote 2). Still, Newman and Baumeister's perusal of the literature suggests that sexual elements, gratuitous attacks, and the use of conventional masochistic paraphernalia (e.g., whips, handcuffs, chains) are not prevalent in UFO abduction stories.

Newman and Baumeister do claim a high prevalence of mild pain and humiliation in the stories as well as overinflated selves and personal calamities among those reporting abductions. However, these claims are typically based on few examples and vague observations—for example, "One reviewer ... (Rimmer, 1984) noted that calamities are often preceded by 'some sort of personal crisis,' such as the breakup of a marriage" (see also the "General Concerns About Selfhood" and "Cognitive Immediacy" sections).

When Newman and Baumeister try to be systematic in assessing prevalence, an incredibly strong confirmation bias is suggested in their general characterizations of the typical abduction story. After leading the reader to believe that pain and humiliation are prevalent features, when they examine Bullard's (1991) pool of 270 stories, they find:

1. Only 84 involved any aspect "that could be construed as a physical examination or medical procedure."
2. Only 19 mentioned pain, and this number amounts to only 23% of the cases Newman and Baumeister hand-selected—for highly dubious reasons ("In order to be certain that we were focusing on prototypical abduction stories, we further selected only those involving the central element of a physical examination" from the 270!).
3. Only 7 mentioned anything that could even loosely be construed as oral humiliation (e.g., "a metallic taste" in one abductee's mouth).

Thus, the one effort to systematically examine abduction stories indicates that the great majority of them bear virtually no resemblance whatsoever to masoch-

ism! It is amazing that Newman and Baumeister cling to their escape-from-self interpretation anyway.

Because these abductions are typically one-time experiences, we would also expect that people who report UFO abductions would generally be prone to actual masochistic fantasies and activities. The only evidence Newman and Baumeister present consistent with this notion is that Strieber wrote a story called "Pain" in 1986, before *Communion* (1987). Indeed, Newman and Baumeister rely so heavily on Strieber that we think they make a plausible case for masochistic proclivities in him, but this does not necessarily pertain to most people who report abduction accounts. In addition, it is problematic for Newman and Baumeister to rely as heavily on Strieber as they do, because all the attention he sought and garnered indicates that his own abduction story clearly did not serve for him as escape from self.

Newman and Baumeister also claim as evidence the apparent fact that upper and upper middle class White people seem to be prevalent in reports of both masochistic activities and alien abductions. Of course, they are also prevalent among those who watch golf on television, buy leather goods, play the stock market, and have laser disk players. Presumably, all of these activities reflect the free time and financial resources available to successful White Americans. Their apparent prevalence in many activities might also reflect the attention paid to them in this society (e.g., would the poor Black or Hispanic person who claimed to be abducted by aliens get the same attention?). Indulging masochistic desires, writing letters to *Penthouse*, and seeking hypnotherapy to recover lost memories do not seem to be likely activities of those struggling for financial survival. Newman and Baumeister speculate that successful Americans have a particularly burdensome self—but what about Americans who cannot get a job or who are trying to support a family earning close to the minimum wage? Wouldn't they have an even greater desire to escape the burden of self-esteem and responsibility?

Similarly, Newman and Baumeister try to make something of similarities in sex differences found in masochistic activity and UFO abduction stories. This evidence is weak at best and entirely unconvincing. Perhaps females are more likely to report being physically displayed and examined in both masochistic and abduction stories—this probably has something to do with the emphasis in American society on female appearance and females as objects—but how does it establish that both types of stories reflect desire for escape from self?

In sum, the escape-from-self framework is not needed to account for UFO abduction stories; lacks conceptual clarity; does not appear to be a plausible account of either masochism or UFO abduction reports; and, perhaps most important in a general sense, seems

unable to explain why a given person chooses one mode of escape from self rather than one of sundry other possible modes. In addition, Newman and Baumeister's target article suffers greatly from the strained effort to make a case for parallels between masochism and abduction stories. Some of these conceptual problems might have been less severe had the authors acknowledged and considered the more elaborate and thoughtful analyses of prior theorists concerned with the problems of self-awareness, selfhood, and control. Although a thorough overview of these earlier analyses is far beyond the scope of this commentary, they warrant brief mention.

Escape From Others

The idea that people might sometimes want to give up control and responsibility and escape from self-awareness is an old idea that is carefully considered in the writings of a variety of early theorists, including Freud, James, Ferenczi, Horney, and Rank. Interestingly, all of these theorists are clearer than Newman and Baumeister about the conditions under which these desires are likely to be strong and the determinants of how they are likely to be satisfied. More recently, Yalom (1980), Becker (1962, 1973), and Fromm (1941) offered analyses that seem particularly closely related to the escape-from-self framework used in Newman and Baumeister's target article.

Yalom (1980) presented a compelling analysis of the psychological consequences of the human condition in which he explored various modes of coping with the anxieties associated with issues such as individuality, freedom, and isolation, including masochism and other approaches to avoiding the responsibility of maintaining one's sense of self.

Becker (1973) also explained masochism within the context of a broad analysis of human motivation and offered a particularly interesting account of the role of pain. According to Becker, the physical pain involved in masochistic fantasies brings the body, as opposed to the self, to the forefront of awareness. Pain to the body is an equation that, when extended, leads to death; in generating this fantasy, because one is controlling it, one therefore controls the pain and thus in a sense controls death. Becker concluded: "Masochism is thus a way of taking the anxiety of life and death and the overwhelming terror of existence and congealing them into a small dosage" (p. 246).

The final theorist who warrants a brief mention is Fromm. The major tenets of the escape-from-self perspective presented in Newman and Baumeister's target article, as well as in Baumeister (1991), including the application to masochism, seem to come directly from Fromm's (1941) seminal classic *Escape From Free-*

dom. Indeed, even Newman and Baumeister's language is remarkably similar to Fromm's:

The individual ... cannot bear to be his own individual self any longer, and he tries frantically to get rid of it and to feel security again by the elimination of this Burden: the self. Masochism is a way toward this goal. The different forms which the masochistic strivings assume have one aim: *to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself*; in other words, *to get rid of the burden of freedom*. (Fromm, 1941, p. 173)

Whereas Baumeister (1991) barely mentioned Fromm (and mischaracterized his analysis at that), the escape-from-self framework would benefit greatly from acknowledging the large debt to Fromm and building on Fromm's sophisticated analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that the framework Newman and Baumeister employ could be greatly improved by building on prior theorizing regarding this topic. This, in turn, might benefit Newman and Baumeister's analysis of UFO abductions, although it seems to us that their more cognitive considerations, along with the notion that some people want to believe in UFOs, provide a sufficient conceptual account of these phenomena. What is most needed now is the systematic collection of new data, along with more systematic, less biased, and more comprehensive analysis of existing archives to adequately assess various explanations for the UFO abduction phenomenon.

Note

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The Ordinary Nature of Alien Abduction Memories

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In June 1962, a mysterious case of bug bites alleged to have caused 11 people to suffer “severe nausea and breaking out all over the body” made the national evening news. In the 3 weeks following the incident, some 57 of 200 employees of a cloth-and-garment manufacturing plant were stricken by an illness marked by nervousness, nausea, weakness, and numbness and attributed to insects that had arrived in a shipment of cloth from England. The plant building was fumigated, and doctors and entomologists from colleges, exterminating companies, and the U.S. Public Health Services Communicable Disease Center (now the Centers for Disease Control) worked to investigate the cause of the illness. According to their report, insect bites were not the cause. Instead, the controversial conclusion was that the events were due to anxiety and nervousness; not to put too fine a point on it, the “June bug” was a case of hysterical contagion. Life at the factory soon returned to normal, but Kerckhoff and Back (1968) were dissatisfied with a label as facile as *hysteria*. They argued that such events warranted explanation in addition to labeling and that such explanations “ought to be the business of social psychologists” (p. 18). Why did the outbreak occur where and when it did? How was it related to conditions prevailing at the plant at the time? What other sources of strain were present in the environment? What determined who succumbed to the illness and who remained unaffected? What features of the social context facilitated social contagion?

Newman and Baumeister do not refer to the June bug, but it is clear that their analysis of the unidentified flying object (UFO) abduction phenomenon is motivated by a similar interest in the creation of shared realities and beliefs and, in particular, how social, personality, and cognitive factors can interact to turn the speculation that one was abducted by aliens into a belief and then into a memory. What possesses hundreds or thousands of people to claim that they were abducted by alien beings, subjected to frightening and invasive

physical procedures, and then returned to Earth with only a vague recollection of their experience? And what possesses respected academic scholars (Jacobs, 1992; Mack, 1994) to take these reports seriously as representations of objective reality?

In the target article, Newman and Baumeister rightly doubt the literal accuracy of these reports, and they offer a psychological explanation of them in terms of both cognitive and motivational processes. On the cognitive side, they focus on the reconstructive nature of memory and on the liabilities of refreshing memory by means of hypnosis. We generally concur with Newman and Baumeister’s analysis of the construction of personal narratives, and we certainly agree with their analysis of the liabilities of hypnosis as a means for bringing forgotten events to consciousness (Kihlstrom & Barnhardt, 1993; Kihlstrom & Eich, 1994). In the past few decades, psychologists have learned a great deal about the role of suggestion, rehearsal, and time delay in memory distortion. Relatively little is still known about the social, political, and cultural factors that, in interaction with cognitive factors, produce the particular shape and form of distorted memories. Viewing any single factor that is responsible for memory distortions can be informative, but phenomena such as the one Newman and Baumeister selected point out the added advantage of focusing on the interplay of social, personality, and cultural factors in addition to the more familiar variables of expert suggestion and the hypnotic environment.

On the motivational side, Newman and Baumeister attribute the masochistic nature of contemporary UFO abduction narratives to a desire to escape ordinary self-awareness. There might be something to this, but much more supportive evidence will be needed before we are convinced that those who report alien abductions had preexisting sadomasochistic tendencies or recently suffered personal setbacks of the sort that make it difficult to maintain a positive self-image. The

