

## The Truth Is Out There

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In the annals of the odd and unusual, few phenomena can compete with alleged unidentified flying object (UFO) abductions for their ability to provoke fascination and debate. Despite the public attention garnered by these claims, the typical response by the scientific community has been to dismiss them simply as shameless hoaxes or as the products of the lunatic fringes of society. Given the lack of supportive physical evidence, that response would seem warranted, but Newman and Baumeister argue instead that these tales might arise from important psychological processes that deserve careful study. Their claim that alleged UFO abductions represent escapes from the burdens of modern selfhood is certainly an open-minded and creative explanation. And, as they point out, the attempt to explain alleged UFO abductions is not simply an academic exercise. The practical implications are far-reaching. The number of individuals claiming to have had such experiences appears to be truly staggering (Hopkins, Jacobs, & Westrum, 1992; Jacobs, 1992), and, if these accounts reflect important symptoms of struggles with modern selfhood, as Newman and Baumeister argue, then the experiences (as a potential social problem) beg for explanation and recourse. The conceptual implications are no less important. The burdens of modern selfhood have been well described by several commentators (Baumeister, 1986, 1989, 1991; Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991) and underscore the historical and cultural embeddedness of self. A complete theory of self must be able to account for these contextual effects. UFO abduction experiences appear to provide an important and untapped natural laboratory.

The major limitation of Newman and Baumeister's "escape from self" explanation is that it rests largely on post hoc arguments and indirect evidence. To be sure, the parallels Newman and Baumeister draw between the characteristics of abductees and masochists are fascinating and compelling. Their initial attempts to compare systematically the firsthand accounts of abductees and masochists are likewise encouraging. But, much more empirical verification will be necessary before these speculations can stand as a scientifically acceptable explanation. In the spirit of promoting such verification, I expand on some of Newman and Baumeister's speculations to suggest specific questions that future empirical work might address. In particular, I focus on a central feature of Newman and Baumeister's account—the apparently key role of an unusual precipitating event. I argue (a) that such events

provide a key marker in the attempt to distinguish escape-from-self abduction claims from abduction claims made for other reasons, (b) that these events help explain why abduction claims are made despite the availability of other, more conventional escapes, and (c) that these kinds of events might be an important element of any culturally unconventional escape from self—not just claimed UFO abductions.

### Multiple Routes to an Escape From Self-Awareness

To guide my comments, I constructed Figure 1 as a simple working model to illustrate how experiencing an unusual event might lead to the claim that one has been abducted by aliens.<sup>1</sup> As Figure 1 indicates, there are both conventional and unconventional routes to escape from self-awareness. The distinction is largely a matter of cultural acceptance; alcohol use currently is a culturally accepted vehicle for reducing self-awareness, whereas claiming to have been abducted by aliens is not. The distinction is important for two reasons. First, it underscores that identification of an escape from self-awareness as "unusual" is subject to wide variability across cultures and time (I return to this point later, when I suggest that the processes described in Figure 1 might have generality beyond accounting for alleged UFO abduction experiences). The second implication is that unconventional escapes from self-awareness are likely to engage additional and different processes than conventional escapes due to the cultural and social resistance that must be overcome (this too is elaborated later).

The model assumes that the dynamics of escape from self-awareness are moderated by personality, broadly defined. Although cultural pressures might generally set the stage for a desire for escape from self-awareness, the specific nature of the attempt is subject to wide individual variability. Not every member of a culture will experience the burdens of selfhood to an equal degree, feel the need to escape self-awareness to an equal measure, or select and implement an escape in the same way. Understanding this systematic individual variability is critical to a clear understanding of the

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<sup>1</sup>Figure 1 certainly does not do justice to the subtlety or comprehensiveness of Newman and Baumeister's arguments; I offer it only to highlight specific points.



found acceptable, then these individuals too will seek escape through more conventional means. But, some individuals will seek out unconventional sources that might suggest the inaccurate but perhaps psychologically acceptable explanation that the unusual event was an alien abduction. The key question is what determines the choice. Newman and Baumeister review several factors that suggest a profile of the individuals most likely to seek this route—prior belief in the paranormal, high suggestibility, rich fantasy life, and so forth. These are the same features that presumably make an abduction explanation believable (particularly when hypnosis is involved) and that might dissuade a person from believing a more conventional explanation if a conventional source of help is first sought (i.e., the belief that an unusual event requires an unusual explanation).

After the unconventional explanation is accepted, additional processes are engaged to defend it against the ridicule that is likely to follow. As Newman and Baumeister argue, the defense tactics (e.g., seeking social support) are quite likely to strengthen the resolve and bolster the beliefs of abductee claimants, insulating them from further attack. Indeed, something like a “belief cult” might emerge. The belief in the experience might be strengthened by other processes as well; Newman and Baumeister make a strong case for cognitive dissonance as one such process. The drive to reduce cognitive inconsistency, however, might not be the only reason that the abduction experience is embraced. The claimed abduction experience can work as a viable escape from self only if it is firmly believed by the claimant. That is, the claimed event did not, after all, really happen. So, no real self-deconstructing pain and humiliation were actually experienced. But, memories can be every bit as painful as actual events and can function as effective escapes if they are firmly believed to represent real events. They are, then, for all intents and purposes, real to the believer. Thus, after the abduction is embraced as the cause for the unusual precipitating event, the bolstering processes might be engaged as much to “maintain the pain” as they are to convince others or to reduce cognitive inconsistency. The stronger the need to escape the self, the more concerted should be the efforts to embrace these false memories.

The processes described thus far are relatively straightforward translations and extensions of Newman and Baumeister’s speculations. These speculations, however, raise several important questions that future research must address. For example, are different escapes from self-awareness interchangeable? Does the choice of some preclude the need to use others? If so, that exchangeability might account in part for the description of alleged UFO abductees as being quite normal by most other accounts, as the review by Newman and Baumeister suggests. An alcoholic, binge-eating masochist with a spiritual bent probably has little need to claim to have been abducted by aliens; the other

escapes, if working well, are lifting the burden of selfhood adequately. But perhaps for some escape candidates, the conventional escape routes are not available by virtue of personal preference, religious prohibition, or subcultural limitation. The fervor with which abduction claimants embrace their experiences might hinge in part on the unavailability or unsuccessful use of other viable escapes. In a paradoxical sense, then, the more “normal” individuals might appear, the more susceptible they might be to claiming odd escape experiences, precisely because they do not embrace conventional escapes that might mark them as unusual in other ways. For some, unconventional escape from self might be the only viable alternative.

An additional issue is the implicit assumption that there are certain elements of the unusual event that must parallel the unconventional-escape explanation to make the latter plausible. That is, although any unusual event should motivate a desire for an explanation, not all unusual events will serve as a catalyst for an eventual claim of abduction by aliens. Newman and Baumeister make a convincing case for hypnopompic and hypnogogic episodes as key precipitating events because they have features that parallel abduction accounts and thus render the accounts plausible to those predisposed to believe them. A key question is whether there are other unusual events that might also serve as catalysts for the belief in an abduction. Other events that might produce lost time or hallucinations include near-death experiences, alcoholic blackouts, narcoleptic episodes, acute sleep deprivation, fugue states, and periods of amnesia. Of course, not all of these will lead to abduction claims—the same is true for hypnogogic and hypnopompic episodes—but they might account for some additional abduction claims and do so through the same mechanisms described in Figure 1.

### Untested, But Testable?

The ultimate judgment on the validity of Newman and Baumeister’s escape-from-self account will rest on careful empirical verification. Given the nature of the problem, this verification will certainly be challenging. The hypothesized precursor of an escape from self-awareness is an overwhelming sense of burden imposed by the cultural pressure for self-esteem and control. That burden is not open to experimental control. Similarly, the manipulation of key precipitating events in a convincing manner can not be carried out ethically. And, the beliefs that guide the seeking and believing of explanations for unusual events are not subject to easy intervention.

How, then, can the model be tested? One approach would use a prospective design following a sample of escape candidates not initially embracing any escape

behaviors. First, the burdens of modern selfhood would need to be operationalized to identify such escape candidates. Then, presumably, some proportion of this sample would fit the profile for those likely to seek and believe unconventional explanations for unusual events. This part, although challenging, would be relatively easy compared to the next—waiting for unusual events to occur and tracking the candidates' responses to them. The types of explanations sought and believed, and the escapes chosen, would then provide important evidence for the major elements of Figure 1. Perhaps some specific parts of the model could be subjected to experimental test (e.g., the responses by abduction claimants to different degrees of threat to their views), but the critical evidence would come primarily from a predictable sorting of escape-prone individuals into conventional and unconventional escape categories based largely on their personality profiles and exposure to unusual events. That some escape candidates would not seek conventional or unconventional escapes would also be important to document.

The major limitation to the prospective design is that it would require a very large initial sample of escape candidates in order to produce, in a reasonable amount of time, an appreciable number of actual escapees. A retrospective approach would provide a viable alternative. This approach would require collecting a representative sample of individuals currently engaged in escape behaviors and then reconstructing the routes they took to those escapes. Unlike previous surveys that have focused only on UFO abductees, however, this approach would include people who have embraced both unconventional and conventional escapes. Admittedly, such research would be open to more distortion and bias because it would rely on recall of prior events and measurement of personality after the escapes have been used, but the retrospective approach would have the advantage of targeting known abduction claimants and others using more conventional escapes from self so that their profiles and routes could be compared. The research would also allow the study of individuals exhibiting the escape behaviors for nonescape reasons.

A key element of verification efforts would be the inclusion of personality moderators. In the absence of experimental manipulations, investigators would need to rely on nature's manipulation of individual differences corresponding to key processes in the hypothesized model. Interactions involving these personality variables can then inform on the validity of the hypothesized underlying processes. For example, the burdens of selfhood presumably weigh most heavily on those with unusually high needs for self-esteem and control. The desire for escape thus might be most urgent for those who are uncertain about their self-attributes (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990) and for those with a high desire for control (Burger, 1993). Similarly, an attributional

process is presumably engaged following the unusual event. Those with an uncertainty orientation (e.g., Sorrentino & Short, 1986), a high need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), a high causal certainty (Weary & Edwards, 1994), or a high desire for self-appraisal (Strube & Yost, 1993) might be especially likely to seek explanations, some of which could result in abduction claims. These and other personality moderators could help define more clearly the profiles of escape candidates and especially candidates for unusual escape claims.

### **A Look to the Future and the Past**

If Newman and Baumeister are correct in saying that UFO abduction accounts are historically and culturally embedded attempts to escape the burdens of modern selfhood, then the specific form of escape might not be important, and other unconventional escapes might easily arise under different cultural and historical conditions. It is important to note that these other unconventional escapes might follow the same mechanisms suggested by Figure 1. In fact, what might consistently set conventional and unconventional escapes apart is the imaginative nature of the latter. That is, unconventional escapes might be unconventional largely because they require the active construction of the escape. A person does not need to be convinced of the escape qualities of alcohol or physical pain; their qualities exist independent of preexisting beliefs. But, claims such as abduction by aliens must be built up in the absence of any real, self-deconstructing event. This would make them particularly susceptible to the vagaries of cultural norms and would seem to require a precipitating event to get the belief construction process going. Have similar unconventional escapes been used in the past? The answer is beyond the scope of this commentary but might be a worthwhile historical form of verification. Equally important, future unconventional escapes might take the same general form when UFO abduction claims run their course. And run their course they should. Eventually, the sheer number of such claims in the absence of any credible physical evidence will open up future claimants to such ridicule that the alleged UFO abduction will cease to have any merit as a viable escape from self. When that happens, some other unconventional experience will presumably take its place. The nature of that experience will provide additional evidence on the generality of the process underlying UFO abduction claims.

### **Conclusion**

Are humans being snatched daily in great numbers by aliens? No—there is simply no evidence to support

the claim. Do significant numbers of otherwise normal people believe that they have been the victims of an abduction? Undoubtedly—the evidence seems clear on this point. Are these alleged abduction victims constructing these claims as a way to escape the pressures of modern identity? Perhaps so. Newman and Baumeister have provided a useful conceptual framework within which this hypothesis can be tested. In this commentary, I have attempted to articulate several features of that conceptual model on which careful scientific work can be conducted; the next step is to carry out that work to separate fact from fantasy. The truth is out there.

### Note

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