

UFO research deals in human frailties

By TIM NORRIS
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SEEING, WHEN IT comes to UFOs, is not necessarily believing.

Lacking undisputed physical evidence, nearly every UFO account made public is based almost entirely on eyewitness accounts. And eyewitness accounts, says a man who has made them his life's work, are notoriously unreliable.

"People are prone to all sorts of optical illusions and can be deceived quite readily," says Steve Penrod, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin — Madison, who specializes in eyewitness descriptions of crimes.

"We can misjudge distance and scale, size and speed, color and shape."

When people do not know what they are seeing, Penrod says, they borrow from their preconceptions. With UFOs — unidentified flying objects — experience offers plenty of them. Through films and books, fiction and non-fiction, UFOs have become part of America's everyday life.

"I suspect that most people are not eager to see an unidentified flying object," Penrod says, "but whenever an anomalous sighting comes up, there are people prepared to interpret it in that way, gather observations together and see something systematic happening out there, even without any compelling evidence."

Most alien sightings show a pattern: people in cars on lonely roads encounter bright lights. In abduction stories, people sometimes report blacking out and losing time, several hours or more. Through a technique called "hypnotic regression," UFO investigators have helped witnesses "recall" events from this lost time.

These events often involve aliens taking them into saucers and conducting bodily examinations.

But hypnosis itself can be faulty. Penrod says the detailed abduction stories may come, like dreams, from the subconscious.

"There are very strong indications that hypnosis can prompt people to recall things that they did not see or experience," he says. "If those hypnotic procedures have been conducted by people who believe that these



A UFO was reported near Union Grove a year ago

subjects have experienced an abduction, that approach would have to be viewed with great suspicion."

UFO researcher Don Schmitt agrees that hypnosis presents problems, but he points out that fully one in three people claiming abduction have a full waking memory of it. He adds that his group, the Center for UFO Studies based in Chicago, carefully monitors the use of hypnosis to avoid suggestion.

"There have been so many cases with nearly identical descriptions," he says, "that you're either talking about a worldwide psychological problem or people are describing what they saw and experienced."

As for cases involving multiple witnesses, both Schmitt and Penrod agree, natural phenomena such as bright stars or planets, light diffracted by ice crystals, mirages, meteorites or falling satellites would offer the same images to one person or a hundred. They are less certain about multiple abductions.

Penrod does not dismiss claims of UFO experiences, but he questions whether they reflect inward or outward realities.

"It's very difficult to come to terms with these stories," Penrod says. "It's as though you have to engage in several levels of trust. The question is, where do you invest your trust?"