

Status Inconsistency Theory and Flying Saucer Sightings

This sociological theory is further validated through analysis of a national survey of sighters.

Donald I. Warren

The discussion of unidentified flying objects (UFO's) at the recent meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science again indicates that this phenomenon has been inadequately studied by the behavioral sciences. The Condon Report (1) contains a single chapter on attitudes, which is 36 pages long and which represents approximately 4 percent of the total length of the report. Such token analysis of the social dimensions of flying saucer sightings reflects both the low priority assigned to a behavioral science interpretation and the lack of available data.

In 1966 the Gallup Poll included a series of questions dealing with UFO's. Although this study is mentioned in the Condon Report, it remains a largely untapped source of social data on UFO phenomena. It seems appropriate to undertake a secondary analysis of the information in that survey and to subject it to sociological theory. The purpose is to support the view that the sighting of UFO's, although widespread in occurrence throughout the world, can be described within the context of the societal positions of particular individuals.

In the review of the Gallup Poll data, the Condon Report makes the following summary (1, p. 214):

- 1) Most Americans (96 percent) have heard of flying saucers.
- 2) About 5 percent of the population claim to have seen a flying saucer.
- 3) About one-half of the population feel that UFO's are real.
- 4) About one-third feel that there are people on other planets.
- 5) People who are better educated are more likely to have heard of flying saucers.

6) Sighters do not differ from the nonsighters with respect to education, region of the country, age, or sex.

When the data referred to above are subjected to a more refined and theoretical analysis, the generally uninteresting findings disclosed in the Condon Report are replaced by a rather general principle that can explain UFO sightings in terms of social structure.

To develop a testable and plausible sociological theory of flying saucer sightings, it is necessary to define an archetypal social pattern and then to link that pattern not only to the general population but also to the individuals in the society. Such is the purpose of this analysis. In its barest form, it suggests a linkage of three variables: (i) a social condition of status discontinuity, producing (ii) a psychological state of marginality, resulting in (iii) a form of individual alienation that expresses itself in a *partial* rejection of the individual's own social position and a *partial* rejection of society's evaluation. The individual is open, then, to a search for new definitions of his proper position in the world.

Concept of Status Consistency

In recent years many sociologists have come to reject the traditional view of social classes in favor of a view that sees all individuals in society ranked on a multidimensional set of criteria (2, 3). The Marxist view of a single criterion of social class based on one's relation to the means of production, or the "status" ranking popularized by Vance Packard's work, is replaced by a view that sees stratification in a mature industrial society as based on a

series of often poorly intercorrelated hierarchies of status (Fig. 1). Among the positional indicators are those attributes designated in a very fixed way by the society. These attributes are often called *ascribed* statuses. Among the most common of the ascribed statuses are sex, race, and age. A second set of criteria for stratifying members of the society reflect *achieved* statuses. These include income, education, and job classification. In the case of ascribed statuses, the element of immutability is foremost. Achieved statuses are, of course, far from immutable, though they are often irreversible. One's formal education cannot be undone, although in general it can be more easily disguised than one's sex. What most characterizes achieved statuses is their fluidity both over time and with respect to birth.

As useful as this kind of information has proved in studies of community stratification and of power and interaction processes, a fact of contemporary American society is the rapid social change and dislocation of individuals, which is reflected in the varied patterns of *horizontal* status comparisons. Put most simply, this means that the neat consistency assumed between rankings on such criteria as income do not correlate with education criteria. Being a Presbyterian and from a Mayflower family does not now ensure being in command of a large corporation or having the dominant say in the political life of the society. At the same time, being Negro and a physician does not overcome the evaluation of skin color that is often made painfully obvious by one's professional peers. The situation in which an individual has different rankings on various indicators of social class can be referred to as status inconsistency (Fig. 1).

Effects of Status Inconsistency

The structural condition of a society that has evolved to a point where status inconsistency is likely can be analyzed apart from the effects it has on the individuals. From the standpoint of the individual, however, the consequence of being a status inconsistent can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Lack of predictable behavioral reactions from other persons with whom one interacts.
- 2) Psychological stress associated

with having to anticipate norms associated with very different sorts of statuses.

In regard to the first point, the fact is that individuals are locked into a network of family, friendship, and work ties that provide a daily round of predictable interactions. A condition of social certitude exists, and social relations are free-flowing and satisfying. The status-inconsistent person possesses sets of expectations that conflict with the usual consistency of social relations. In turn, others with whom the inconsistent relates cannot rely on his having normal and often automatic expectations about other people. Strain, stress, and discontinuity will enter many interactions. Groups and organizations where status discrepancies are accentuated often lead the status inconsistent to withdraw to avoid difficult relationships.

The concept of *marginality*, borrowed from earlier sociological theory, summarizes the social-psychological position of the status inconsistent (4). The woman engineer is simultaneously the possessor of two incompatible social statuses: that of female and that of technically trained expert. The result is a partial exclusion from both worlds. She is neither a real woman to the neighborhood housewives nor a fully accepted work peer in a profession

dominated by men. A somewhat less obvious position of marginality is the occupant of two social worlds. Such a person is one whose dimensions of achieved status differ from those of the general population. This kind of discrepancy involves such instances as the tool and die worker whose income is substantially above that of his high-school-educated peers. The concept that illustrates the psychological consequence of such a position of marginality brought about through status inconsistency is *cognitive dissonance* (5). Since each status position carries with it expectations regarding behavior that should be forthcoming from or directed toward the occupant of that position, the absence of such balance puts pressure on the individual to redefine his situation.

The alternatives open to the individual are (i) to distort the information coming to him, or (ii) to alter the system of evaluations that presents the dilemma. Adoption of the second alternative explains why support of moderate social system change, rejection of status quo values, and projection of felt interpersonal dilemmas of status onto the larger society or its agents have been found to be prevalent among status inconsistencies (6). Status inconsistency produces a sense of social alienation, which is a reflection of the

variety of feelings that the individual may possess. Among these feelings are powerlessness—the inability to affect events in the larger society; meaninglessness—the individual's being unclear as to what he ought to believe; normlessness—the view that socially unapproved behavior or values are required to achieve given goals; isolation—the assigning of low value to goals or beliefs that are typically cherished by the majority of the society; and self-estrangement—the finding of low satisfaction in immediate tasks, while simultaneously seeking rewards that lie outside the activity itself (7). Each of these facets of social alienation may be emphasized to various degrees, but it is important to recognize that the likely object of such feelings is not random. The flying saucer phenomenon provides an appropriate link between the social condition of alienation and its individual expression. Not only is there some rejection of conventional morality involved in saucer sightings, but the very ambiguity of the phenomenon permits one to view it as expressive of one's own interpretation of personal status situation.

The Theory

It is therefore postulated here that UFO sightings are linked to status frustration and, especially, to perceived status deprivations relative to one's position on the social ladder. Status inconsistencies are sometimes able to orient themselves to experience new relationships and to open up new channels of communication that could give them a more secure position in the external world. More often, however, inconsistency means withdrawal, defeatism, and retreat from the larger society. This retreat implies, in part, a withdrawal from the new definitions of science and an insulation from possibilities of change. This is especially true for a person who ranks generally low in vertical status and is also inconsistent—that is, who has one dimension of medium or high status. Consumption of science itself may imply a questioning of science which, for the person of little education, is an impossibility. Thus, the marginal status persons report saucer sightings to break out of a social order in which they are not accorded the place that their situation, in their eyes, deserves. Alienation and distrust of official explanations and a general questioning of the merits of the "system"

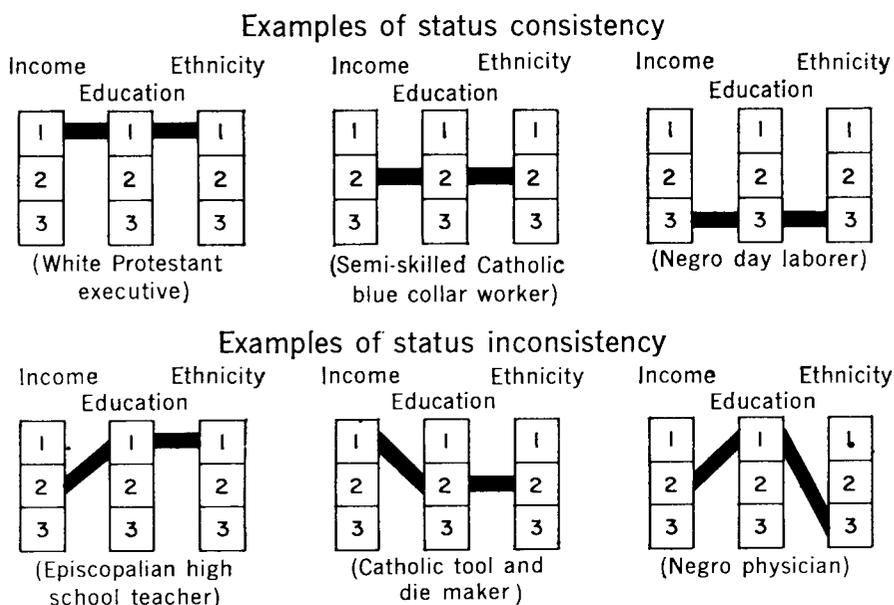


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the status consistency theory. The ranks of individuals are compared in vertical dimensions of social status in terms of their horizontal configurations. The general approach and theory is most prominently identified with Gerhard E. Lenski (see 2). The specific threefold ranking is based on the work of E. F. Jackson, who distinguished between one- and two-step inconsistencies (3). Note that the three measures of status illustrated are not the same as those employed in the empirical analysis. Ethnicity as ascribed status ranking is treated separately. Rankings on income, education, and occupational level are employed in the analysis reported in this article.

are common attitudes among status inconsistent. It is the ambivalent attachment to that system's rewards and rankings that creates the desire to re-define the social order rather than to express total rejection of that system and its values. The very improvement in one dimension, which implies partial upward mobility, creates the need for a sense of integration, which would permit the individual to relate to the universe in such a way as to provide for new patterns of interaction that might bring about an integrated order.

Status inconsistent support a search and a collective desire not to be locked into the disorder of societal fractionation. The UFO's provide, therefore, a form of escape into unrealized and perhaps unrealizable consistent situations. One expression of this escape mechanism is the possibility of other lives, other planets, other beings like or unlike oneself. Such conceptions need not be explicit. Indeed, the argument suggests that UFO sighting is but one manifestation of the marginality of status inconsistent. What makes such phenomena amenable to association with status inconsistency is the possibility of change that it offers. It presents the opportunity to escape the system without threatening one's gains in the immediate social environment defined by the political-economic structure. It is this acceptance-rejection pattern that most corresponds to the social position of the status-inconsistent individual.

Testing the Theory

The Gallup Poll of 1966 permits an empirical test of the theoretical ideas so far discussed. This study, which involved a cross-sectional, representative sample of adults 21 years of age and over, included the bases for determining which individuals are status inconsistent and for rating the reports of saucer sightings. As a base figure, the study indicates that 5 percent, or 6 million people, of the adult population are saucer sighters. By constructing classifications of status consistency and inconsistency, it is then possible to evaluate the hypothesis that status inconsistent are more likely than other persons to sight flying saucers and to report such observations. The approach employed in constructing an index of status levels follows closely the one used by Elton F. Jackson (3), in which the distribution of three achieved statuses—income, education, and occupa-

tion—were divided into three approximately equal ranges from high to low. Individuals have rankings in each of the separate dimensions and can be compared in terms of whether their

ranking in one dimension corresponds to their ranking in the others.

In this analysis of the Gallup Poll data, measures of ascribed status (race and sex) are separated and examined

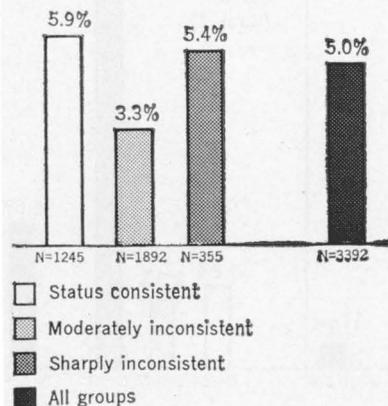


Fig. 2 (left). Total UFO sightings. Status consistents report more sightings than other groups when women and Negro men are included in the analysis. The special inconsistency associated with racial and sex roles makes the overall sample of responses refute the hypothesis advanced by the author. The differences masked by the groupings of diverse population elements into one analysis are indicated in subsequent figures.

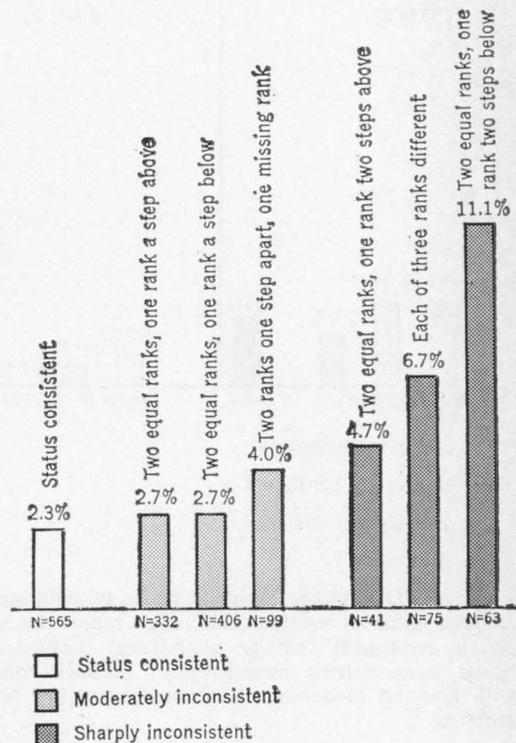


Fig. 3 (right). UFO sightings by white males. Refined comparisons of types of status inconsistency reveal the special importance of "underrewarded" versus "overrewarded" status discrepancies. Moreover, where the individual has three divergent ranks or where the lone divergent rank is two steps below the other two ranks reported, saucer sightings are the highest of all inconsistent situations.

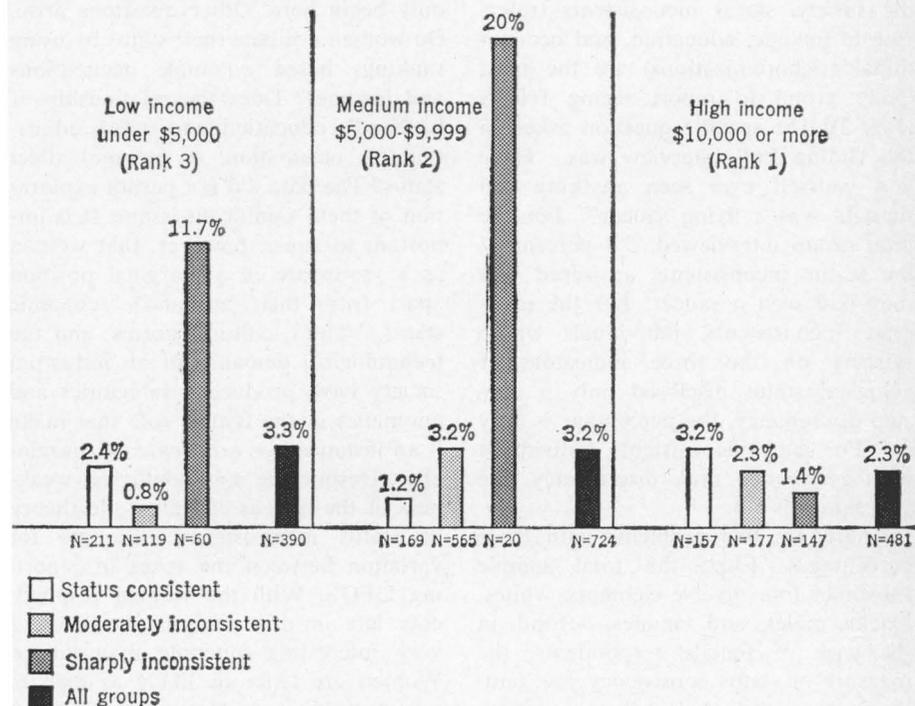


Fig. 4. UFO sightings by white males of differing incomes. Those in the low- or medium-income categories who are sharply status inconsistent are highest in reported UFO sightings. Where reward (income) is high and investment (occupation or education) relatively low, saucer sightings are below the level of other groups.

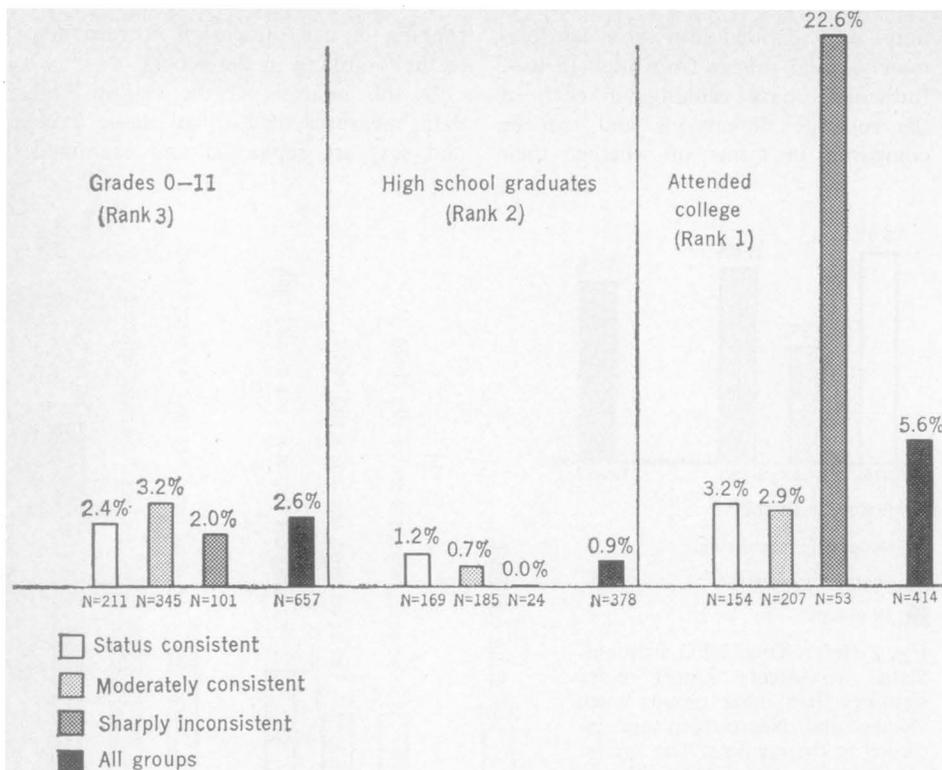


Fig. 5. UFO sightings by white males of differing educational levels. College-educated, sharply status-inconsistent individuals report the most UFO sightings. The highest education investment (college attendance) coupled with the lowest income or occupational status (sharp inconsistency) produces maximum saucer sighting. The groups with low and moderate education show a low level of sightings irrespective of status patterns.

first. Then income, education, and occupation become the basis for more detailed comparisons. It is first discovered that, for all the respondents in the survey, status inconsistencies (referring to income, education, and occupational trichotomizations) are the most likely group to report seeing UFO's (Fig. 2). The specific question asked in the Gallup Poll interview was, "Have you yourself ever seen anything you thought was a flying saucer?" For the total group interviewed, 5.9 percent of the status inconsistent answered that they had seen a saucer. For the moderate inconsistent, individuals whose ranking on the three indicators of achieved status disclosed only a one-step discrepancy, the percentage is only 3.3. For sharp inconsistent, individuals with a two-step rank discrepancy, the percentage is 5.4.

There are two problems with these percentages. First, the total sample subsumes four diverse elements: whites, blacks, males, and females. Second, in the case of female respondents, the measure of status consistency was family income and husband's occupation. On this latter point, it is clear that, if a woman is employed, her occupation and not her husband's ought to be used.

If she contributes to the family income, her income and not the total family income ought to be the measure for her status. The difficulties of discrepancy only begin here. Other questions arise. Do women evaluate their status by using rankings based on male occupations and incomes? Does the relationship of husband's education and wife's education (or occupation, or income) affect status? The data did not permit exploration of these significant issues. It is important to stress, however, that women as a group are in a marginal position apart from their husband's economic status. Values, cultural norms, and the technological demands of an industrial society have produced ambiguities and anomalies in the female role that make it an instance *par excellence* of marginality. Despite the methodological weakness of the indices of status, the theory of status inconsistency accounts for variation between the sexes in reporting UFO's. With the woman respondents left in this analysis, however, a very interesting outcome materializes. Women are twice as likely as men to report sighting saucers irrespective of achieved status consistency or inconsistency.

The same analysis that reveals the

pattern for male-female variations also introduces another difference generally ignored in studies using a status inconsistency theory: race. It is reasonable to argue that the position of blacks in American society is such that, whatever the discrepancies between levels of income, occupation, and education, it reflects a more basic status inconsistency: that of being black in a white society. Why should not this distinction of race, when coupled with achieved status discrepancies, mean more alienation and marginality, and hence more saucer sightings? There are two plausible reasons for a disparate pattern between blacks and whites. First, black status problems have been visibly channeled into political protest. The alienation of blacks, far from being diffuse, is increasingly specific and focuses on social system targets. Second, status inconsistencies in the Gallup Poll sample of blacks involve persons, in 7 out of 8 instances, who are higher in at least one status dimension than their consistent peers. The pattern for blacks is, therefore, explained in two ways. First, inconsistency generally means important gains in socioeconomic ways over a stagnant low-status position. Second, political structuring of alienation skims off vaguer and "escapist" channels of marginal expression.

Further testing of the major hypothesis is now concentrated on the largest subgroup within the overall sample: white males of 21 years of age and over. For this group the indices of achieved status are most valid and consonant, and therefore the operational measures of these theoretical concepts can be very directly assessed without additional specifications and qualifications. The data clearly reveal that white males with either moderate or sharp inconsistency are more likely than their status-consistent peers to report flying saucers. The data disclose strong support for the argument that white males who are sharply inconsistent because their incomes are two steps below their education and occupation levels are most likely of all (11.1 percent) to report saucer phenomena (Fig. 3). This inconsistency can be termed the concept of *underreward*. Highly educated white males with incomes under \$5000 report saucers five times as often as low-educated white males with the same low incomes. This difference is even more pronounced in the case of highly educated white males with medium incomes. These men are 16 times as likely to see UFO's as their status-consistent coun-

terparts (Fig. 4). In other words, it is not low income alone but low income with moderate to high education or occupational status that produces a high level of saucer reporting. An examination of status inconsistency in the three educational rankings of white males further underscores the previous argument. Of the group of college-educated white males, the sharp inconsistencies report saucer sightings seven times as often as their moderately consistent or status-consistent peers (Fig. 5). It is not, therefore, the uneducated credulous or the uninformed individual who reports saucers. Rather, it is the individual whose reward structure is out of line with his investment—that is, the status-inconsistent white male who has the highest education ranking but a moderate or low income or occupation ranking.

Do UFO Sighters Reject Establishment Values?

If the reader has followed the argument and analysis to this point, he will note that one issue still provides a nagging problem in the interpretation of the findings. Granted that status dilemmas may lead people to report seeing something labeled as a flying saucer, what about the key point in the argument: that such phenomena reflect a rejection of the established society and its values, albeit in a rather escapist fashion? In other words, what evidence is there that status inconsistencies believe that what they see are visitors from other planets or that they reject the view that saucers are merely unexplained natural events? Without establishing the extraterrestrial meaning of the UFO sightings, it cannot really be argued that status inconsistencies who see saucers do so in response to their position of ambiguity and marginality. The answers to the follow-up question about the sighting of a saucer provide the most direct data for the key proof of this analysis. The question is "Just what do you think these flying saucers are?" Individuals interviewed described in their words what they felt they had observed. Answers were categorized in the

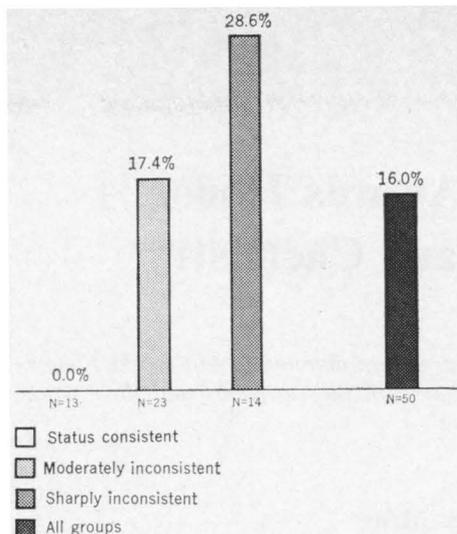


Fig. 6. Answers to the question "Just what do you think these flying saucers are?" Status-inconsistent persons who report seeing UFO's are far more likely than other groups to define them as extraterrestrial vehicles.

Gallup survey into eight major classifications, one of which was the group of answers including "real objects from outer space, other planets, planetary objects from another system, vehicles from outer space." There were 50 white male respondents who had sighted saucers. Of this group, eight (16.0 percent) provided answers within the classification cited. The other 84 percent of the white male sighters said that what they had observed was a weather balloon, experimental planes, a mirage, a meteor, and so forth. However, the status inconsistencies gave a clear preference for the extraterrestrial interpretation (Fig. 6). Of the sharply status-inconsistent sighters, 28.6 percent gave that kind of answer; of the moderate inconsistencies, 17.4 percent did so. In fact, all such answers came from the status-inconsistent respondents, and none from the status-consistent saucer sighters.

Summary

The analysis is completed. Through a series of propositions and hypothesized links between the reporting of UFO sightings and a particular kind of social position, the utility of social the-

ory as a basis for explaining phenomena presumed to be in the domain of the physical sciences has been demonstrated. Nothing in the data rejects the possibility that some individuals have, in fact, seen objects propelled from another solar system or that all observations are of ill-understood or misperceived terrestrial phenomena. Empirical science, particularly social science, does not address itself to ultimate truth. What has been attempted here is the employment of a sociological theory to account successfully for observed regularity in patterns of UFO sightings. Another and reasonable, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, procedure for organizing social data might provide an equal degree of explanatory consistency. This analysis merely emphasizes the need to utilize such approaches outside the confines of laboratory groups and the more convenient and established domains of social science. Our analysis has presented just one application of sociological theory to the complex interplay among quasi-scientific phenomena, physical science knowledge, and human behavior in society.

References and Notes

1. E. U. Condon, Ed., *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (Bantam, New York, 1968).
2. Basic to this approach has been the work of E. C. Hughes [*Amer. J. Sociol.* 50, 353 (1945)], E. Benoit-Smullyan [*Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 11, 151 (1944)], and G. E. Lenski [*ibid.* 19, 405 (1954)].
3. E. F. Jackson, *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 27, 469 (1962).
4. The original study of marginality is derived from the work of E. V. Stonequist [*The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict* (Scribner, New York, 1937)]. See also the essay by E. C. Hughes, *Amer. J. Sociol.* 50, 120 (1945).
5. For a review of the literature on the social-psychological concept, see J. W. Brehm and A. R. Cohen, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance* (Wiley, New York, 1962).
6. G. E. Lenski [*Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 19, 405 (1954)] found that liberal voting patterns in national elections were correlated with status inconsistency; K. D. Kelly and W. J. Chambliss [*ibid.* 31, 375 (1966)] also explore this relationship. D. Trieman [*Amer. J. Sociol.* 71, 653 (1966)] finds a similar relationship regarding race attitudes. G. B. Rush [*Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 32, 86 (1967)] points to a linkage with ultraconservative political attitudes. In a study of a small group, I. W. Goffman [*ibid.* 22, 275 (1957)] finds status inconsistency related to desired change in influence.
7. These dimensions are differentiated from the generic notion of alienation by M. M. Seeman, *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 24, 783 (1959).
8. I thank Mary L. Wermuth of Oakland University who, by her editing and argument, helped to clarify the principles and application of this interpretation.