

## ON A BEHAVIORAL EXPLANATION OF UFO SIGHTINGS

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The scientific study of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) is receiving increased attention from behavioral scientists. For example, Saunders (1968) and Saunders and Van Arsdale (1968) have carried out a careful analysis of UFO-related attitudes. More recently, Warren (1970) has argued that "status inconsistency theory" can "account successfully for observed regularity in patterns of UFO sightings" (p. 603). This theory suggests that persons who can be ranked differentially on various criteria of social class experience psychological stress which may be manifested in a tendency to escape the norms of society and to reject conventional conceptions. Warren suggests that this kind of behavior can account for UFOs.

It is the purpose of this paper to show that the data presented by Warren (1970) cannot be used to support his conclusions. His arguments are based on an analysis of respondents to the Gallup Poll of 1966, who reported seeing something they "thought was a flying saucer." However, the UFO literature consists mainly of anecdotal accounts reported to some investigating agency. There is no reason to assume on an *a priori* basis that the self-described "sighters" among Gallup Poll respondents share characteristics with those persons actually making UFO reports.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is no *a priori* basis for concluding that the UFO literature can be explained by the behavioral mechanisms he suggests. This objection to Warren's interpretation is supported by the Condon Report (1968), a government study referred to by Warren in his own paper. That study found that 87% of the respondents reporting having seen a UFO in their survey, "reported the sighting to no one other than family or friends." It concluded that "most sightings have little chance of coming to the attention of an agency, whether official, semi-official, or private" (p. 226). The individual who reports a UFO belongs to a group distinct from that of the individual who merely sees a UFO. The former group comprises those persons responsible for the data of the UFO phenomenon. The latter group was analyzed by Warren.

It is not argued that Warren's "status inconsistency theory" does not apply to that group of people who believe they have seen a "flying saucer." Objection is raised to Warren's extrapolating from that sample to the UFO data *per se* and to those individuals actually generating UFO reports. There is evidence that this latter group and the group analyzed by Warren may come from two very different populations. Although Warren's theory may in fact account for the UFO phenomenon, there is no reason to accept this behavioral interpretation at the present time. Further tests with a more appropriate sample should therefore be encouraged.

### REFERENCES

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- WARREN, D. I. Status inconsistency theory and flying saucer sightings. *Science*, 1970, 170(3958), 599-603.

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<sup>1</sup>Information regarding UFO reports actually submitted to investigating agencies can be obtained from the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), 1522 Connecticut Avenue N. W., Washington, D. C. 20036. The arguments presented in this paper were formulated while the author was acting as a consultant to NICAP.