

INTERGALACTIC HOSTAGES: PEOPLE WHO REPORT ABDUCTION BY UFOS

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Quite a few people have reported what may seem to many to be a bizarre experience: They claim to have had painful and humiliating encounters with extraterrestrials. Some argue that these events actually occur, while others claim that the people reporting them are dishonest or mentally ill. Instead, it is argued here that UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) abduction accounts are false memories. Conditions encouraging the construction of pseudomemories are reviewed, and it is argued that these are the conditions associated with the construction of UFO abduction accounts. In addition, abduction accounts may be understood as stories that express the desire to escape from awareness of the self and the demands placed on it. Similarities between the typical abduction narrative and another form of fantasy and activity hypothesized to serve escape-from-self needs—masochism—are reviewed. Costs and benefits of a skeptical approach to the UFO abduction phenomenon are discussed.

People tell us all sorts of things about themselves. Many of those things are true, but some, of course, are not. According to Gilbert (1991; see also DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985), our initial and automatic reaction to other people's stories or accounts is to believe them. "Unbelieving" takes some extra cognitive work. Often, however, we do that extra work so as to carefully evaluate what other people tell us, and when we do so, we use particular criteria for assessing whether or not the experiences and events people describe actually took place. For example, when personal accounts are highly detailed and contain many visual and other sensory details, we tend to conclude that the events did in fact occur (Johnson & Suengas, 1989; Schooler, Gerhard, & Loftus, 1986). Still, our judgments of others' memories are not error-free, and we will at least occasionally be misled if we simply assume that "if it feels like a real memory and

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sounds like a real memory, then it's a real memory" (cf. Garry, Loftus, & Brown, 1994, p. 449).

For example, a surprising number of people are now describing in great detail a particularly bizarre personal experience: forcible abduction by extraterrestrials, an experience also known as UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) abduction. No two accounts are exactly alike, but there are enough recurring elements so that a prototypical UFO abduction can be easily described. Typically, abductions begin with the appearance of strange-looking alien beings, who are presumed to be extraterrestrials. Very often (in about half of all cases—see Pritchard, Pritchard, Mack, Kasey, & Yapp, 1994), the victim is abducted from his or her bed. Other abductions begin outdoors, and in a common variant of the story the abductee is behind the wheel of a car. Either way, abductees usually report feeling paralyzed, immobilized and aware that they are being controlled by some entity or entities. If a car is involved, the vehicle comes to a halt and/or also appears to be under external control. A UFO itself—some sort of flying saucer or spaceship—is often sighted by abductees, and occasionally people also remember actually being transported inside. More commonly, though, abductees cannot recall how they ended up inside the UFO.

Once inside the UFO, a number of events may transpire. But as Bullard (1994b) notes, "Whatever else happens on board, the examination dominates abduction stories as their climactic event" (p. 588). Abductees are typically placed (often undressed) on a table or bed and a "physical examination" takes place. Physical restraints are sometimes said to be used to prevent movement or escape, but given the paralysis that abductees often report, they are not generally necessary. The exact "medical" procedures can be complex, and they have been the topic of extensive analysis by UFO investigators (see Pritchard et al., 1994). But any or all of the following can occur: needles are inserted, cuts are made, blood is drawn, limbs are bent, and orifices of the body are probed and violated. And needless to say, this is all quite painful. Abductees also describe the experience as humiliating, and beings other than those actually mistreating the human captives are often standing by to observe the whole procedure. In recent years, that procedure has been more and more likely to involve explicit sexual activity.

A number of post-examination procedures are also sometimes described (including conferences with the extraterrestrials, tours of the spacecraft, and space travel), but these episodes are relatively rare (Bullard, 1987a, 1994c). When the unfortunate abductees are released (usually at the site of the initial abduction), they may be bothered by what seems like a chunk of "missing time" (Hopkins, 1981), but they generally go on with what they were doing before this unexpected extraterrestrial intrusion into their lives. This may seem remarkable, but the reason for it is simple: The aliens are said to

somehow program abductees to forget about the entire unpleasant episode. (For a variety of abduction accounts, see Bullard, 1987b; Fiore, 1989; Jacobs, 1992; Lorenzon & Lorenzon, 1977; Mack, 1994; Randles, 1988; Rimmer, 1984; and Strieber, 1987).

If these abductions are actually occurring, the aliens' efforts to keep their activities secret with their memory wipes have clearly not been totally successful. Good approximations of the number of people who identify themselves as abductees are not, however, available. A survey designed Hopkins, Jacobs, and Westrum (1992) and conducted by the Roper organization has received considerable publicity, primarily because of what Hopkins et al. concluded from the results. They reported an estimate of 3.7 million abductees in the United States alone. Unfortunately, survey respondents were not directly asked about extraterrestrial encounters. Instead, they were asked about other experiences that Hopkins et al. asserted were strongly associated to the phenomenon (e.g., respondents were asked whether or not they remembered ever "waking up paralyzed with a sense of a strange person or presence or something else in the room"). A number of commentators have questioned the validity of these criteria (for a variety of methodological, conceptual, and psychometric critiques of this survey, see Dawes & Mulford, 1993; Goertzel, 1994; Hall, Rodeghier, & Johnson, 1992; Stires, 1993).

Other than that one flawed survey, one must fall back on informal observations in order to estimate the number of abductees. As discussed by Newman and Baumeister (1996b), estimates in the 1970's and early 1980's were usually in the hundreds (e.g., Greenberg, 1979; Rimmer, 1984), but there may now be thousands of people who consider themselves to be abductees. In a 1993 appearance on the television program "Larry King Live", Whitley Strieber (author of the best-selling abduction account *Communion*; 1987, 1993) claimed to have received 55,000 letters from people who suspected that they might have been abducted by aliens. Even more recently, Bullard (1994b) analyzed the abduction reports collected by just 13 investigators, and found 1700 separate cases among them. Those figures may be startling enough, but it is generally assumed that admitted abductees represent only the tip of the iceberg. Even more people might believe that they have been abducted, but they might be embarrassed or afraid to talk about their experiences. Fortunately for them, even if they do not confide in a therapist or investigator, they can perhaps find solace in the pages of UFO-related publications; there, they can find advertisements for products such as UFO detectors, and read articles containing advice on how to resist future abductions (Druffel, 1993).

The abduction phenomenon will be familiar to most readers, because anyone who has turned on a television or radio or even just glanced at the supermarket tabloids in the last few years will almost certainly have been

exposed to it already. Until very recently, people who manage to isolate themselves from all but the most highbrow media outlets might possibly have remained ignorant of the alleged extraterrestrial invasion of our planet. But even the *New York Times Book Review* (Koontz, 1995) and *The New Yorker* (Wolcott, 1995) recently published prominent reviews of *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind* (Bryan, 1995), the latest major work on the topic.

Most of us have thus heard quite a few abduction stories, and many of those stories describe extraterrestrial encounters in great detail with extensive information about all of the sights, sounds, and smells that accompany a UFO abduction. Therefore, if we use the criteria for evaluating memories described above, we may well reach the conclusion that abduction accounts are descriptions of actual events. It will surprise few readers, however, to hear that there is no physical evidence—or any evidence other than personal testimony—that anyone has actually been abducted by aliens (Klass, 1988; Newman & Baumeister, 1996b). Why, then, are people telling such stories, and why are they presenting them as autobiographical accounts?

WHY DO PEOPLE CLAIM TO BE ABDUCTEES?

Given the complete lack of evidence for UFO abductions, the most straightforward conclusion to reach is that abductees are simply lying about their experiences (Baker, 1992). There are undoubtedly abductees who have fabricated their accounts just to get attention (see Klass, 1988). However, if abductees are simply people seeking notoriety, it would be difficult to explain why many assiduously *avoid* the spotlight (as noted by Hopkins, 1987; Jacobs, 1992; Rimmer, 1984; and Vallee, 1988, among others). In addition, while the affective intensity and apparent sincerity with which abductees tell their stories (for examples, see Bryan, 1995) cannot be taken as compelling evidence that the story-tellers are sincere, they have certainly caused quite a few investigators to think twice before writing off the entire phenomenon as a massive con game.

Alternatively, it has been suggested that most abductees are mentally ill and simply incapable of distinguishing between reality and fantasy (Baker, 1992). In other words, abduction memories might be hallucinations akin to (or identical to) the positive symptoms of schizophrenia. The evidence is inconsistent with this hypothesis. When abductees are formally examined with standardized psychological instruments (e.g., the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), there is generally little evidence of psychosis or any other severe abnormality that could easily explain hallucinations involving aliens and spaceships (e.g., Bloecher, Clamar, & Hopkins, 1985; Mack, 1994; Parnell, 1988; Ring & Rosing, 1990). In sum, the only unambiguously non-normative charac-

teristic that most abductees possess is that they say they have been abducted by aliens.¹

Finally, another hypothesis (and the one favored here), is that abductees are neither crazy nor liars, yet have unwittingly constructed a false memory. In the following section, I briefly review research on the conditions that foster the construction of false memories. The implications of that research for the UFO abduction phenomenon are then discussed.

FALSE MEMORIES

Memory is a reconstructive process, and the act of recalling any event involves both adding to and deleting information from the original representation. Expectations and beliefs play a particularly important role in shaping distorted reconstructions of the past (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Loftus & Loftus, 1980; Ross, 1989), as do irrelevant and misleading pieces of information people are exposed to after the original episode (see Loftus, 1992, on misinformation effects). Furthermore, while one might expect that the most malleable memories would be unimportant ones that people rarely dwell on and rehearse, memories for personally significant and emotionally involving events can be drastically altered as well (Neisser & Harsch, 1992).

Recent research provides evidence for a more radical kind of memory reconstruction. People are not only capable of reshaping their memories for events they actually experienced; they are also capable of completely fabricating autobiographical episodes (Garry & Loftus, 1994; Loftus, 1993; Ofshe, 1992; Schooler, 1994). For example, Loftus (1993) describes how a subject was able to vividly recall and recount a traumatic childhood episode: getting lost in a shopping mall. Unfortunately, the memory was bogus; the subject simply constructed a pseudomemory in response to a family member's suggestion that the event had in fact occurred. Similarly, Ceci, Croteau, Smith, and Loftus (1994) induced subjects to falsely believe that their fingers had once been caught in a mousetrap. Clearly, autobiographical memory is far from perfect, and people are capable of confabulating memories of things that never actually happened (see also Lindsay & Read, 1994).

The conditions that give rise to false memories cannot be completely specified, but imagination and suggestibility seem to be key factors. In

1. Some have suggested that abductees tend to have high levels of fantasy proneness (e.g., Bartholomew, Basterfield, & Howard, 1991). Fantasy prone people have extensive and vivid fantasy lives, and they may even report having trouble distinguishing between their fantasies and reality (Lynn & Rhue, 1988; Wilson & Barber, 1983). Compelling evidence for a significant correlation between fantasy proneness and recall of a UFO abduction is still lacking, however (see Newman & Baumeister, 1996a, 1996b).

other words, false memories have a tendency to emerge when (1) people imagine events and fantasize for protracted periods of time and adopt loose standards for distinguishing fantasy from reality, and (2) authority figures confirm the authenticity of the pseudomemories by encouraging people to believe that they are real (Lindsay & Read, 1994; Loftus, 1993). Lynn and Kirsch (1996) assert that false memories can emerge as a result of any memory recovery procedure that "(a) encourages fantasy and imagination; (b) is...conducted in a context of assumed accuracy of exhumed memories, which invites participants to adopt a lax standard for distinguishing fantasy and reality; and (c) encourages participants to report more information independent of recall accuracy" (p. 152).

Hypnosis is one such memory recovery procedure. According to Orne, Whitehouse, Orne, and Dinges (1996), hypnosis "has been found to facilitate the transformation of mental images and vague recollections into compelling pseudomemories that may come to be believed with great conviction...exposure to hypnotic procedures leaves subjects as confident in their inaccurate recollections as they are in their veridical reminiscences." (p. 169-170) Autobiographical memories retrieved with the aid of hypnosis are thus especially suspect. These memories may often be accurate. Unfortunately, they may also be constructions that incorporate information suggested by the hypnotist or other people who are present, and any general knowledge a person has related to whatever he or she is trying to remember (Orne, 1979; Orne, Whitehouse, Dinges, & Orne, 1988; Spanos, Burgess, & Burgess, 1994). For example, the kinds of "past lives" that people recall through hypnosis are strongly affected by what they believe a hypnotist expects them to find (Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991).

FALSE UFO ABDUCTION MEMORIES

The conditions associated with the construction of false memories are conditions that are usually in place when people claim to retrieve UFO abduction memories. People who do the kind of "memory work" needed to construct an abduction story are generally people who are seeking guidance for understanding the roots of various problems or disturbances, such as vague anxieties, more specific phobias, and disturbing memories and dreams (see Mack, 1994). Hence, people who report being abducted are often people who are motivated to dig around in their pasts and retrieve memories that were previously unavailable.

There is reason to believe that at least some of the "odd experiences" that abductees wish to explain are unusual sleep-related episodes, especially hypnogogic and hypnopompic hallucinations (see Hufford, 1982). These "waking dreams" occur just before falling asleep (hypnogogic) or

waking up (hypnopompic), and while having them a person is paralyzed and often has bizarre visions of frightening and monstrous entities. Hopkins (1987) described what he called a common "bedroom encounter" with aliens, which he said "involves the appearance of a strange figure (or two or three) standing near the bed on which the invariably frightened subject lies physically paralyzed" (p. 314). These "encounters" sound very much like episodes of sleep paralysis. Ramsay, Spanos, and Csoli (1994) found that people who report supernatural experiences of all sorts are also more likely to report hypnogogic and hypnopompic hallucinations. It thus seems likely that many abductees have experienced such hallucinations, which may later be fleshed out and elaborated into a full-blown abduction memory.

More often than not, this fleshing out is done with the aid of hypnotic procedures (Bullard, 1989, 1994b). And as noted above, when people try to reconstruct an event with the aid of hypnosis, they may end up creating instead of retrieving memories. The likelihood that the memories created will involve a UFO abduction will increase if the person administering the hypnotic induction believes in the possibility of such extraterrestrial contacts and expects to find evidence for them. In fact, a great many abductees construct their abduction memories in hypnotic sessions with investigators and therapists who essentially specialize in eliciting abduction narratives (e.g., see Fiore, 1989; Hopkins, 1987; Jacobs, 1992; and Mack, 1994; for examples of leading questions and even blatant pressure to recall abductions, see Newman & Baumeister, 1996b). In addition, potential abductees, like most other members of our culture, are likely at this point to have a reasonable amount of general knowledge about the abduction phenomenon. This knowledge can be used to generate images that might subsequently be confused for traces of a personally experienced event. If a person believes in the possibility of an alien encounter, he or she is even more likely to accept a confabulated abduction episode as an actual memory. Those people who eventually come to believe that they experienced a UFO abduction may very well have such a belief; in fact, Spanos, Cross, Dickson, and DuBreuil (1993) found that people with elaborate UFO-related experiences (i.e., more than just the sighting of a craft) are more likely than other people to believe not only in the reality of UFOs, but in a wide variety of paranormal and esoteric phenomena. It is possible that a person's interest in UFOs and related issues is what leads him or her to an abduction investigator in the first place.

In sum, many people may be disturbed by some unexplained feeling, dream, memory, or experience (possible a hypnopompic or hypnogogic hallucination). They may end up seeking help from an investigator of UFO-related phenomena or a therapist interested in

the abduction phenomenon. In fact, their interest in paranormal phenomena may lead them to such people.

A particularly unfortunate combination is a person who believes he or she could have been abducted and an investigator who also believes this. Whatever knowledge potential abductees have about UFO and abduction lore could become intertwined with their fantasies, actual memories, and hints and cues from the investigator during an attempt at memory recovery (typically involving a hypnotic induction). An abduction memory may subsequently be constructed. Needless to say, not every abductee experiences this entire sequence of events. It is meant only as an outline of the prototypical case (see also Spanos et al., 1994).

Two final points should be emphasized. First of all, a number of UFO abduction accounts (up to 30%; see Newman & Baumeister, 1996a, 1996b) emerge without the formal use of hypnosis. As noted above, however, hypnotic procedures are not necessary for the elicitation of false memories. Hypnotic inductions simply involve most if not all of the elements of the kind of situation most likely to lead to the creation of pseudomemories.

Secondly, many of the mechanisms involved in creating false UFO abduction memories are not unique to the creation of this particular kind of false memory. They may also play a role in leading people to recall extensive involvement in Satanic cults (Bottoms & Davis, this issue; Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, 1996), memories of past lives (Spanos et al., 1991), and possibly even bogus accounts of abuse in early childhood (Loftus, 1993; Tavriss, 1993).² Each particular category of false memories, however, involves its own unique issues and puzzles. This article is devoted to exploring what is special about UFO abduction memories.

2. Although the parallels between UFO abduction memories and confabulated memories of sexual and satanic cult abuse are being emphasized here, there are some interesting differences as well. For example, while there have been a number of highly publicized cases of people disavowing abuse memories, the author is not aware of more than one or two alleged abductees who have publicly recanted. Perhaps some of the consequences of abuse memories (e.g., lawsuits, the breakup of families) impel people to critically analyze their memories in a way that is not required of abductees. Alternatively, the possible social costs of disavowing abduction memories may discourage people from doing so publicly. Although literally everyone acknowledges that sexual abuse takes place, the same is certainly not true of UFO encounters, so people may fear that they will expose themselves to ridicule by announcing that they had deceived themselves about being abducted by aliens. Finally, the media may simply not report these cases. If newspaper editors dismiss the possibility of UFO abductions, they will not run stories about people who decide that their abduction memories were false—just as they would also not devote space in their publications to stories about people who underwent “past-life regressions” and subsequently decided that they may not in fact have been 17th century shepherds or soldiers in Julius Caesar’s army.

ABDUCTION NARRATIVES AS JOINT CONSTRUCTIONS

One way of viewing the proliferation of abduction memories is as follows: A number of years ago, an outlandish story about a traumatic encounter with extraterrestrial beings received a great deal of publicity (the Betty and Barney Hill case; see Fuller, 1966). A number of therapists and investigators of UFO-related phenomena became intrigued with the story and began seeking out people who might have had similar experiences; some people sought advice or counseling from those therapists and investigators; and finally, due to the power of suggestion, those unfortunate people had abduction memories implanted in their minds.

Note, however, that the above account portrays abductees as being essentially passive participants in the creation of the false UFO abduction memory. Instead, it is more likely that the creation of any false autobiographical account (including, but not limited to those involving alien encounters) elicited with the help of a therapist, investigator, or hypnotist, is a joint creation of that authority figure and the person doing the remembering. An active role on the part of the abductee is implicit in the very phrase “the construction of abduction memories,” which is used throughout this article.

One obvious way in which abductees could play an active role in constructing their pseudomemories would be for them to follow up on hints they were provided with—perhaps by an investigator expecting to find evidence for an abduction—and fill in gaps in their emerging story with their schematic knowledge about extraterrestrials and UFOs. The mechanisms involved would be similar to the ones that psychologists have been investigating at least since Bartlett’s (1932) seminal research on reconstructive processes in long term memory. A large body of research has demonstrated that knowledge and expectations can and will be used to flesh out imperfect memory representations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Abductees may thus simply be people who incorporate what they know about other UFO abduction reports into the stories they tell about themselves while either hypnotized or otherwise encouraged to relax their usual standards for reality-testing.³

As Erdelyi (1993) argues, however, “we distort memories for (thoughts, percepts, etc.) not only out of intellective considerations but also out of emotional ones” (p. 132). In other words, we are not dispass-

3. Lindsay and Read (1994) discuss another active process that plays a role in the creation of false memories. After constructing a memory—false or veridical—people can actively assess its accuracy, and they can do so using the same criteria (discussed above) that they use to assess the accuracy of *other* people’s memories. This process, unfortunately, is far from foolproof. (See Ross & Newby, 1996, for an even more extensive discussion of this issue).

sionate observers of our pasts; the way in which we simplify, distort, and otherwise construct autobiographical memories is a function of motivational factors, not just cold cognitive ones. Tavris (1993), for example, argues that the confabulation of memories of early sexual abuse may be facilitated due to their serving as metaphors to dramatize and explain the powerlessness and sense of victimization felt by many women in our society. (For other vivid examples of motivated constructions of the past, see Caro, 1990, Chapter 3, on progressive distortions in Lyndon B. Johnson's accounts of his war-time record; and Neisser, 1981, on John Dean's self-serving memories of his role in the Watergate scandal). Below, I will argue that abduction memories are also motivated constructions, although the motives are far from straightforward.

ABDUCTION ACCOUNTS AS GOOD STORIES

People rarely construct and reconstruct their autobiographical memories in an impartial manner. The accounts we give of our past experiences are often distorted such that they become accounts of what we would have *wanted* to experience. Why, though, would someone want to remember a UFO abduction? In Randles' (1988) words, "Who would wish for the trauma these involve?" (p. 200). Why would a person construct what Mack (1992, p. 12) has called the "self destroying traumatic narrative?"

Intuitively, one might guess that stories about extraterrestrial encounters that were shaped by people's needs and goals would be quite different from the prototypical modern abduction narrative. One might expect these encounters to be more fun and rewarding. Occasionally, stories about exhilarating and life-affirming UFO experiences are indeed told. Bullard (1994a), in discussing his catalogue of abduction cases, opined that

More troubling than the outright hoaxes are the personal fantasies that crop up in the sample. The skeptics have blamed abduction reports on wish fulfillment, though the wish is hard to square with its sometimes unhappy realization. In other cases the fantasy process is clearly at work. Encounters with aliens become an opportunity for romance and adventure, and the story clearly exploits these possibilities (p. 47).

In short, Bullard argued that abduction stories that are flattering to the abductee can usually be dismissed out of hand because they clearly describe the kinds of experiences people hope for and fantasize about. On the other hand, the capture and examination stories, because they do

not seem be such obvious examples of wish fulfillment, must be taken more seriously as accounts of actual events. Similarly, at a recent conference devoted to the topic of UFO abduction, the mere mention of the “contactees”—those people who claimed to have made contact with aliens in the pre-Betty and Barney Hill age—led to “a slight ripple of disdainful laughter among the audience” (Bryan, 1995, p. 14). The contactees (see Hough & Randles, 1991; Westrum, Swift, & Stupple, 1984) had experiences with extraterrestrials that were very different from those of the more recent abductees. Contactees were generally treated with great respect aboard the flying saucers; in fact, they often seemed to function as ambassadors from Earth. Far from being immobilized, tormented, and degraded, contactees’ experiences were more likely to feature such activities as tours of cities on the Moon. Ultimately, the lucky people to whom the aliens had chosen to reveal themselves would be given messages to transmit to their fellow Earthlings. These messages to humanity took the form of warnings about threats to life on our planet (e.g., the dangers of nuclear weapons). In sum, “contactees have a good time; abductees don’t” (Bryan, 1995, p. 142).

It is now generally accepted that many (if not most) contactees were hoaxers. In other words, they were quite consciously making their stories up. Their motives for doing so, however, seem quite easy to understand. Contactees wanted to feel and appear to be important and powerful, and so they told stories to portray themselves in those terms. Although the content of their stories was more than a bit outlandish, people frequently tell stories like this about themselves. Baumeister (1991b) argued that people’s efforts to find meaning in their lives can be understood in terms of four basic needs: self-worth (being important and esteemed by others), efficacy (being able to make a difference in the world and have some control over the events of one’s life), purposiveness (seeing the events of one’s life as causally linked by intentions), and justification (believing that what one does is moral and good). The four basic needs “form the core of what makes an experience meaningful to the individual” (Baumeister & Newman, 1995, p. 106). These needs also should shape the narratives that people (such as contactees) create about the events in their lives. In fact, Baumeister and Newman (1994) reviewed evidence consistent with the hypothesis that the needs for meaning guide the way people construct accounts of their experiences.

Many of the stories people tell about themselves are not only related to the four needs, but are also constructed so as to *satisfy* the needs. For example, Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993) found that when people write about having rejected a would-be lover, they go to great lengths to deny any responsibility for the unpleasant episode. They tend to insist that they never led the other person on; in fact they often portray

themselves as victims of persistent and intrusive attempts to win their affections. Self-justification is thus an important aspect of the rejectors' stories. On the other hand, would-be-lovers often supplement *their* accounts of such incidents with descriptions of relationships they later developed that were more satisfying and reciprocal. By emphasizing their desirability as romantic partners, they defuse the threat to their self-worth. Research on people's accounts of another kind of unhappy romantic relationship—reciprocal ones that later dissolved—reveals that people over-emphasize the extent to which they were the ones who initiated the breakup (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1979). Thus, these people tell stories that downplay their lack of efficacy, and reaffirm their ability to control important outcomes. Needless to say, stories often are designed to satisfy more than one need. Contactee stories, for example, clearly focus on needs for both self-worth ("I'm a special human being, contacted by the space people because of my wonderful qualities") and efficacy ("The fate of the planet is in my hands").

In light of the above, UFO abduction stories might seem especially perplexing as false autobiographical memories—much less as autobiographical memories people are motivated to construct. Abduction accounts, unlike the older contactee stories, clearly do not serve to satisfy any of the needs for meaning; in fact, they seem to describe experiences where the needs for self-worth and efficacy are almost completely nullified. But as discussed by Baumeister and Newman (1995), while the four needs for meaning define the *dimensions* that constitute the focus of story making, it is clearly not the case that the accounts people provide of their experiences always serve to enhance their self-worth, efficacy, justification, and purposiveness. Instead, motivations may have *polarizing* effects on story construction. Stories tend to describe events that are exaggerated in both the socially desirable and undesirable directions. People rarely tell stories about being average human beings with average abilities and average lives. There are few reasons to tell such stories, and few people would want to hear them. Great victories and great disasters more readily lend themselves to autobiographical narratives. Abduction stories fall into the latter category. In other words, although abduction accounts might just happen to be stories in which the teller has no dignity, has no control over events, and gets no respect, they might instead be stories that are constructed to express and communicate *precisely those details*. Abduction narratives' most striking feature is the complete lack of any of those things that typically contribute to a person's sense of self-worth and efficacy.

Experiences involving the absence of self worth and efficacy—like those involving the fulfillment of those and other needs—thus lend themselves well to personal narratives and make good stories. Of course,

this would not explain why a person might also be motivated to fabricate such a story and present it as a true autobiographical episode. But people may be drawn to constructing UFO abduction accounts because they actually represent fantasized states and experiences. This may seem like an odd suggestion, but it is a fact that some people actively fantasize about and others even enact scenes that (I will argue) bear a striking resemblance to the classic UFO abduction. These fantasies and activities are generally categorized as *masochistic* ones (see Baumeister, 1988b, 1989). In the typical masochistic fantasy, the protagonist has no dignity, no control over events, and experiences a considerable amount of physical pain. People report these fantasies, write about them, subscribe to magazines that publish them, watch movies that dramatize them, and pay people to help act them out. If strong similarities between masochistic fantasies and abduction accounts can be demonstrated, then it will be hard to argue that no one could possibly want to believe that they had been abducted by aliens.

The question posed above—"Who would wish for the trauma?"—is thus easy to answer: Plenty of people would wish for the trauma described by UFO abduction stories. In fact, many people pay a lot of money to have very similar experiences. In sum, the construction of pseudomemories involving abduction by extraterrestrials might be driven to a great extent by the same motive that draws people to masochism: the desire to escape the self (Baumeister, this issue; 1991a). To support this hypothesis, the many similarities between UFO abduction accounts and masochistic fantasies and activities will be reviewed.

ESCAPING THE SELF

People often work to enhance their self-concepts and self-images so that their most favorable characteristics will be salient, but they sometimes also desire to *escape* from self—i.e., they desire to avoid awareness of the self as a meaningful entity (see Baumeister, 1991a, for an extensive discussion and review). Why would someone want to escape awareness of the self? The answer is that the self is needy. People need to be liked, respected, and esteemed, and in control of their lives (see above discussion of the needs for meaning; Baumeister, 1991b). These needs are often fulfilled, but when they are not, the self may be perceived as a burden. For example, people may want to escape self-awareness because of things that happen that make them feel stupid, clumsy, or unlovable. Thus, events that make one feel bad by threatening one's sense of being valued by others and in control of important outcomes can lead one to seek an escape from self-awareness.

The actual experience of failure or some other calamity is not actually

necessary to trigger a desire to escape self-awareness, however. The self may become a burden simply due to the pressure of constantly having to live up to the standards imposed on it. Always having to worry about autonomy, responsibility, success and "being in control" can eventually take its toll. This kind of anxiety is most typical of people who have what we might call "overinflated selves"—i.e., people with a great deal of responsibility who are constantly called on to perform at a high level and make important decisions so as to maintain their positions. Overall, what people often try to escape from is the self that constantly has to strive to meet the standards imposed on it—to be loved, respected, goal-oriented, and in control—and the self that inevitably fails to always live up to those standards.

This, then, is why a person might want to escape the self. And the key to doing so is to actively avoid meaningful thought (see also Baumeister, 1990). If people can avoid thinking about the implications of their behavior and if they can avoid thinking about how well they are living up to the demands of the self, they can essentially escape the self. There are a number of methods for accomplishing this goal, including heavy drinking and vigorous physical exercise. But some people may turn to a particularly intense method of escape, one that makes the typical relentless pressures for achieving success, dignity, and autonomy almost totally irrelevant. That escape is masochism.

MASOCHISM

Masochism is an activity that involves (1) most obviously, having *pain* inflicted; (2) *loss of control*; and (3) *humiliation and embarrassment*. These features of masochism make it a systematic procedure for canceling out all of the most important aspects of the self (see Baumeister, 1988b, 1989, this issue). The pain involved blots out meaningful thought and makes doing any self-reflection next to impossible. Loss of control, usually accomplished with bondage, means that the self as a responsible decision maker becomes irrelevant. By totally relinquishing control, one is relieved of the need to even attempt self-regulation in the service of being an autonomous and independent person. Finally, humiliation—such as being tied naked to a table with one's legs spread in a roomful of strangers—means that the self's other major needs, esteem and dignity, are so completely out of reach that the old "self" that demanded these things basically ceases to exist. In other words, people being whipped and degraded are so far from fulfilling their usual goals of being accomplished and respectable that those goals become moot (if they are even considered at all).

The profile of the typical person attracted to these rituals is very revealing

of the meaning of masochistic activity. People with higher-paying and more prominent jobs with more responsibility—in other words, people with the most inflated and burdened selves—seem to be most drawn to it. The historical record is also supportive of an interpretation of masochism in terms of the desire to escape from self. It was only with the dawn of the early modern period (1500–1800)—when people in Western cultures were first subjected to intense pressure to be independent and autonomous individuals (see Baumeister, 1986)—that masochism became widespread. Masochism thus became common only when it became appealing as a form of escape from the pressures inherent in the modern notion of self.

Masochism is thus an effective way to escape the self. If you are tied up and treated like a slave, you are not in control; if you are forced to crawl around on all fours and bark like a dog, you have no dignity; and if at the same time you are being whipped and slapped, you will not have the capacity to care.

COMPARING UFO ABDUCTION NARRATIVES AND MASOCHISTIC FANTASIES

Quite a few people are thus drawn to masochism, and the desire to escape the self explains why this would be so. The main features of masochistic activities and fantasies are also themes that dominate UFO abduction accounts. Therefore, the need to escape the self may also provide an answer to a question often posed by people discussing the UFO abduction phenomenon: that is, why on earth (or on any other planet) would someone be motivated to confabulate such a memory? (For a more extensive review of the similarities between abduction narratives and masochistic fantasies and activities, see Newman & Baumeister, 1996a, 1996b).

Pain. Physical pain is the most well-known attribute of masochistic behavior and fantasy. Pain also figures prominently in abduction narratives. Sometimes the pain that is recalled is quite intense, and some abductees have reported feeling as if they are being ripped apart. At other times, the pain seems to be administered in doses that are easier to deal with, much as it is in ritualized masochistic activity (Baumeister, 1989). For example, one of Fiore's (1989) subjects said that the aliens hurt her because "they...poked, poked, poked, poked...and...just poked everywhere...every little rib and bone and muscle" (p. 25; see also Jacobs, 1992, p. 58). Bullard (1987a) notes that some abductees describe nothing more excruciatingly painful than just having their limbs roughly flexed. Either way, Vallee (1988, p. 240) jokes that in light of the discomfort experienced by abductees, "The UFO-nauts should go back to medical school" if they are in fact attempting to carry out physical examinations.

Loss of Control. Another theme common to both UFO abduction stories and masochism is a loss of control over one's environment and one's own behavior. In the case of masochism, loss of control is usually instantiated by bondage of some sort, using devices like ropes, handcuffs, and gags (Baumeister, 1989). Some abductees also report being restrained with physical devices such as armbands (Lorenzon & Lorenzon, 1977), rubber tubing (Mack, 1994), or straps (Lorenzon & Lorenzon, 1977; Jacobs, 1992). But many more just report that their captors in some mysterious way deprived them of all control. For example, Whitley Strieber in *Communion* said that "I felt that I was under the exact and detailed control of whomever had me. I could not move my head, or my hands, or any part of my body save for my eyes. Despite this, I was not tied" (p. 15). These comments are similar to those of another abductee who reported that "A force...it wouldn't quit holding me. It wouldn't let me move...I'm just stuck there...just an invisible force" (Lorenzon & Lorenzon, 1977, p. 56). Some observers have said that a sense of being externally controlled is the most common feature of UFO abduction reports (Hopkins, 1987).

Over and above the actual restraints, when abductees tell their stories they have a habit of talking in a more abstract way about personal control and (especially) their inability to exercise it. In the words of one abductee, the aliens had "to show me that they had control. I must never doubt that they have control over me or anyone else" (Steiger, 1988, p. 93). And as noted by Newman and Baumeister (1996b), in ten of the thirteen cases presented by Mack (1994), surrendering and losing control is explicitly mentioned as either a central feature of the abduction episode or as an important lesson taught by the experience. Mack himself speculates that the point of abductees' loss of control is "to bring about a kind of ego death" (1994, p. 399).

Given the events contained in the classic abduction episode, people experiencing them would obviously lack control, whether they explicitly mentioned this or not. Clearly, a person who is paralyzed, pinned to a table, and being manhandled is not the one with the power to decide what will happen next. As noted by Newman and Baumeister (1996a), however, it is this very fact that makes the frequent discussion of control a telling feature of the abduction phenomenon.

Students of verbal communication (e.g., Grice, 1975; Higgins, 1981) have often noted that one of the most basic rules is the "maxim of quantity." In other words, when speaking to others, people should not only say enough so that they can be understood, but they should also avoid filling their stories and other verbalizations with superfluous and gratuitous information. For example, abductees who claim they were snatched from their automobiles and brought onto a spaceship do not repeatedly and pointlessly exclaim that they were no longer in their cars.

On the other hand, abductees who are paralyzed, transported onto a spaceship, stripped naked, and subjected to various indignities, *do* persist in dwelling on what they perceived to be a total lack of control and volition. It is unlikely that abductees are people who are ignorant of the basic rules of communication. Instead, they might simply be telling us what the abduction story means to them.

Humiliation. Humiliation—especially sexual humiliation—is also central to masochism (Baumeister, 1989). The same is true for the experiences described by UFO abductees. Often, this involves anal humiliation, in which large objects are inserted into the rectums of abductees (see Fiore, 1989; Jacobs, 1992; Mack, 1994; and Strieber, 1987). Male abductees also describe vacuum-like devices being attached to their genitals (see Hopkins, 1987; Jacobs, 1992). In at least one case, a male abductee claimed that aliens dressed him up in a diaper (Bullard, 1987b). This is significant in that being treated like a baby is a very popular form of masochistic activity (Baumeister, 1989).

Sexual Activity. Newman and Baumeister (1996b) noted that until the late 1980s, despite the fact that abduction accounts were rife with sexual humiliation, actual sexual activity such as intercourse was extremely rare. Some investigators (e.g., Jacobs, 1992) seemed to find more evidence of explicit sexual activity, but it was notable mostly by its absence in Bullard's (1987b) extensive catalogue of abduction cases. In recent years, however, sex seems to have become a more frequent aspect of the abduction narrative (see Bryan, 1995; Pritchard et al., 1994). Sometimes this takes the form of actual sexual intercourse between the abductee and extraterrestrial beings (or alien-human hybrids); at other times the aliens are said to stage sex acts involving the human beings they have abducted. Mack (1994), for example, talked about how the aliens "delight in watching humans in all sorts of acts of love, which they may even stage as they stand watching and chattering as the abductees perform them" (p. 416). Also reported are various sperm extraction and collection procedures (which may or may not involve ejaculation and orgasm).

The heavy concentration of sexual activity in the case files of a small handful of investigators led Newman and Baumeister (1996b) to attribute such reports to those investigators' expectations. In other words, subtle (or not so subtle) pressure to recall sexual acts may have been brought to bear on the abductees with whom they worked. The wide exposure received by these more shocking and provocative abduction stories, however, has led sexual activity to be incorporated into the basic abduction script shared by members of our culture. Along with that, sex has become a more common part of the abduction narrative.

At this point, then, sexual contact with the aliens most likely works its way into abduction accounts by means of the schema-driven "filling-in"

processes mentioned above. In addition, explicit sexual activity makes sense as a component of a script that is essentially a masochistic one. Masochism is primarily a sexual activity; in particular, masochistic practices help to undermine the self-awareness that can interfere with sexual performance and pleasure (Baumeister, 1988b; Masters & Johnson, 1970). In fact, actual intercourse was mentioned in close to half of the stories included in the letters written by masochists and analyzed by Baumeister (1988a). In sum, the increasing prominence of the sexual aspects of the abduction narrative arguably increases the similarity between masochism and UFO abduction.

Who Are the Abductees? Readers of this article may choose to distance themselves from the material it covers by comforting themselves with the belief that only ignorant or uneducated people could come to believe that aliens abducted them. The evidence is not consistent with that belief; in fact, the evidence is more consistent with the conclusion that abductees are found in disproportionate numbers in the *higher* socioeconomic classes (see Newman & Baumeister, 1996b). In other words, abductees are likely to belong to the segment of the population where selves are "inflated" and the burdens of power, responsibility, and decision-making are greatest. Masochists have a similar demographic profile (Baumeister, 1988b).

The international distribution of abductees provides another point of convergence between abduction accounts and masochistic fantasies. Abduction seems to be mostly an American and British phenomenon. Randles concluded that the evidence is consistent with the possibility that "abduction is a product of the mind of Western white people." Either that, she says, or "some intelligence behind the abductions *prefers to contact* such people" (1988, p. 158). In 1987, Bullard found that "Asia and most of Africa remain blanks on the abduction map" (1987a, p. 4). More recently, in summarizing his updated collection of abduction cases, he noted that "The geographical pattern of the first catalogue repeats itself with the second, with 276 cases from the United States and 24 from Canada, so two-thirds of the reports come from North America. The English-speaking world accounts for much of the remainder..." (1994a, p. 45, see Mack, 1994; and Rimmer, 1984, for similar conclusions). Abductions, therefore, seem to be reported primarily in Westernized individualistic societies where the emphasis on individuality and autonomy is greatest (Triandis, 1995). And according to Baumeister (1989), the same is true of masochism. This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that UFO abduction narratives, like masochistic fantasies and activities, express escape from self themes. (see Newman & Baumeister, 1996a, for further discussion of this issue).

Masochism and UFO Abduction: Parallel Sex Differences. There are both

male and female masochists, but Baumeister (1988a) found that the nature of their fantasies differ. A content-analysis of a large set of letters to publications read by masochists revealed a number of significant sex differences. Some of these differences involved dimensions irrelevant to the abduction experience (e.g., women were more likely to describe the pain inflicted upon them as punishment administered by a partner in an ongoing relationship). But Baumeister also found that women were more likely to explicitly mention pain or physical discomfort in their letters and more frequently described humiliation involving display.⁴ In addition, male descriptions of masochistic activities contained more oral humiliations (such as being required to kiss the feet or anus of one's tormentor) than did the female masochists' descriptions.

If the construction of abduction accounts serves the same psychological function as do masochistic fantasies, then sex differences in the content of abduction stories should be similar to the differences revealed by Baumeister's (1988a) analysis. Indeed, Newman and Baumeister (1996b) analyzed the content of eighty-four abduction reports that included a typical alien "physical examination" (found in Bullard's [1987b] catalogue of abduction cases), and found that (1) only 50% of the males' stories involved display (e.g., being stretched out on a table), but the proportion for females approached 80% (a statistically significant difference); (2) women were somewhat more likely to mention pain than were men; and (3) although only seven cases included incidents that could be construed as unpleasant oral experiences (e.g., having an instrument placed in one's mouth), six of the seven were reported by male abductees. In sum, sex differences in some of the details of masochistic fantasies were also found in descriptions of abductions. This could suggest that the aliens just use different procedures with their male and female captives. Alternatively, it could be a reflection of the common intrapsychic forces leading to both masochism and the confabulation of UFO abduction memories.

A Preoccupation with the Independent Self. The many similarities between masochistic fantasies and UFO abduction memories thus support the hypothesis that the two spring from a similar motive: the desire to escape the self and its burdens. The meaning of the abduction narrative is also reflected in a marked concern with the whole idea of independence and individuality. Abductees often dwell on the idea that their alien captors

4. To illustrate a display fantasy, Reik (1941/1957, p. 236), described a young girl who "derives her pleasure mainly from the idea that she is lying naked and at full length on a long table...with her legs spread wide so that her vagina is distinctly visible. A man, whose face is only dimly distinguishable, stands at her feet and scrutinizes her genitals" (Also cited in Baumeister, 1989, and Newman & Baumeister, 1996b).

seem not to function as autonomous entities. We read that “there is very little sense of self associated with individual members of their species...They are not afraid of man’s savagery or his greed, but of his capacity for independent action” (Strieber, 1987, pp. 142, 231). Another abductee quoted by Strieber (1987, p. 265) complained that “we feel that when we were abducted, that individual freedom has been taken away, and they don’t understand that. They don’t really understand our sense of freedom and being allowed our own will.” And yet another was driven to comment about how “they don’t seem to have any understanding of the fact that we have a sense of free will here on this planet and that we think and act as individuals” (Steiger, 1988, p. 14). Abductees’ preoccupations with the perils associated with having to maintain independent and unique selves are thus projected onto the abductors themselves.

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF SKEPTICISM

I have argued in the previous sections that:

1. There is no physical evidence to support what has been called the “extraterrestrial hypothesis”—that is, it is difficult to accept the claim that aliens are currently visiting our planet and abducting human beings;
2. People have been found to confabulate memories of all sorts;
3. The circumstances in which people “recover” abduction memories are often circumstances that are believed to promote the creation of pseudomemories;
4. UFO abduction accounts, outlandish as they might seem at first, actually share many of the themes found in common masochistic fantasies.

In sum, I have argued that UFO abduction accounts can be plausibly viewed as false memories.

Needless to say, false memories do not *feel* false to the people who report them. Therefore, the suggestion that people who remember being victimized in some way may not actually have experienced that victimization is often met with resistance and rage. Questioning memories of abuse or abduction is seen by some people as a means of re-victimizing the victims, and a contribution to what DePrince and Quirk (1995) have called the institutionalization of disbelief and denial.

A number of people who claim to have recovered repressed memories, along with the therapists who work with them, now have spoken out forcefully against what they call the “backlash”—i.e., the increasing

emphasis on the dangers of memory confabulation. A notable example is a recent article by Blume (1995), a prominent recovered memory therapist. Blume would only reluctantly admit in a footnote that some of the therapists, researchers, and journalists who have publicly expressed their concerns about the possible widespread creation of false memories "are probably decent people" (p. 131). Her lack of generosity is understandable, given what she perceives to be the true agenda of some of the most prominent "backlashers": the celebration and promotion of pedophilia. Furthermore, she compares those sounding the alarm about memory confabulation to holocaust deniers. Memory recovery therapists, on the other hand, are in her eyes akin to the Chinese students who faced down tyranny in Tiananmen Square.

The level of invective in the literature on UFO abduction does not seem to have reached such levels. Nonetheless, one does not have to look far to find a great deal of resentment towards "the skeptics" (see Pritchard et al., 1994). Some abductees and their advocates seem to feel that those researchers who have doubts about the extraterrestrial hypothesis are stubbornly jumping through hoops to avoid the most parsimonious explanation for the abduction phenomenon: that is, that people remember these events because they indeed occurred.

Because accepting the claim that extraterrestrials are playing active roles in our lives would arguably require a basic paradigm shift in the physical and psychological sciences (see Newman & Baumeister, 1996a), the extraterrestrial hypothesis hardly provides the most parsimonious explanation for the UFO abduction phenomenon. Hence, skepticism about the reality of reported UFO abductions does not seem to be unreasonable. In addition to this more general skepticism, more skepticism in individual abduction cases might be necessary as well. For example, Mack (1994) describes the experiences of a female abductee, who when giving her case history, explains why she divorced her first husband. As Mack reports, she "said that her ex-husband played 'sexual games' with the children involving oral sex but not penetration" (p. 112). The woman goes on to relate her abduction experiences, and she and Mack eventually conclude that her children also "appear to be involved in the abduction phenomenon" (p. 114). The first (and presumably most important) piece of evidence presented in support of this conclusion is the following: "From the time Sally [her daughter], who was born in 1981, was six she has had severe nightmares and will scream out 'Don't touch me. Leave me alone'" These nightmares seem to have started shortly after the couple split up (the divorce took place in 1986). Alien intervention would not seem to be the most parsimonious explanation for the girl's nightmares and other problems.

Similarly, Hopkins (1987) described in great detail a case that he considered at the time to be "the most important" one ever (p. 221). A

woman who suspected that she had been abducted by aliens told him that she had become pregnant “early in 1978,” but that at some point in March she “awoke with what seemed to be a normal menstrual flow” (p. 79). The pregnancy had thus been mysteriously terminated. As Klass (1988) notes, an event like this is by no means very common, but there are a number of rather prosaic medical explanations. The woman, however, subsequently described another encounter with aliens (which she initially labeled as a “dream”), during which she was presented with an odd looking female baby that she was told was her own. Another dream followed in which she saw her “daughter” again, along with another child. She was told that the children were both hers, and were “but two of nine” (p. 260). Hopkins concluded that the woman was involved in an alien breeding program. In fact, some people have subsequently suggested that the abduction phenomenon in general is a product of an extraterrestrial effort to produce alien-human hybrids (see Jacobs, 1992).

To reiterate: A woman was upset because her pregnancy had lasted only about *two* months, not the expected *nine*. She did not have the child she hoped for. Subsequently, though, the child appeared in what she tentatively called a dream. In fact, she saw more than one child, but only *two* of *nine*. It would not be difficult to argue that this unfortunate woman’s nightmares could be explained without invoking an alien breeding program.

The latter case has been discussed at length because it was indeed significant. Before Hopkins’ book was published, reports of “baby presentation” scenes like the one he described were few in number or even nonexistent. Bullard (1994c) notes that there were “certainly no clear antecedents” for this kind of thing in the previous literature. Unfortunately, Bullard’s (1994b) data now indicate (and a cursory examination of the literature will confirm) that baby presentation has become a fairly common feature of abduction narratives. This case thus illustrates that while there may be costs associated with skepticism about recovered memories, there are obviously costs associated with a lack of skepticism as well.

Those costs may not always be recognized. A number of psychotherapists have now established themselves as abduction specialists (see Clamar, 1988; Sprinkle, 1988). Wilson (1990), for example, argues that abductees are essentially suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, just like victims of other brutal experiences, such as rape or warfare. Therefore, he claims, they should be treated like other clients meeting the relevant diagnostic criteria. Clearly, abductees—who often seek out help because of persistent feelings of anxiety and unhappiness—should be treated with care and compassion. It is not so clear, however, that confirming a person’s belief that he or she will forever be prone to

abduction, torture, humiliation, rape, and fetus removal by brutal alien beings is the first step on the path to recovery.

CONCLUSION

In sum, while there is little evidence that thousands of people in the United States and elsewhere are being abducted by extraterrestrials, the stories abductees are telling us are maybe not so incomprehensible after all. They share many of the features of masochistic activities and fantasies. If UFO abduction accounts are not genuine autobiographical memories, we can maybe understand them as fantasies that, like masochistic ones, derive from the motivation to escape the self.

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