

TOLERANCE OF AMBIGUITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF UFOS¹

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Summary.—As some percipients of UFOs may misinterpret ambiguous yet conventional aerial phenomena, this research tested the hypothesis that percipients of UFOs would score significantly lower on tolerance of ambiguity than nonpercipients. 39 percipients and 43 nonpercipients completed a measure of tolerance of ambiguity and the findings supported the hypothesis. Confounding factors such as respondents' age and sex could not reasonably account for this finding. Results complement conventional explanations for some UFO sightings.

In many sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) the percipient has unknowingly perceived a known natural object such as the Moon or Venus (3, 6) or perhaps more often luminous aerial phenomena associated with increases in geomagnetic activity (see e.g., 8, 10). Evans (1) suggested that the interpretation of such natural phenomena as extraterrestrial craft results from psychological influences. For example, Keinan (4) reported that a low tolerance of ambiguity is associated with enhanced magical thinking, which includes a belief in UFOs (2). Consequently, percipients of UFO phenomena, i.e., those who interpret ambiguous aerial phenomena as extraterrestrial, might be expected to score significantly lower on tolerance of ambiguity than nonpercipients.

Two hundred copies of the Rydell-Rosen Ambiguity Tolerance Scale (5, p. 793) were distributed to local colleges and social service agencies. Eighty-two questionnaires were returned and reflect the responses of 40 men and 42 women. Since the participants were self-selected, the sample may be biased with an unusually high proportion of UFO percipients. As the present research was not concerned with the details of their experiences, participants simply indicated at the top of the questionnaire if they had ever witnessed a UFO. Twenty men and 19 women were self-identified as percipients of UFO phenomena (M age = 31.1, SD = 13.7, range 21–60 yr.), whereas 20 men and 23 women were self-identified as nonpercipients (M age = 30.5, SD = 11.3, range 21–50 yr.).

In support of the hypothesis, the 39 UFO percipients (M = 11.4, SD = 2.3, SE = .50) scored significantly ($F_{1,80} = 5.70$, $p < .02$) lower on tolerance of ambiguity than nonpercipients (M = 12.8, SD = 2.3, SE = .35). This finding cannot be reasonably attributed to the confounding factors of respondents'

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age or sex. Scores on tolerance of ambiguity did not correlate with age ($r = .05$, ns). Further, an analysis of variance of the means on tolerance of ambiguity ($F_{1,80} = .09$, $p < 1.0$) indicated that the 42 women ($M = 12.2$, $SD = 3.0$, $SE = .44$) scored comparably to the 40 men ($M = 12.0$, $SD = 2.6$, $SE = .43$).

The results supported the hypothesis and complement the explanations for UFOs cited above, but the author does not suggest that all sightings can be accounted for by a low tolerance of ambiguity. Additional personality and neuroscientific factors may be involved, especially with respect to more complex UFO-related issues, such as "abduction" (7) and "missing embryo" (9) reports.

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