

It Came From Outer Space

NANCY, AN ATTORNEY ON THE WEST COAST OF THE U.S., remembered details of the incident only four months ago, after she began hypnotherapy sessions. Now, she recalls how one spring night in 1989 she awoke to see a strange craft outside her window. She was taken into the vehicle and examined by strange beings. A tube was inserted into her to extract an ovum. She breaks down as she describes the abduction. "People say 'How do you know?' You don't know. You're never sure what happened."

As thousands of therapy patients in America are "discovering" repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, a smaller number are adding a new twist: they are recalling abductions by aliens. Under hypnosis, Los Angeles film producer Michael Bershada recalled his car being pulled to the side of the road by a bright object. "I got out of the car and saw five guys under 4 ft. [1.2 m] tall. They led me inside the craft." A leader examined him, opening up his back to poke around his vertebra. The extraterrestrials also extracted sperm. "I had a lot of shame," says Bershada. "It was humiliating and degrading."

A painful sincerity unites those who have dredged up memories of UFO abductions. Many suffer from insomnia and shy away from telling anyone what they believe may have happened for fear of being perceived as crazy. "Virtually all abductees are opposed to the idea that these

things really happen," explains Budd Hopkins, author of two books about contact with aliens. "They don't want these things to be real. There is no pleasure in this experience."

Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, who won a Pulitzer in 1977 for his psychological study of Lawrence of Arabia, takes the stories literally. "I encountered something here very early on, which I saw did not fit anything I had ever come across in 40 years of psychiatry." He has treated more than 70 abductees, whom he calls "experiencers."

A few researchers argue that alien abductions may be disguised memories of sexual abuse. Others assert that abduction memories may also be unwittingly planted by over-zealous therapists. "I believe these victims believe it," says Ray Hyman, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. "People are trying to please the hypnotist. The therapist and patient collaborate with each other to produce the story." Hypnosis can be extremely effective in eliciting fantasies that therapists can use in treating patients. The technique, however, can also create false memories. Says Ray William London,

president of the American Boards of Clinical Hypnosis: "It isn't a way of validating an abduction or anything else."

William Cone, a psychologist in Newport Beach, California, who specializes in treating alleged abductees, finds similarities between some of his patients and people who recover memories of satanic ritual abuse. Both have "organizing personalities"—a loose sense of self given to paranormal experiences like seeing ghosts. Many are also highly suggestible. "They are highly functioning, intelligent people and truly believe that this happened," says Cone. "I try not to believe or disbelieve. I just sit and listen and try to help."

—By Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles

