

Earth moves in an extra-terrestrial way

FROM CHARLES BREMNER IN NEW YORK

When it comes to studying space, American universities have notched up a fine record, but eyebrows are being raised over the latest enthusiasm of a handful of academics: the abduction of earthlings by extra-terrestrial aliens.

At issue is the question whether a Harvard psychiatrist and professors from Philadelphia and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have taken leave of their ivory towers in giving credence to the belief, shared by thousands of Americans, that flying saucers have visited their suburbs and beamed them on board, often for some intergalactic hanky-panky.

John Mack, of Harvard Medical School, David Jacobs, a historian from Temple University, and David Pritchard, a physicist at MIT, are the most prominent among a group which thinks there must be more than fantasy behind the extraordinarily similar accounts of alien kidnapping given by citizens from all backgrounds, races and professions. The most celebrated report came from Michael Shea, a government lawyer in Washington. According to reputable surveys, about one in every 50 Americans thinks they have received the attentions of visiting aliens.

By curious coincidence, the aliens are usually described as diminutive, big-headed, dish-eyed, smooth-skinned creatures who arrive in beams of intense light. But going beyond this stereotype, the accounts usually feature some form of physical examination in a cosmic operating theatre. This often involves sexual manipulation, with women saying

they had been impregnated and men saying their semen had been extracted.

Dr Mack, who featured last weekend in fictional form in a CBS television drama, is organising an abduction conference in Massachusetts next month. Mr Jacobs, who teaches a university course called "UFOs in US Society", has been promoting on TV his book *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions*. He believes the aliens are engaged in "a programme of systematic exploitation of one species over another, in which people are mined — or farmed, if you will — over and over and over again, over the course of their lives, from infancy to adulthood."

Dr Mack, who has helped 40 patients overcome abduction trauma, says he retains an open mind and cannot dismiss the phenomenon. "I don't have an explanation. But I know they've undergone a powerful sense of being intruded upon and traumatised," he said recently. Mr Pritchard said in *The Wall Street Journal* last week that the CBS mini-series could prompt a mass recall of alien experience. "I think it's a disaster in the making," he said.

Critics, who come from the "orthodox" wing of the UFO fraternity as well as the medical profession, say there are simple explanations. All the "abducted" recall the details of their experiences under hypnosis. They are probably mingling personal trauma, usually abuse during childhood, with Hollywood-born fantasies suggested by their questioner.