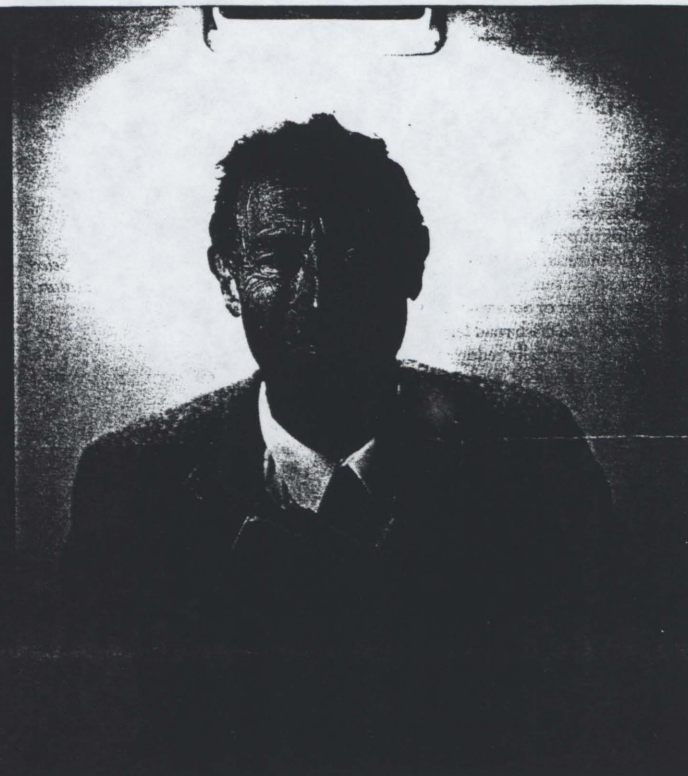


BEHAVIOR

THE MAN FROM OUTER SPACE

Harvard psychiatrist John Mack claims that tales of UFO abductions are real. But experts and former patients say his research is shoddy.



By JAMES WILLWERTH BOSTON

THE YOUNG MAN HAD SLOWLY BECOME aware of his enigmatic memories, of otherworldly beings lurking in his life, of "strange coincidences" and time out of joint. What was happening? Who could tell him? Casting about for help, says the boyish Pennsylvania health-care worker, "I saw this article in the newspaper about Dr. Mack. And I thought if you can't trust a Harvard professor, who can you trust?"

John Mack is more than a Harvard professor; he is a respected author (his book on T.E. Lawrence, *A Prince of Our Disorder*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1977), a psychiatrist who helped found the clinical psychiatry department at Cambridge Hospital and a noted scientific advocate of environmental and antiwar causes. Under Mack's hypnotic guidance, the young man "remembered" being abducted repeatedly by aliens, taken to a spaceship and having a probe inserted in his anus. He also recalled past lives, including one as a young Indian warrior called Panther-by-the-Creek, who died in battle. Even more

astonishing, Mack believed every word.

The story of "Dave Reynolds" is one of 13 recounted by Mack in his new book *Abduction* (Scribners), the result of his study of scores of "experiencers," people who he believes have come in contact with extraterrestrial visitors. The striking similarity of their memories and Mack's academic reputation have led UFO believers to proclaim *Abduction* as the most important step yet in scientifically validating abduction experiences. A 1991 Roper poll found that 4 million people have had at least some abduction-related experiences, such as seeing unusual lights or missing time. "Until John came along, there wasn't enough credibility for this subject to support a methodological investigation," says Caroline McLeod, Mack's research chief. "Until now, if you decided to research alien abductions, you risked being pigeonholed as a lunatic."

Psychologists and ethicists do not question Mack's sanity so much as his motives and methodology. They charge that he is misusing the techniques of hypnosis, trying to shape the "memories" of his subjects to suit his vision of an intergalactic future, and very possibly endangering the emo-

tional health of his patients in the process.

"If this were just an example of some zany new outer limit of how foolish psychology and psychiatry can be in the wrong hands, we'd look at it, roll our eyes and walk away," says University of California, Berkeley, psychologist Richard Ofshe. "But the use of his techniques in counseling is substantially harming lots of people."

The scientific skepticism is bolstered by some unusual firsthand evidence. One of Mack's "experiencers" has revealed to TIME that she was actually an undercover debunker who worked her way into Mack's confidence and rose high in the ranks of his subjects. She found that Mack's work was riddled with scientific irregularities; it lacked a formal research protocol as well as legally required consent forms that advise research subjects of potential risks. She also discovered that Mack billed the insurance companies of at least some patient-subjects for what he described as therapy sessions.

Mack says he expected the disbelief that has greeted the bizarre tales recounted in his book. "This isn't supposed to be," he explained to TIME. "You aren't supposed to have little guys with big black

eyes taking men, women and children against their wills on beams of light through walls and windows into strange craft and have this going on all over the country." But after hearing dozens of such stories, Mack concluded that the abductions were real. Moreover, he discerned a motive behind them: the abductors, it seems, were implanting mind-to-mind messages urging better care of the planet. The aliens' apparent objective was an intergalactic breeding program combined with a brotherly warning of impending doom if the earth doesn't change its warlike and ecologically wasteful ways.

Mack's studies are largely funded by a tax-exempt, nonprofit research organization that he founded in 1983, now called the Center for Psychology and Social Change. With headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the center was started as an attempt to study the nuclear arms race in psychological terms. After the cold war ended, the organization started raising money for scholars who want to combine psychology with such topics as ecology and ethnic conflicts. Explains the center's executive director, Vivienne Simon: "One of our main goals is to challenge current scientific method, which is to deny all things you cannot reduce to statistics."

Donna Bassett's story seemed to fit right in with that goal. Bassett, 37, then a Boston-based writer and researcher, became interested in Mack's studies after hearing complaints that he was "strip mining" the stories of emotionally distraught people and failing to help them with follow-up therapy. After reading stacks of books and articles on UFO abductions, Bassett made up an elaborate story of otherworldly encounters involving her family, going back to the 11th century. Her great-grandmother, she said, saw "little people," whom she called angels from God. Bassett herself saw "balls of light" around her house at age five. She also said that as a child she had a space-alien friend named Jane, who healed her hands after a neighbor stuck them in boiling fudge to punish her for snooping.

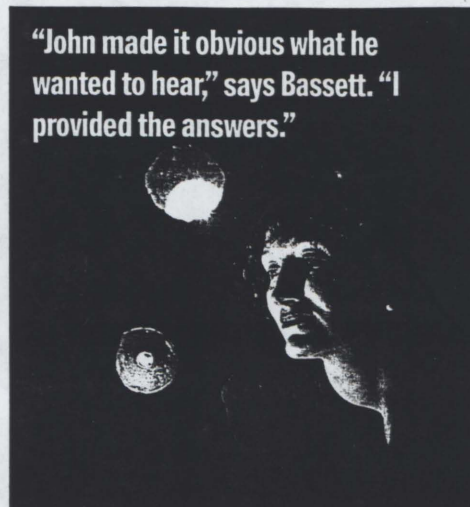
Bassett participated in three hypnotic-regression sessions (she says she used method-acting techniques to fake her way through them) and eventually served as treasurer of an abductee support group that Mack organized and ran. "I've never seen a UFO in my life," Bassett says, "and I certainly haven't been inside one."

Bassett, who made extensive tapes and notes of her life in the UFO cult, says Mack provided her with UFO literature to read

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prior to her sessions—a practice that medical hypnotists say will almost surely influence hypnotic revelations. During the sessions, which Mack held in a darkened bedroom in his house rather than in a neutral office, he asked leading questions that reflected his biases. "John made it obvious what he wanted to hear," says Bassett. "I provided the answers." Among other recollections, she told of an encounter with John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev on board a spaceship during the Cuban missile crisis. Bassett said Khrushchev was cry-

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THE INTERLOPER: Bassett posed as an abductee, fooling Mack

ing and that "I sat in his lap, and I put my arms around his neck, and I told him it would be O.K." Hearing her tale, Mack became so excited that he leaned on the bed too heavily, and it collapsed.

Later, at a support-group session, Bassett confronted Mack about mixing research and therapy. According to Bassett, Mack billed insurance companies for some support-group sessions, claiming they were "therapeutic" rather than "research." Yet some members of the support group complained about the lack of therapy following their traumatic hypnosis sessions. "That I can't do everything that each person needs does not mean that what I'm doing is not therapeutic," Mack said. "There are too many of you, and I'm also doing research."

Bassett's account is supported by others who had close encounters with Mack. "He had a hidden agenda," says Dave Duclos, who left the experiment when he became disenchanted. "He was against anybody who said anything negative about the aliens. Once he said to me, 'If you think the aliens are bad, Mr. Duclos, keep thinking about it until you realize they are good.'"

But what of the surprising consistency of the stories Mack elicited? "Dr. Mack is ignoring the high level of suggestion and imagery that surrounds the way in which he deals with these people," says Fred Frankel, 70, a Harvard Medical School professor and psychiatrist in chief at Boston's Beth Israel hospital. "Hypnosis helps you regain memories that you would not have otherwise recalled... But some will be true, and some will be false. The expectation of the hypnotist and the expectation of the person who is going to be hypnotized can influence the result."

To many experts, the abduction scenarios bear a striking resemblance to stories of satanic rituals and child abuse—stories that can be shaped by all sorts of outside influences, from movies and TV shows to the suggestive questioning of a therapist. Says Ofshe, who is an expert in hypnosis: "If you convince someone they've been brutalized and raped, and you encourage them to fully experience the emotions appropriate for this event—and the event never happened—you've led them through an experience of pain that is utterly gratuitous."

Confronted by TIME with the news that Bassett had faked her abduction experience, Mack declined to discuss her case, though he hinted that he had doubts about her reliability. (Hers is not among the 13 case histories recounted in his book, but tapes of her sessions leave little doubt that Mack took her seriously.) In general, he insists, there is no evidence that the core memories he elicited are distorted. "When [the subjects] talk about this—and other people in the room with me have witnessed this, including several psychiatrists—the experience is that of a person who has been through something deeply disturbing." While acknowledging that he is not "an expert on hypnosis," Mack scoffs at the debunkers. "The attacks on hypnosis didn't begin until it began to reveal information that the culture didn't want to hear."

Mack's view of the UFO phenomenon reflects a larger philosophical stance that rejects "rational" scientific explanations and embraces a hazier New Age reality. "I don't know why there's such a zeal to find a conventional physical explanation," he says. "I don't know why people have such trouble simply accepting the fact that something unusual is going on here... We have lost the faculties to know other realities that other cultures still can know. The world no longer has spirit, has soul, is sacred. We've lost all that ability to know a world beyond the physical... I am a bridge between those two worlds."