

More and more people claim to have been abducted in spaceships. What lies behind it?

Readers of this paper probably do not routinely read *The People*. So they would have missed an extraordinary recent story about seven people who claimed to have been abducted from their homes by aliens, taken on board spaceships, and then subjected to a series of humiliating sexual assaults.

These stories are new to this country, but are common in the United States. According to journalist Jim Schnabel, whose fascinating book *Dark White: Aliens, Abductions and the UFO Obsession* has just been published here by Harnish Hamilton, the first case surfaced in the 1960s. Since then the topic has become a craze, with numerous journals and conventions devoted to these UFO abductions, as well as support groups for the alleged victims, known as UFO abductees.

The stories are so bizarre that the instinctive reaction is to dismiss them as the delusions of individuals suffering from severe mental illness. However, the "victims" are not usually mentally ill in the sense of suffering from a psychotic illness, nor are they drug or alcohol abusers. A recent paper in the prestigious *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* describes them as "solid representatives of the American middle class".

Most of those claiming to have been abducted by aliens say the experience began during sleep, and was associated with extreme emotional states. The victim may recall vivid, unexpected and frightening internal sensations, such as terror, visual hallucinations, choking sensations and other abnormal sensations affecting many parts of the body.

Neuropsychologists have suggested that their experiences may be related to brief episodes of epileptic activity in the temporal lobe of the

Sexual fantasy and science fiction

brain, also implicated in the genesis of complex hallucinations such as religious visions. Others have been linked to sleep-related disturbances such as sleep paralysis. This not uncommon phenomenon occurs in people either when going to sleep or on waking, and causes muscle paralysis and frightening sensations such as choking.

These mechanisms may be sufficient to account for the abnormal sensations that herald a UFO experience, but do not account for the fully formed stories of being transported to alien spacecraft. To understand those one needs to consider the victim's background and pre-existing beliefs.

He or she probably also suffers from what are known as dissociative disorders, in which the normal integration of thought, feelings and experience into memory and consciousness is interrupted. A person's ability to dissociate is determined by



many things — childhood abuse and trauma are current focuses of attention. The result may be an extreme example of something we all possess — the capacity for intense self-absorption, during which we lose track of time. Those who experience dissociative phenomena are often highly suggestible. Many so-called abductees only piece together that they have been kidnapped by aliens some time after the abnormal experience, often with the "help" of ill-advised hypnotic regression. Thus the UFO story may be an attempt to provide an explanation for the gaps in memory that result from dissociation.

One must also consider the role of fantasy. Some accounts may be vivid dreams, in which fantasy and reality are easily confused. Others are related to sexual fantasy. Most of the stories of abductees were of a disturbing sexual nature involving abuse or humiliation. One related in *The People* included medical evidence of real rape. Others describe medical

experimentation including being operated on by aliens who frequently remove eggs from the subject's womb or inseminate them.

The final thread is found in the background beliefs and culture of the subject. The study carried in the current *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* reported that those with the most intense UFO experiences shared a similar range of pre-existing beliefs. Those ranged from the only mildly unusual, such as telepathy or astrology, to the more bizarre, such as channelling, or spontaneous combustion. Also shared was a conspiratorial view of the world. Those active in the UFO movement overlap with those who spend their time deriving elaborate conspiracy theories of the Kennedy assassination.

All these otherwise incomprehensible stories can be understood only by bringing together the sufferers' internal and external worlds. People who become convinced that they have been abducted by aliens are those who already believe in the paranormal in general and UFOs/aliens in particular. They then experience vivid, terrifying experiences such as occur in sleep and dreams. Perhaps because of previous trauma, they also have the capacity for intense introspection, which may lead to gaps in their memories. These sensory experiences and subsequent memory gaps are then elaborated, sometimes under hypnosis. The consequence is the mixture of sexual fantasy and science fiction that constitutes their final belief.

DR SIMON WESSELY

• The author is senior lecturer in psychological medicine at the Maudsley Hospital.