

# The Psychological Pay Dirt of Space Alien Abduction Memories

2557 p. 841

John E. Mack

**Abduction: Human Encounters  
With Aliens**

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Strange things are happening. Space aliens are coming to Earth and abducting children and adults from their beds, mainly for the purpose of studying them, almost as if they were amoebas in a petri dish. The aliens bring with them a warning to humanity, delivered through the abductees, that we people of earth are on a collision course with destruction, unless we change our ways.

Psychiatrist John E. Mack tells the stories of 13 of his clients, whose presenting problems include, among other things, having been abducted by space aliens. The stories are remarkably similar: Under hypnosis, the client tells a bone-chilling story in which he or she is not only abducted, but sexually probed while restrained. The stories are the terrifying tales of our worst nightmares. The question is whether they are simply that—our worst nightmares—or what Mack and others believe to be real events.

We certainly are in no position to argue the existence of space aliens. In fact, let's concede the point that space aliens exist, they visit our planet, they abduct humans, extract semen from humans, stick long probing objects into the vaginas of humans, and mate with humans. The point we will not concede is that the people who might experience these events seem to have repressed them until the memories were recovered sometimes decades later. The question now is not about the existence or behavior of space aliens, but rather about something much closer to home: the workings of the mind, and specifically, the workings of human memory.

Mack's clients vary considerably in their initial visits to Mack. Their memories range from vague feelings ("I might have had that too" after a lecture on abductions, p. 293) and nightmares to well-articulated stories of alien encounters. What does not vary is that they are quite sure they have had an encounter with aliens and they know that Mack is the person to see about such encounters. In the course of therapy, each client will undergo hypnotic regression, usually on several occasions. Each regression produces a more dramatic story than the one before it until finally the pivotal memory of a frightening abduction is recovered in a crescendo of emotion.

The report of the client is vivid and detailed as if he or she were reliving the event moment-by-moment, as if it were being played back like a video tape. The assumption buried in these stories is that memories are stored with a faithful obedience to reality, and that we can recover

such memories with the same faithful obedience. Decades of memory research have shown that this conception of memory storage and retrieval is just plain wrong.

#### Repressed memories and hypnosis

The abduction tales are strikingly similar to the thousands of cases of ostensibly repressed and recovered memories of child sexual abuse, satanic ritual abuse, and past lives. In every case described in *Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens*, the memories of the abductions are repressed and recovered only in the course of several episodes of hypnotic regression. Mack presents each episode without so much as a blink of skepticism. No mention is made of the precarious status of repression as a psychological construct (Loftus, 1993; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994; Ofshe & Watters, 1994; Pendergrast, 1994; Wright, 1994; Yapko, 1994).

Psychologists have also long been concerned about the accuracy of memories recalled under hypnosis, and there is a large body of evidence that shows that hypnotically induced recall may be more vivid and more detailed, but not necessarily more accurate. In fact, memory can be extremely pliable under hypnosis, and quite capable of invention. Moreover, memories invented in the course of hypnosis can feel so real to the person creating them, that the hypnotically induced memory may be reported with very high confidence.

Mack addresses a vague concern briefly, but quickly brushes it aside with a reference to a personal communication with Daniel Brown,

a noted expert in the field of hypnosis research [who] determined after carefully reviewing the literature on recall among trauma sufferers under hypnosis that there are simply no studies of the accuracy of memory in this population, i.e., among individuals for whom the events in question are of core meaning or central importance. (p. 24)

It is curious that Mack's reference for this position is a personal communication. Does this mean that there is no published opinion on the matter? Indeed there is, by the American Medical Association (AMA), and if Mack's concerns about hypnosis are assuaged, those of the AMA are not. The AMA Council on Scientific Affairs unanimously passed a resolution concerning hypnosis that stated "that recollections obtained during hypnosis can involve confabulations and pseudo-memories and not only fail to be more

accurate, but actually appear to be less reliable than nonhypnotic recall" (1985, p. 1918). The AMA resolution is a reflection of decades of scientific research in hypnosis that shows that although hypnosis may increase the vividness and detail of recall, as well as the sheer volume of recall, it does not increase the overall accuracy of memory (Erdelyi, 1994; Kihlstrom, 1994; Orne, 1951).

Given how pliable and receptive a hypnotized person may be to the suggestions of the hypnotist, it should perhaps come as no surprise that almost all of Mack's experiencers reveal that in the course of their abduction, the aliens warned them of the impending disaster facing humanity if we do not change our ways. Mack has written extensively on issues such as the fear of nuclear war (Mack, 1988; Mack & Redmont, 1990) and the psychology of our relationship with the earth (Mack, 1992).

#### Scientific rigor and alternative explanations

Mack presents stories that are fantastic if not magical. And once we step into the realm of magic, we no longer are bound to play by the rules. In the Preface, Mack writes, "thinking of memory too literally as 'true' or 'false' may restrict what we can learn about human consciousness from the abduction experiences I recount in the pages that follow" (p. xi). So, we can disregard the fact that the concept of repression is not well-founded, and we can disregard the fact that memory does not faithfully record one's life, so that it can be replayed during hypnosis. With Space Men, all things are possible. If people need to float, they float. If humans need to survive having metal objects shoved into their brains, they do. If people need to disappear for several hours without anyone noticing, they do. Scientific skepticism and rigor seem to be all but abandoned. This is particularly troubling, given the two words on the back of the jacket, "Science/Psychology," which are presumably a suggestion as to where to place *Abduction* in the bookstore.

#### Alternative explanations

Mack presents a challenge for those who would offer more conventional explanations of the abduction memories, listing six criteria that must be met by any alternative account. None of them are compelling. He notes, for example, the striking similarity of the abduction stories. But perhaps the similarity should not surprise us, given our culture's fascina-

tion with space alien visitation. The descriptions of the space aliens read as if they were straight out of the movie "Close Encounters," and the desperate warnings to humanity read like Klaatu's dramatic final scene in the classic "The Day the Earth Stood Still." The TV portrayal of alien visitation is no longer alien given television programs such as the CBS miniseries *Intruders*. Most of us could give a detailed description of the Kennedy assassination, as well, complete with the pink pillbox hat. Does our consensus mean that we were there at Dealey Plaza in 1963?

We must be careful not to equate consensus with truth. After all, Father Bernard Pagano was misidentified by seven people who swore under oath that the 53-year-old Roman Catholic priest was the man who pointed the pistol at them in a string of armed robberies. As another challenge to alternative accounts, Mack notes abduction memories by very young children, which seems to ignore a large body of research on the suggestibility of children's testimony (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). He refers specifically to the case of two-year-old Colin in Chapter 6. But Chapter 6 is not about Colin but rather Colin's mother, Jerry. The chapter describes much of what Colin says to his mother (or more accurately, what Colin's mother says Colin says), but very little about what Mother says to Colin. Given what we know about children's memory, the latter may be much more informative than the former.

Another challenge suggests that many of the UFO stories are experienced independently by others. But there is much compromise on this score as well. Chapter 15 describes the case of Arthur, whose entire family supposedly witnessed the UFO when Arthur was abducted. However, no one in the family spoke of it for 25 years, until the story was assembled at a family reunion. The claim of independent witnesses cannot be made if the event is not recalled independently.

#### Therapy and science

An important question not raised by Mack, but which we raise here regards the relationship between therapy and science in psychology. The Boulder Model conceives of the clinical psychologist as both a scientist and practitioner, yet it seems that these two roles can easily come into conflict. It has been argued that it is not the therapist's job to determine by the rigorous, skeptical standards of science whether clients are recalling

memories of events that happened or engaging in fantasy.

If we accept that the goal of therapy is to send clients home without the problems they came in with, then perhaps the ends justify the means. If hypnotically created affirmation of the space alien story allows the client to go home happy, well, why not? As Mack writes, "important therapeutic gains become possible when the source of the experiencer's dysfunction is discovered" (p. 111). It is hard to argue with success. Mack's clients come into his office troubled and frustrated, and in some cases as self-professed social misfits, and leave as major players in intergalactic science, liaisons between a supreme extraterrestrial intelligence and all of humanity.

Viewed from one angle, Mack's open-mindedness in accepting the reality of his clients' reports is not only courageous, but also the necessary foundation for their recovery. On the other hand, it may simply stoke an oven of pseudomemories. From where the therapist sits, it may be a very tough call (see also, American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

#### A final thought

Those two words on the back of the book jacket loom large, particularly the one, "Science." We might object to Mack's acceptance of the abduction stories and the method that produced them; and yet there may be something far more interesting in the data than what appears on the surface. As astronomer Carl Sagan (1993) has noted,

If indeed the bulk of the alien abduction accounts are really about hallucinations, don't we have before us a matter of supreme importance—touching on our limitations, the ease with which we may be misled, the fashioning of our beliefs and perhaps even the origins of our religions? There is genuine scientific paydirt in UFOs and alien abductions—but it is, I think, of distinctly terrestrial origin. (p. 7)

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