

Alien abductions, psychologists and the Harvard memory wars

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When Susan Clancy, a psychologist at Harvard University, wanted to study people with memories of events that had never happened, she cast her net wide. So wide it reached galaxies far, far away.

Have you ever been "contacted or abducted by space aliens?" the newspaper ads she ran read. Researchers at Harvard, the ads said, were seeking subjects "to participate in a memory study."

The responses tumbled in. From people outraged that a venerable institution like Harvard would raise such oddball questions. From illegal immigrants who thought that Clancy was asking about abductions by the border

police. From reporters, and from tricksters who left the names of unsuspecting friends. From people who, Clancy guessed, believed that they were aliens themselves, and left messages that went "beep-bop-boop." And a few from people who genuinely believed that they had been taken by extraterrestrials and had built elaborate narratives of space travel, mind control and erotic encounters with beings from other planets.

"I felt like I had one foot in the ivory tower and one foot in the reality of their experiences," said Clancy, whose main interest is not outer space but the more mysterious question of whether children who are sexually molested can bury knowledge of their abuse, and yet later, as adults, recover true memories. Clancy says the answer to that question, one of the most fiercely disputed issues

in psychology today, is no. Many psychiatrists, psychologists and victims of child sex abuse dispute her view.

In choosing people who remembered being spirited away by visitors from other planets, Clancy said she aimed to study people whose tales were undoubtedly fabrications. "I was so naive," she said.

She found herself walking from one intellectual land mine to another, and under attack from two camps: those who believe that memories can indeed be repressed, and those who support the work of John Mack, a Harvard professor and author of a 1994 book, "Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens," who maintains that alien visitations may really occur.

Clancy asked her subjects, eight of whom said they had recovered memo-

ries of abductions, to memorize lists of words that suggested ideas without stating them. One, for example, gave the words sour, candy, sugar and bitter. The people with recovered memories were more likely to mistakenly remember the word sweet than the control group. She concluded that people with recovered memories were open to suggestion, and more likely to distort memories.

"The whole notion of repressed memories has done a great disservice to the field," Clancy said. "Some people are prone to forget how, where or when a memory was acquired. They see a movie as a kid and remember the events, but don't remember whether they saw it or it actually happened to them."

But why would a psyche adopt the memory of being taken away by space aliens?

Clancy said all of her subjects had experienced a strange moment between sleep and wakefulness, where the eyes may be open but the body is still in the rapid-eye-movement stage of sleep, with its sense of paralysis. Sometimes there are hallucinations. Troubled by the experience, an "effort at meaning" follows, she said, in which popular portrayals of alien encounters, in science-fiction television shows, movies and books, seem to fit in the memory hole.

"What they're getting from alien abductions is what I wish I could get from religion," Clancy said. The people who spoke of abductions described a sense of belonging, and of someone watching over them.

"Not one of them said, 'I wish it didn't happen,'" she said.

The same, of course, cannot be said of

victims of childhood rape.

Daniel Brown, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School and author of the 1998 book "Memory, Trauma Treatment and the Law," said Clancy was not naive, but instead canny, in trying to equate adults who say they have unearthed memories of abuse with people who swear they have talked with space aliens.

"There's a political agenda here," he said.

Many of the main players in the highly charged debate over memory are here at Harvard, separated by only a few minutes' walk. But they never speak to one another, and each side accuses the other of doing shoddy science for political or financial ends.

"It's all about spin," Brown said. "It's absolutely hostile."