

# Psychology and UFOs

*Psychological research on the topic of UFOs has been surprisingly scarce. The few studies appear to have been done in isolation from one another. Some questions have been answered, but more data are available and can be readily exploited.*

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**I**NVESTIGATIONS OF UFOs have for the most part been performed by either nontechnical personnel or by professionals whose realms of expertise extend only into the natural sciences, in particular, astrophysics. It is only logical that astronomers would be involved, since flying saucers from the very beginning were assumed to be extraterrestrial spacecraft (Menzel and Boyd 1963; Vallee 1965). However, mundane meteorological explanations for sensational cases of UFOs (translate: blobs of light) traveling at an apparent 200 mph and making 90° turns were emotionally unsatisfactory. Even when the investigator patiently explained that any living organism inside such a "craft" would have become grape jelly by a 90° turn, due to the force of inertia, such explanations were waved aside with the frustrating response that "the laws of science as we now know them may not apply to the craft" or that the assumed aliens were far advanced technologically and could have overcome such a petty obstacle.

Refusal to believe in "down to earth" solutions resided in several types of advocates (Jacobs 1975). One was the cynical type, who would financially milk the phenomena for all it was worth. Another was the "contactee" (a person who claimed to have been picked up by angelic-looking aliens who were Christians, given a ride to Mars or Venus, maybe even meeting Jesus, and given a mission to spread pacifism on Earth) and

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his or her followers (Menger 1959). A third type of advocate would adhere to any belief even remotely connected with the occult. Last, there were groups of people who sincerely believed that the UFOs they saw were extraterrestrial ships, such beliefs being reinforced by the sometimes spectacular effects present in the sightings. Yet none of the believers ever questioned their basic assumption: Why were the flying saucers automatically interpreted as being from outer space and piloted by aliens, in as much as they were a novel phenomenon with no previous clue as to their origin or occupants? To this day, this question has not been considered by either the UFO skeptics or the believers.

Psychologists studying the UFO phenomenon were scarce until after the conclusion of the University of Colorado Condon Report in 1968. The lateness of the involvement of psychologists is both surprising and unexplainable, since early on there was much speculation voiced about the psychological components in sightings of flying saucers. Most of the earlier questions and opinions alluding to psychological ramifications had been rather crude: "Are people who see flying saucers crazy?" "Flying saucers go away when the silly season ends." "One cannot doubt the reports made by reliable professionals like policemen, doctors, and pilots." "Did the people who saw the UFOs last night really imagine everything?" (Jacobs 1975; Hynek 1974).

Even so, the phenomenon strongly implied a role for psychologists. When a few did finally get involved, they faced the same problems natural scientists had faced, namely, that a UFO could not be seized for study, nor would it stay in one place long enough for instrument readings, much less a research design. Worse, they had to shake off the sensationalism promoted by the mass media.

The research presented here falls within various branches of psychology and is so grouped. No new specialty within psychology has emerged to investigate this phenomenon. The degree of interest within a particular specialty has been sporadic and subject to a lack of systematization. Personality researchers, for example, by all expectations should have taken the personality correlates of skeptics, contactees, hoaxers, and reporters and nonreporters of sightings in order to compare the profiles. Yet few, if any, psychologists have done so. In contrast, the field of attitude-formation has enjoyed comparatively heavy investigation vis-à-vis UFOs, as will be seen.

### **Psychoanalysis**

In spite of their sexually suggestive elliptical and cigar-shaped descriptions, UFOs have drawn relatively little attention from the psychoanalytic field. Wilhelm Reich, toward the end of his turbulent career and before his research papers were burned by the Food and Drug Administration, saw



a UFO and was of the opinion that it was of extraterrestrial origin and warlike in its intentions (Boadella 1973). His interpretations were not psychological, nor was the research he engaged in during the latter part of his life—such as his work on “orgone energy,” which he suggested could be put to good use against flying saucers in the forthcoming war of the worlds. Ironically, Reich, like another famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, became somewhat mentally unstable in his later years.

It should not be too surprising that a psychoanalyst as multifaceted in his interests as Carl Jung (1961) would turn his attention to flying saucers. He was one of the few to do so with more than a passing interest. Jung first gave his views on the subject in a 1954 Swiss weekly, and these views were subsequently distorted by the world press (Jung 1959). When he issued a statement correcting the sensationalist version, he was curiously ignored by the press, a phenomenon similarly noted by UFOlogists Philip Klass and J. Allen Hynek. “The moral of this story,” Jung wrote in his book *Flying Saucers*, “is rather interesting. As the behavior of the press is a sort of Gallup test with reference to world opinion, one must draw the conclusion that news affirming the existence of UFOs is welcome, but that skepticism seems to be undesirable. To believe that UFOs are real suits the general opinion, whereas disbelief is discouraged. This creates the impression that there is a tendency all over the world to believe in saucers and to want them to be real.” Reviewing the pertinent case histories, including his patients’ art works, and extensively reading the UFO literature, he suggested a hypothesis. He started with the fact that the mandala has at all times, in all cultures, been the symbol of order, of wholesomeness, of a desire to bring sanity out of insanity. Further, he affirmed that UFOs were visionary rumors and that in order to have a visionary rumor

the following are prerequisites: (1) unusual emotion, (2) emotional tension, and (3) projection.

Essentially, Jung stated that, in the 1950s and 1960s, mankind was faced with the dilemma of nuclear annihilation, on the one hand, or totalitarian subjugation due to Soviet imperialism, on the other. (Needless to say, his works were banned in the USSR.) Therefore, flying saucers were projections from the unconscious that, because of their mandala shapes and their alleged heavenly origins and technological superiority, had an air of salvation about them. Because of our modern rationalism, we interpreted such visions of longing and deliverance not as heavenly, other-worldly angels, but as mechanical, other-worldly spaceships. *Such projections, incidentally, would come from quite normal persons.* It should be further noted that the peak years for flying saucer sightings in the United States (1952, 1957, 1966) were years when the world dilemma referred to above was most threatening to the American public (the Korean War and presidential elections, the highly traumatic Sputnik, and the Vietnam war).

One other psychoanalyst became interested in UFOs. Berthold Schwarz (1968, 1969), an American psychiatrist, began a decade later to inquire about a totally different aspect of the phenomenon, to wit, the frequency of UFO themes in the narratives of psychiatric patients as well as the question of sanity in relation to sightings of UFOs. In a local journal of medicine in New Jersey, Schwarz reported that, of the thousands of patients he had seen and of the thousands of patients in a nearby county mental hospital, not one had ever reported any UFO experiences. Conversely, all of the sighters that Schwarz interviewed seemed to be quite stable and without any symptomatology. The only case that I myself have run across in the literature has been of a case study in Arthur Janov's book on primal therapy, wherein flying saucers did play an important role in the patient's delusions.

## Hypnosis

The use of hypnosis, more than any other aspect of psychology in UFO research, has gained much publicity. Not only have popular magazines like *Omni*, *Psychology Today*, and *Astronomy* treated the topic, but a TV dramatization of the well-known Betty and Barney Hill abduction—which some psychoanalysts have interpreted simply as a case of a *folie a deux*—was aired in 1975, nearly ten years after the original incident. There seems to be a set pattern in nearly all abduction cases. This pattern, and the fact that most of the “time loss” cases occurred after the 1966 publication of *The Interrupted Journey* (Fuller 1966), implies mass suggestion.

An abduction case usually goes this way: A person is in a deserted area of the country, possibly with some relatives or friends, sees a UFO,

and after some time is trapped by aliens who physically examine and then return the individual, sometimes with amnesia (Sprinkle 1979; Fuller 1966; Wells 1981).

Some doubts have begun to be cast upon the validity of narratives given under hypnosis. Alvin H. Lawson (1977) found 16 people who were not well acquainted with UFO lore. He had a clinical hypnotist hypnotize them into believing they were inside a flying saucer and then had them describe their "experience." Their accounts were quite similar in detail to the actual reports of abductions and included medical examinations. His conclusions were presented at the American Psychological Association in 1976.

An experimental objection to the Lawson study was carried out by Allen Hendry (1979), the chief investigator at the Center for UFO Studies. A woman had seen a UFO in 1978 and claimed to have been in telepathic communication with the aliens, who did not land; she also experienced nausea. Upon obtaining additional information, Hendry found a conventional explanation for the object seen but did not reveal the identity of the object to the sighter (the woman, incidentally, had claimed never to have believed that anything like the story above could be true). Hendry then hired a hypnotherapist. Under hypnosis, the woman did *not* invent any additional details, and her account was in the past tense, unlike that of true "abductees." In other words, under hypnosis, she stated she had seen a UFO and not that she had been abducted, nor that she had been medically examined by the aliens. One last point: Her Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Index profile was evaluated as not coming from a psychologically healthy person.

It is surprising, however, that to date few have looked at the abduction cases in light of the controversy enveloping hypnosis as a whole. The controversy revolves on the question, What exactly *is* hypnosis? There are two theories. One interprets hypnosis in its traditional sense, that of inducing a trance state as a gateway to the unconscious. The alternative interpretation is that the "hypnotizing" of a subject leads to a role-playing state, the role being that of a "trance state"; the degree of influence over a subject (even to the point of causing warts and ignoring pain) is directly related to how suggestible that person is (Spanos and Barber 1974). This second theory is somewhat related to the objection made over the abduction cases, that the hypnotherapist is subtly influencing the session. Thomas Szasz has given a relevant definition in *The Second Sin*: "Hypnosis: two people lying to each other, each pretending to believe both his own and his partner's lies."

## Attitudes

Attitude formation is one of the most well-traveled research paths in both

psychology and sociology. Nearly every topic imaginable that one could have an opinion on has been investigated and its correlates explored. Most of the research on attitudes toward UFOs/flying saucers/extraterrestrial-life was done during and after publication of the Condon Report. Indeed, for many reasons the 1966 wave of sightings proved to be the watershed for the beginning of all reputable research on the phenomenon (Simón 1979a). The attitude studies fell in two general directions: one was to identify the various outlooks toward flying saucers, their interrelationships, and who held such beliefs; the second was to use the belief in such concepts to test a particular theory. An example of the former is the periodic Gallup Poll, which has consistently seen a rise in the percentage of the population admitting to having seen a UFO and to believing there is life in the universe beyond our planet. The Gallup data, incidentally, have been used for further secondary analysis by other researchers.

Aldora Lee (1969) emphasized the importance of studying attitudes toward flying saucers by pointing out that almost always there is no physical evidence, just verbal reports, and that the reports are colored by the beliefs held by the witnesses. Examining the Gallup data and conducting polls on her own for the much-maligned Condon project, Lee found that (a) age, education, and geographical region were related to whether respondents believed in extraterrestrial life, (b) sighters do not differ from nonsighters with respect to sex, age, education, or geographical region, (c) adults, compared with teen-agers, tend to be negatively inclined toward the possibility of UFOs' extraterrestrial origin.

In establishing the various attitudes toward UFOs independently, Simón (1979b) and Saunders (1968) have employed very complicated statistical techniques in order to ascertain the very obvious. For example, a 63-item questionnaire that Simón (1979b) administered to college students and members of the National Investigations Committee of Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), a UFO group, upon being factor-analyzed, brought out ten obvious attitude factors: belief in extraterrestrial visitation, skepticism of UFOs, belief in the occult, extrapolation of nature, psychological explanations, disbelief in contactees, witnessing, belief in extraterrestrial life, reluctance to report a sighting, belief in possibilities.

On a different plane altogether is Lawrence Littig's (1971) brief but important study. Littig was interested in matching the belief in life in other worlds with degree of *affiliation motivation* (the desire to be accepted and loved by others). Giving his subjects a test for affiliation motivation and separating the high and low scorers, he compared their responses to the statement, "Further research on UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects, e.g., 'flying saucers') will reveal that they come from outer space." He found that subjects scoring strongly in affiliation motivation tended to significantly agree with the statement. Littig furthermore stated that a peopled universe is more reassuring than an empty one and that there are

psychological processes involved in the beliefs in extraterrestrial life, but that such processes tended to be normal ones rather than abnormal and irrational.

Littig's study was indirectly supported by P. Fox (1979). Asking her subjects what they thought UFOs were, she matched her answers with attitudinal and background data. She found that the best predictor of an extraterrestrial interpretation of UFOs was agreement with the statement that there are intelligent life forms on other planets.\*

Littig's study was unfortunately overlooked within the field of UFOlogy during the controversy in *Science* sparked by Warren (1970), possibly because *Science*, unlike a specialized journal, is read by all disciplines. Warren examined the 1966 Gallup Poll data in view of the *status inconsistency theory*. Essentially, this theory states that individuals who do not have equivalent status in ethnicity, education, income, or intelligence are bound to feel that they are "outsiders" and hence are under tension. This tension will find expression in asocial actions. Warren came to the conclusion that sighters of flying saucers upheld the theory. He maintained that upon breakdown of the collected data, the Gallup Poll verified that status inconsistencies were 16 times more likely to see UFOs. In a UFO newsletter rebuttal, R. Leo Sprinkle of the University of Wyoming countered that the real question was the difference between sighters who report the UFOs seen and sighters who do not report their sightings. Hynek (1974), in turn, dismissed the hypothesis in his book *The UFO Experience* because in one particular sighting the witnesses did not appear to be status inconsistent. The best critique of the Warren study, however, came from Saunders, who delivered a report at the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics in 1975. Saunders simply pointed out that Warren's paper was devoid of any statistical analysis. His own analysis of other, independent data seemed to indicate that it was *status consistency* that was predictive of sightings, a finding supported by other studies (Westrum 1979; Fox 1979). In my view, this makes more sense, since UFOs are almost universally accepted in North America. To date, no more attempts at settling the controversy have surfaced anywhere.

## Perception

Logically, perceptual psychologists should have been very productive on the subject of UFOs. Yet with one important exception (Haines 1980), the extent of research on UFOs' (mis)perception has been to cite case studies

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\*Both of these studies at least explain why it is that nearly every time I reply in the negative when asked if I believe flying saucers are visits from space, I am immediately asked the irrelevant, non-sequitur question, "But don't you believe in life on other worlds?" The same thing. I am sure, happens to others.

and a few experiments, some of them involving the common *autokinesis* and *autostasis* effects (Wertheimer 1968). For example, Carl Sagan and Thornton Page (1972) in *UFOs—A Scientific Debate* cite a case study wherein several observers witnessed the reentry of Zond IV and interpreted it as a UFO. Reports came in of its having windows, starting grass fires, frightening a dog, and causing an observer to be unexplainably overcome with sleep. Even the Condon Report, which was specifically charged with the study of the psychological components of UFOs, limited its treatment of perception to a couple of general textbook chapters in its ballast section; there was only one true experimental study in the report, that of Aldora Lee cited above.

In a series of tests, Haines (1979, 1980) asked two groups of people to draw a UFO, comparing the drawings by the group that reported having previously seen a UFO with those of the one that had not seen a UFO. Both tended to give the basic dimensional characteristics, suggesting that there is an underlying consensus of what a UFO should look like. Nevertheless, the former group tended to draw fewer openings, apertures, insignia, domes, and landing gear than the latter group. Haines then investigated the reliability of potential drawings of UFOs by presenting a visual stimulus to a group of subjects and asking them to draw it, the stimulus being allowed to be viewed as long as desired. Errors were made. Even bigger errors were made during a UFO investigator workshop, where participants were asked to draw the UFO that was verbally described by a witness; the investigators' drawings compared poorly with the original witness's. A large amount of "investigative experience" in terms of years did not necessarily guarantee greater accuracy. Haines ended his series of experiments by suggesting that further research was indicated, a classic of understatement.

Addressing himself to this same problem, but more with the aim of aiding future investigators, Roger Shepard (1979) noted that test results based on recognition are more valid than tests using verbal recall. He compiled an exhaustive array of UFO drawings based on photographs, as well as computer-generated silhouettes of UFOs and a list of terms used in the past in order to describe observed phenomena in future sightings.

Paradoxically enough, despite the involvement of psychologists in investigating UFOs, it is a nonpsychologist who has come forth with the most testable hypotheses amenable to perceptual research. Philip J. Klass (1974), who incidentally has urged involvement by psychologists in the UFO arena, presented several propositions in his book *UFOs Explained*.

1. Basically honest and intelligent persons who are suddenly exposed to a brief, unexpected event, especially one that involves an unfamiliar object, may be grossly inaccurate in trying to describe precisely what they have seen.



2. Despite the intrinsic limitations of human perception when exposed to brief, unexpected and unusual events, some details recalled by the observer may be reasonably accurate. The problem facing the UFO investigator is to try to distinguish between those details that are accurate and those that are grossly inaccurate. This may be impossible until the true identity of the UFO can be determined, so that in some cases this poses an insoluble problem.

3. If a person observing an unusual or unfamiliar object concludes that it is probably a spaceship from another world, he can readily adduce that the object is reacting to his presence or actions when in reality there is absolutely no cause-effect relationship.

4. News media that give great prominence to a UFO report when it is first received, subsequently devote little if any space or time for reporting a prosaic explanation for the case when all the facts are uncovered.

5. No human observer, including experienced flight crews, can accurately estimate either the distance/altitude or the size of an unfamiliar object in the sky unless it is in very close proximity to a familiar object whose size or altitude is known.

6. Once news media coverage leads the public to believe that UFOs may be in the vicinity, there are numerous natural and man-made objects which, especially when seen at night, can take on unusual characteristics in the minds of hopeful viewers. Their UFO reports in turn add to the mass excitement which encourages still more observers to watch for UFOs. This situation feeds upon itself until such time as the news media lose interest in the subject, and then the "flap" quickly runs out of steam.

7. Whenever a light is sighted in the night sky that is believed to be a UFO and this is reported to a radar operator, who is asked to search his scope for an unknown target, almost invariably an "unknown" target will be found. Conversely, if an unusual target is spotted on the radarscope at night that is suspected of being a UFO, and an observer is dispatched or asked to search for a light in the night sky, almost invariably a visual sighting will be made.

## Social Psychology

The studies that fall into the social psychology category are somewhat similar to those under the section on perception. There is a lack of reported investigation in proportion to the wealth of potential experiments that could be conceived and concluded.

By coincidence, however, a classic study in social psychology involved flying saucers (Festinger, Riecken, Schachter 1956). *When Prophecy Fails* detailed the 1954 infiltration of a contactee group for the purpose of testing a theory of *cognitive dissonance*. A cult group predicted the rescue of its members by flying saucers following the destruction of the world. Needless to say, the predictions did not bear out. Whereas before the doomsday date arrived the cult leaders were highly secretive and skeptical

of both the news media and new converts, the reverse came to be the case after disconfirmation of the rescue prophecy. Not only did publicity and proselytizing begin, but, paradoxically, their faith was reinforced, especially if they had made deep irreversible commitments of a social and financial nature.

A study by H. Buckner (1966) of Concordia University in Montreal gave some rough parameters of a California contactee group. The members had an average age of 65, were widowed or single women, had poor health, were interested in the occult, and had little formal education. The men either were young schizophrenics or were aged with advanced senility. Criticism of doctrines was discouraged; all ideas were legitimate.\*

Another area of research within social psychology has been the influence of the mass media on the rate of UFO sightings. Simón (1979a) unsuccessfully attempted to answer this question by correlating the number of sightings per year with the number of science fiction movies per year. It was found that such a correlation would be spurious due to a number of idiosyncrasies within the data: (1) the making of a film took a long time, sometimes over a year from its inception, (2) there was a *qualitative* difference between films, whose appeal to the public was elusive to statistical analysis, and (3) the year of initial release of a film was no indication of that film's duration in theaters, nor of its return at later times. Basically, the problems encountered were typically those found within unobtrusive data (Campbell and Stanley 1963; Simón 1979c). Nevertheless, the increase of such films after the first official sighting of a flying saucer, in 1947, was suggestive, as was the thematic material found in the films themselves.

A second attempt at gauging the effect of the mass media on UFO sightings again brought mixed results (Simón 1981). Again, this was partly due to the statistical analyses. Statistical tests were run and significant results found for all the numerical data presented, but it was pointed out by the editors, quite correctly, that the underlying assumptions for the tests were inapplicable to the data, and unnecessary due to the dramatic changes evident in the data.

This second study attempted to (1) objectify public interest in fads through numerical tabulations of magazine and newspaper articles, films and television shows, and the number of public library books checked out by readers on the particular topic of interest, (2) show that the development of a buildup of UFO sightings follows the same pattern as other fads, with a strong implication that the mass media is a causal factor.

The underlying assumption to both studies is that the number of

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\*From personal experience with a similar Kansas-based group, I can verify these observations. One thing that neither of the investigators mentioned is the fact that the contactees' lectures and readings are very bland and boring, with nothing of the sensationalism found in noncontactees' reports.

unidentified flying objects remains basically stable but that the public's interest in them fluctuates due to particular events in the culture (individual countries tend to have sporadic increases in reported sightings).

## Conclusions

It is apparent that some of the above-mentioned studies suffer from *experimenter bias*, possibly due to the researcher's interest that UFOs be acknowledged in their true identity, either as extraterrestrial spacecraft or as misperceived terrestrial phenomena. Any psychologist planning on doing any long-term research involving UFO sightings or UFO sighters would do well to stay clear of the seductive yet vacuous UFO subculture in order to maintain the integrity of his research. To be sure, the investigation of certain areas (such as the contactees) necessitates delving deeply into the subculture.

In addition, there is a distasteful impression that instead of research data and theories being worked out and applied to society, an apparently ludicrous and disreputable aspect of society is being thrust onto a serious subject, be it psychology, astronomy, or physics.

It is frustrating to summarize what research has been done. Part of the problem is the aimlessness of the literature as a whole. Little relevancy connects one study with another except when one author pursues a question throughout several studies. Nevertheless, in light of the studies mentioned above, several conclusions can be affirmed:

1. There is a strong indication that those UFOs whose existence can be objectively verified, and are usually blobs of light in the sky, are the physical equivalent of Rorschach inkblots. They will be reported according to the reporter's mental set.

2. Belief in flying saucers and extraterrestrial life is positively correlated with youth, high income, increased education, and being male.

3. To believe that UFOs are piloted by "little green men" is the cultural norm in North America, and not, as is put forth, a minority viewpoint. It is not a sign of mental illness.

4. There is a strong indication that the rate of flying saucer sightings fluctuates according to the amount, as well as the quality, of coverage in the mass media.

5. The "contactee" cult groups, mostly based in California, are composed primarily of senile or schizoid members. They tend to be religious and low-key.

6. Due to (3) and (4), there appears to be a cultural consensus of what a "UFO" is supposed to look like and what the "aliens" are supposed to look like.

Numerous questions remain unanswered in each specialty within psychology. Some areas, such as personality correlates, remain virtually

untouched and offer a fine repository of potential data for theses or dissertations. If properly exploited, the whole topic of UFOs/flying-saucers can yield much useful information that can be applied to many areas other than the UFO subculture. Only the surface has been scratched. Future research must incorporate the experimental rigors found elsewhere in the field of psychology.

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