conscious movements.

*Nonconscious Movements* consists of eight chapters. The first four concern phenomena produced by involuntary muscle movements: a detailed and damning analysis of facilitated communication; a history of Clever Hans and Lady the Wonder Horse, who supposedly could receive messages telepathically (you will learn far more about the fascinating story of Clever Hans and his handlers, by the way, than you ever got in introductory psychology); a discussion of the mechanisms shared by facilitated communication and clever horses; and "Other Phenomena," such as pendulums, mind-reading, table moving, dowsing, Ouija boards, and automatic handwriting. Chapter 5 reviews scientific studies of involuntary muscle movements. Chapter 6, "Additional Psychological Mechanisms Relevant for Understanding Facilitator Behavior," explores possible reasons for the alarming number of false allegations of sexual abuse that facilitators have communicated. Chapter 7 reviews the normal cognitive processes that make people receptive to beliefs in FC and its relatives, including the self-fulfilling prophecy, cognitive dissonance, and biases of self-deception. Chapter 8 is a brief conclusion.

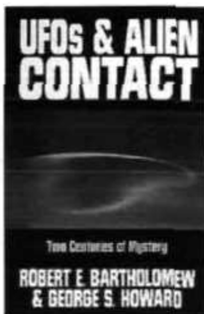
Chapter 6 is the most provocative and debatable chapter, as Spitz acknowledges. What, he asks, is going on in the conscious and unconscious motivations of the facilitators who make up unfounded charges of sexual abuse? Spitz considers "surface" explanations, based on behavioral principles such as reinforcements, as well as "depth" explanations, based on nonconscious motivations.

Some facilitators, he believes, are driven by motives that are hardly mysterious: Making dramatic accusations through the method of FC gives them a means of controlling others, exacting revenge on parents and colleagues (via accusations supposedly made by the autistic child), and getting attention and power. Other facilitators, he believes, may be releasing the "conflicting and troubling feelings that resulted from their own abuse" (p. 159). And many are acting out a self-fulfilling prophecy; in their training, many facilitators are actually told to expect their students to raise charges of abuse.

According to Spitz, facilitators fall into a form of dissociation, using the keyboard like a form of automatic writing (a phenomenon in which subjects in a trance, under hypnosis, or another "altered state" produce poems, writing, or images of which they are unaware). For Spitz, dissociation, like involuntary muscle movements, is another result of the adaptation during evolution of a subconscious capacity to process information and perform activities without clogging up consciousness. In my view, Spitz tries to do too much in this slight chapter, digressing into dissociative versus sociocognitive theories of multiple personality disorder and false memory syndrome. But I completely concur with its conclusion: that "the founder and disseminators of facilitated communication created a fertile breeding ground for automatic writing in which a ventriloquist communicates through a live mannequin who cannot speak out in denial. If we were asked to design conditions in which individuals could unwittingly release inner material of which they were unaware or which they would not have released under ordinary circumstances, we could do no better than invent facilitated communication . . ." (p. 157).

In spite of the mountain of empirical evidence that has discredited it, Spitz warns, FC "continues to spread like a virus run rampant" (p. 175). Its proponents don't back down because they are eager to protect their livelihoods, reputations, and self-esteem, and undoubtedly too because they are scared to face the disappointment and wrath (not to mention lawsuits) of parents and educators if they say, "we were wrong."

These vested interests and face-saving denials of incontrovertible evidence are the reason, Spitz correctly observes, that further research discrediting FC "will simply fall on deaf ears" (p. 167). Precisely — which is why it is so important for the rest of us to be listening. Spitz's book is important because students and professionals alike need to be reminded that FC is only the latest—but not the last—in a long line of hoaxes, to which we are all vulnerable if we do not use reason and evidence to counterbalance our human longing for easy cures, quick fixes, and miracles.




# The Social Psychology of UFO Sightings and Beliefs

ROBERT A. BAKER

*UFOs & Alien Contact: Two Centuries of Mystery.* By Robert E. Bartholomew and George S. Howard. Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 1998. ISBN 1-57392-200-5. 408 pp. Hardcover, $26.95.

Without question, sociologist Robert Bartholomew and social psychologist George Howard have compiled one of the best collections of UFO reports, alien contact claims, and reports of alien abductions available thus far. Every serious student of UFOlogy should read and ponder their meticulously researched and carefully documented historical account of "strange things in the sky."

Although most of us have assumed that the UFO phenomenon is a rather recent occurrence, the authors quickly inform us that UFO sightings are "logical extensions of a social phenomenon that has been emerging for more than one hundred years . . ." Part 1 is devoted to many examples of "airship mania" and other instances of wishful thinking and social delusions regarding "things in the sky" beginning with "The Great

American Airship Mania of 1896–97," in which thousands of citizens reported seeing cigar-shaped craft with wings and propellers and an attached undercarriage with human occupants floating across the skies. Boosted by press sensationalism, many people across the nation were reporting strange sightings, weird encounters, and bizarre events surrounding various forms and sorts of "air machines."

These events are easily understood if one is familiar with mainstream theories of social psychology. First of all, eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable and subject to error. Secondly, a person's mental set or frame of reference strongly influences how external events are interpreted and internalized as reality. Further, under ambiguous circumstances and viewing conditions, misidentifications are common. The fallible nature of human perception when colored by suggestion and the pressure of social consensus makes it easy to understand why so many people were deceived. Since the real world was on the cutting edge of manned flight, it is certainly understandable that so many people were expecting to see ships in the air.

Near the end of the airship mania period in 1897, Thomas Edison began experiments involving telegraphy and two balloons sent aloft at night. Hearing of this experiment, hundreds of citizens at numerous locations across the nation reported seeing a giant imaginary arc lamp suspended in the sky. Again, the installation of "electric lights" across the country was the source of inspiration for this social delusion.

The United States was not alone at this time in reporting aerial delusions. Hundreds of sighting of ghost balloons were reported in Canada after press reports of plans by the Swedish scientist Andree to navigate by balloon to the North Pole. A few years later, in 1909, shortly after the Germans developed the zeppelin, the British began to feel vulnerable to attack and worried that their long-held military and naval superiority was lost. The result? In New Zealand between July and September, thousands of New Zealanders reported seeing zeppelin-type dirigibles. Then, in the winter of 1909–1910, residents of the New England seaboard were convinced that the world's first practical heavier-than-air flying machine had been perfected because thousands of people reported seeing it sailing through the skies. Next, in 1912 and 1913 a collective delusion lasting for a period of over five months occurred in Great Britain. This delusion also involved the mass sightings of imaginary zeppelins and was precipitated by the German armament buildup and widespread press speculation.

Then, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, people's vivid imaginations gave birth to a series of wild rumors about German subversion and sabotage both in the U.S. and Canada. The German scare in the U.S. reached such proportions that streets with German names were renamed, anything German was prohibited, and many people of German ancestry were placed in internment camps. This panic led to many people seeing airplanes in the skies over Canada, America, and even South Africa carrying out air raids between 1914 and 1916. After America's entry into the war in 1917, National Guardsmen in New Hampshire fired at aeroplanes supposedly carrying out an air attack. After World War I there were, indeed, many many things seen in the sky as aircraft and air travel proliferated. But reports of nonexistent aerial phenomena died down until 1946, when thousands of Swedish citizens reported seeing remote-controlled German V-rockets crossing Sweden's skies. Rumor had it that these missiles fell into Soviet hands at the end of World War II and they were merely the prelude to a massive Soviet invasion. Despite the massive publicity supporting this possibility and reports from hundreds of eyewitnesses, no concrete physical evidence of such missiles was ever found.

A year later, in 1947, the modern era of UFOs and flying saucers began with the report by Kenneth Arnold, while flying near Mount Rainer on June 24, of what appeared to be nine glittering objects, flying in formation at incredible speed. When Arnold reported his sighting to newsmen, one of them referred to the objects as "flying saucers." The name stuck and within a few weeks reports of saucers and unidentified flying objects came in from all across the nation. An August 1947 Gallup poll revealed that 90 percent of Americans surveyed were aware of the flying-saucer sightings and that most believed that U.S. or foreign secret weapons, hoaxes, and balloons were responsible. Soon, however, the popular press began to bombard the public with magazine articles, books, and newspaper stories suggesting that the saucers were extraterrestrial in origin and were being piloted by aliens who were here to help earthlings survive the dangerous nuclear age.

In the 1950s, as more and more people began to report sightings and contact with extraterrestrial craft and their occupants, most of these individuals were considered to be either irrational or psychologically disturbed. The authors point out that this stigma has continued despite repeated scientific findings that human perception is unreliable, eyewitness behavior untrustworthy, and social psychological theory can easily account for mass UFO sightings. When the fact that visual hallucinations occasionally occur to normal people is considered, there is really little reason to assume the people who see and report UFOs are either irrational or psychotic.

Bartholomew and Howard also note that for many many people the widespread belief in extraterrestrials is a thinly disguised attempt "to resurrect the power and function of God within a plausible rationalistic framework. In other words, UFOs seem to be a substitute for God." As for crashed UFO stories, the authors say these are the substitutes for legends and folktales of earlier times and they "contain a poignant message about our secular age, in which science and reason

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have expelled gods, ghosts, and demons from our minds, quickly replacing their absence with more plausible and equally compelling contemporary themes to stimulate our imaginations: complex government conspiracies and alien creatures. That many people envisage such an exciting and wondrous universe over a godless, aimless, mechanistic existence should come as no surprise."

In summary, the authors see the UFO phenomenon as a classic example of a mass delusion marked by feelings of threat to the community, attempts to flee from the threat, collective wish-fulfillment, and small group scares. The Betty and Barney Hill event, the Taylor family in Kentucky episode, and the experience of the Knowles family in western Australia are seen as good examples of "small group" scares.

For my money, Part II of the book is by far the more interesting and valuable. Here, according to the authors, the fundamental assumption is that we have *not* been contacted by aliens and that based on the evidence to date there is no clear evidence of alien contact that is "acceptable to the general scientific community . . . There are a small number of scientists who claim to have proof or believe the evidence favors the existence of aliens, but we are referring to the majority of the scientific community." The next chapter, "In Praise Of Foresight and Fantasy," argues that without bold, creative scientific fantasies the achievements of modern science would not be possible. Moreover, the authors insist that the old "objectivist" ideas of "truth" and "reality" no longer hold and that we should think of "scientific evidence as a possible truth that is created when the world (or specific entities such as human beings or aliens) is approached from a particular system of beliefs . . . Does science tell us the truth (the complete truth and the final truth) about our objects of investigation? Absolutely not!" This point of view is but a prelude to a long chapter about UFO contactees and UFO abductees in which the authors maintain, rather than being psychopathological, *most* of these people are "fantasy-prone," i.e. they have difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality but otherwise are normal and healthy. Psychologists know that approximately 4 percent of the population do experience exceptionally vivid and involved fantasies. In Bartholomew and Howard's survey of 132 abductees and contactees, all showed one or more fantasy prone characteristics, i.e. psychic occurrences, out-of-body experience, seeing visions or apparitions, hypnotic susceptibility, a supernatural belief system, and a strong "spiritual" orientation.

**I have difficulty in seeing anything either practical or useful in believing in aliens and alien abductions.**

Here the authors make a valid and useful argument. I, as well as other skeptics, have also concluded that many of the alleged abductees are, indeed, fantasy-prone personality types and are in no way pathological. This does not mean, however, that many other alleged contactees and abductees are totally free from psychopathological symptoms or other serious behavioral disorders or are not perpetrating a hoax, or lying. The line between fantasy and reality is admittedly thin but we must be very careful not to cross it, blur it, or arrive at the point where we can no longer distinguish what is "real" from what is "imagined." If we do, we find ourselves in the land of the madman. It is essential to our mental health and well-being that we make hard, sharp, and clear distinctions between reality and delusions.

As for the authors' argument that labeling contactees and abductees as "fantasy prone" rather than pathological gives the therapist an alternative approach, competent clinicians don't need this alternative. They *automatically* look for the *true* cause and *real* meaning of their client's delusions. Moreover, they manage to maintain their own grip on reality and never buy into the client's delusion or accept as "fact" that their client *really is* Jesus Christ! In a very curious and disturbing final chapter of this otherwise persuasive book, the authors attempt to convince us that belief in alien spaceships, alien contacts, and alien abductions is not a bad thing after all. They cite Whitley Strieber as a good example of a person whose abduction experience led to paranoid symptoms until he admitted the "truth" to himself that the aliens were "real." Once he accepted this, the authors say, his paranoid symptoms disappeared: As for Strieber being a fantasy-prone personality, both Joe Nickell and I have also made this same argument before in the pages of this journal. Strieber's alleged abductions are also classic examples of sleep paralysis with hypnopompic hallucinations. As for Strieber's being better off, his latest book, *Confirmation: The Hard Evidence Of Aliens Among Us* (St. Martins, 1998), argues that not only are the aliens with us but he has implants to prove it—as well as evidence that the government is engaged in a vast conspiracy with the aliens to enslave the human race. This is not pathological and Strieber is to be admired? Well, Strieber did get rich and has, perhaps, inspired others to follow in his steps. If we agree with Bartholomew and Howard's definition of truth as "that which is practical or useful," I still have difficulty in seeing anything either practical or useful in believing in aliens and alien abductions.

I find it equally difficult to see anything either useful or practical in believing in witches, believing that the Earth is flat, believing that humans spontaneously combust, or believing that demons cause disease. Admittedly, I still cling to the old objectivist view of the scientific enterprise and continue to agree with Philip Klass that alien abductions remain a very dangerous game that sane, thoughtful, and socially responsible people would never want to play. This stance may be passé but I, personally, find it both practical and useful.