

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A Brief History of Abduction Research

DAVID M. JACOBS

Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122
e-mail: djacobs@temple.edu

Abstract—UFO abductions have been a part of the UFO phenomenon since the early years of public awareness of sightings. Although academics and scientists began to study UFO abduction, over the years cultural events and non-evidence-based theories provided barriers to academic and scientific inquiry into it. In spite of the lack of academic interest, the phenomenon continues unabated and unaffected by societal events.

Keywords: abductions—academics—research

It did not take long for UFO researchers to learn about the abduction phenomenon. UFO sightings came to public attention in 1947, and by 1953 there were already puzzling aspects of some sightings that researchers could not comprehend. In Florida, a Boy Scouts scoutmaster, Sonny Desvergers, claimed that he had seen a flying saucer from close up while standing underneath it. He said a ball of light came from it and he lost consciousness. He woke up 45 minutes or so later and he noticed that he was in a different area than when he became unconscious. His narrative of what happened to him was somewhat jumbled, and he even alluded to seeing creatures, but he did not elaborate.

With present-day knowledge, abduction researchers might see Desvergers' description and difficulty recounting his experience as signals that this case needed serious investigation. There were many like this before researchers could understand what was happening. Thus, the abduction phenomenon could easily have been couched in sighting cases from the beginning. In 1953, however, the Air Force judged the case to be a hoax, although the investigators could not figure out how he burned the roots of the grass and not the tops at the sighting scene.¹

In 1957, Brazilian law student Antonio Villas Boas provided the first account of an abduction. He said that creatures from a UFO forcibly took him into their craft and forced him to undergo a series of physical procedures that included the taking of blood. Afterwards, a strange looking female who looked half-human and half-creature forced him to have sex with her twice. The second time his sperm was collected in a receptacle. When she left, she pointed to her midsection and then up presumably towards the sky. After he was let out, his sense of the situation was that they were using him as a "stallion" to improve their stock. Most members

of the UFO research community thought this was an outlandish and embarrassing story. Although it took place in 1957, it did not appear in print until 1962. Few researchers gave it credence.²

Four years after the Villas Boas case, the famed Barney and Betty Hill abduction took place. The Hills claimed that aliens abducted them from their car into a UFO. When they were returned, they promptly forgot nearly everything that had happened. The couple seemed to be missing 2 hours of time on a trip down Highway 1 in New Hampshire as they drove home. Anxiety over the missing time and strange dreams led them to the noted psychiatrist and hypnotist Benjamin Simon, who retrieved their memories with hypnosis. Their accounts described not only a physical examination, but also alien interest in reproduction; the abductors took a sperm sample from Barney and gave Betty what she thought was a “pregnancy test.”

The Hills were a serious couple. They did not resemble the infamous 1950s “contactees” who claimed ongoing contact with Space Brothers and who went on trips in UFOs, sometimes to other planets. UFO researchers had fought them in the 1950s and did not want another round of new contactee battles. In 1966 the publication of a book about the Hills’ story began the public’s fascination with abductions, but UFO researchers were not so enthusiastic. The specter of the contactees and the possibility that deluded people were psychologically generating these accounts was too great.³

During the next few years, a few more abduction cases began to be uncovered. But understanding what was actually happening proved to be far more difficult than analyzing UFO sightings. People understood that strange things had happened to them, but they were at a loss to explain them or even remember what they were. Using the Simon model, a few researchers attempted hypnosis, but the results, while suggestive of something unusual happening, were not consistent with each other except in broad terms of being taken and given examinations.

By the 1970s, while researchers were becoming aware of abductions, two incidents generated national publicity that helped make the subject familiar to most Americans: the Pascagoula and the Travis Walton abductions. In Pascagoula, Mississippi, in October 1973, Calvin Parker and Charles Hickson claimed that they were taken on board a UFO and examined, but that was all they could remember. The venerable UFO investigator J. Allen Hynek and University of California–Berkeley engineering professor James Harder came to Mississippi to investigate. Harder tried hypnosis on the traumatized Hickson, but his attempt was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the case made national news. No evidence of a hoax turned up.⁴

The heavily publicized 1975 Travis Walton case spanned 5 days of missing time. He consciously remembered about 20 minutes of what happened to him, but like the Pascagoula case, more information was not forthcoming. Also in 1975, NBC showed a TV movie about the Hill case, *The UFO Incident*. Millions of people saw a serious rendition of an abduction event. By the end of the 1970s, the media began to pay more attention to the phenomenon. UFO researchers were

also becoming more interested in it because the accounts were increasing from reputable people, even though they should not have been because by their very nature they cast aspersions upon the claimants' mental stability.

Soon other cases came forward and researchers struggled to deal with them. University of Wyoming psychology professor Leo Sprinkle learned hypnosis and began to look into cases while Harder continued his research. Independent researchers like Raymond Fowler and Ann Druffel wrote investigative books about people's experiences. Researchers Jim and Coral Lorenzen publicized abduction accounts in their books and articles. Folklorist Thomas E. Bullard scrutinized abduction accounts for folklore influence and for patterns. University of Connecticut psychology professor Kenneth Ring tried to place the phenomenon within more common paradigms like near death experiences.⁵

By the end of the 1970s, three basic assumptions had emerged—abductions were random adult-onset single events, the abductors' intent seemed to be to study humans, and people were making contact with extraterrestrials. Other patterns were slow in coming. People described similar events but memory problems prevented full and accurate expositions. Although abductions were gradually becoming a significant force in UFO study, most researchers were still convinced that they were psychological in origin.

In the late 1970s, the famed artist Budd Hopkins became interested in abductions after publishing an analysis of a UFO and "occupant" sighting that had happened to an acquaintance across the street from his New York City home. Hopkins' article provoked a large number of letters about people's unusual experiences. He recognized the abduction material and began the process of comparing abductees' accounts and searching for similarities. With a psychologist doing the hypnosis, Hopkins found that the seven abductees with whom he had worked all had unusual scars, they could be abducted more than once, and they had odd masking memories of animals and other figures that were hidden abduction memories. He confirmed and elaborated upon the examinations of abductees. The book provided what UFO researchers had been looking for—detailed, matching, non-idiosyncratic accounts.

Hopkins' 1981 book *Missing Time*⁶ was a milestone in abduction research and it began to draw the serious attention of other researchers. Hopkins opened a window on the phenomenon and he proved that others could do the same. In 1982 I became one of the UFO researchers who began to look through that window. By 1986 I was doing hypnosis with abductees to find out for myself what the abduction phenomenon was. I quickly discovered that hypnosis was not an easy tool to use. It required knowledge of the problems and pitfalls of false memories, confabulation, and other unforeseen problems specific to abduction memories. After making mistakes, I felt my way around in it very gingerly for the next few years.⁶

In the meantime, Hopkins continued his research, and in 1987 he published *Intruders*.⁷ In this best-selling book he followed a family beset by abductions and uncovered accounts of fetuses implanted in women and removed weeks later.

He found babies and toddlers that appeared to have physical and mental elements of both humans and aliens. He called them “hybrids.” He found that people were abducted more than one time, ending the theory of random adult-onset single events. His investigation into families of abductees suggested that the phenomenon might be intergenerational. He uncovered the depth of trauma on some abductees that suggested physical and not psychological causation. He was beginning to flesh out the phenomenon as never before.⁷

At the same time *Intruders* came out, writer Whitley Strieber published his immensely popular *Communion*.⁸ The book was a sensational *New York Times* best-seller. Although *Intruders* was far more meaningful in its uncovering and analysis of abduction patterns and activities, the Strieber book was famous not only because of its personal story, but for its cover’s fanciful (and incorrect) close-up illustration of an alien’s head. Many individuals looked at the alien’s peering eyes and inexplicably lapsed into panic. A torrent of people began to question why the cover had seemingly irrationally scared them. Furthermore, many were at a loss to explain why they in some way knew that the alien’s head shape was wrong. Investigation into some of those whom the book frightened revealed a history of abduction activity. In effect, the response to Strieber’s cover art seemed to confirm Hopkins’ discovery of ubiquitous hidden abductions.

The success of both books prompted a rash of television shows about the subject and suddenly the phenomenon emerged as a reliable popular culture revenue generator. Eventually, the figure of an alien (not necessarily Strieber’s) became a cultural icon used by advertising agencies to sell a wide range of products from cars to computers to candy.

As media interest grew, so did the numbers of abduction researchers. Licensed hypnotherapists such as Yvonne Smith, licensed clinical social workers such as John Carpenter, NASA psychologist Richard Haines, and University of North Texas English professor Karla Turner all began to investigate abductions through hypnosis. While many abduction researchers were competent and conscientious, many others were new to the field and were anxious to place the phenomenon into well-known spiritual, religious, and New Age contexts. Hypnosis offered an easy opportunity to do this. Some of the more naïve researchers began to tie abduction phenomena to angels, devils, the Bible, past lives, and even future lives. Many, but not all, of these investigators strongly required and often received the agreement they sought from the sometimes vulnerable abductees undergoing hypnosis.

Serious researchers realized that competency in both the techniques and pitfalls of hypnosis and knowledge of the abduction phenomenon was optimum for confirmable data. More commonly, however, amateur researchers with personal agendas began to do hypnosis of abductees. As a result, the evidence obtained tended to mirror the incompetent hypnotist’s agenda. Furthermore, “channeled” information has been used to suggest that abductions are amenable to someone communicating with aliens through one’s mind and then asking questions and receiving answers. The information generated has not proven to be worthwhile even though there might be a “hit” or two out of the enormous mass of channeled

material generated over the decades. Unfortunately, neither the media nor the academic community could distinguish between these researchers and the competent ones. The exploration of abductions was becoming less rather than more rigorous for many investigators.

The 1990s started with the publication of a 1991 Roper poll and with the introduction of John Mack into the debate. The random sampling of almost 6000 people showed that the number of Americans who had abduction-like experiences was far greater than anyone had ever imagined. The poll indicated that they had seen spirits, religious figures, and ghosts, and had other experiences that many abductees had claimed before investigating their memories. These events often resolved into abduction cases when the claimants recalled the events with hypnosis.⁹ Hopkins and I estimated that, although it was impossible to know without individual investigation, as many as 2% of the American public might have had abduction experiences. A few researchers criticized the survey on methodological grounds, but regardless of the poll numbers, thousands of purported abductees had already directly contacted investigators, indicating that there were a substantial number of people in the country who felt this phenomenon had happened to them.¹⁰

John Mack became interested in the subject after attending a 1990 lecture by Budd Hopkins. A noted Harvard professor of psychiatry and a Pulitzer Prize winner, Mack immediately understood that abductee accounts did not match any conventional psychological models. Having studied theories of transformational consciousness with Stanislov Grof, he felt that perhaps the phenomenon abutted theories about the place of consciousness in the universe. Although he found the same procedures that other researchers found, his two books, *Abduction* (1994) and *Passport to the Cosmos* (1999),¹¹ espoused the idea that Western Science was not equipped to account for a phenomenon that spanned both the experiential and the spiritual worlds. Eventually, he became more interested in transformational studies, and he ended his abduction research a few years before his death in 2004.

Mack's Harvard affiliation helped the abduction phenomenon get more attention. Unfortunately, he also got attention as a Harvard committee convened to investigate his research. Although this unprecedented committee found no improprieties, it questioned his methodology. The well-publicized affair showed that working in the UFO and abduction field within the confines of academia could be a very risky endeavor. With no university or institutional funding for research into the subject, nearly all researchers did their work with their own money and time.

My own research resulted in my books, *Secret Life* (1992) and *The Threat* (1998).¹² I was able to develop information about the complex neurological manipulations involved with carrying out abductions and the procedures used on abductees. I studied the function of secrecy and the role of hybrids in the program. The babies that Hopkins had discovered were growing into adults and they seemed to have increasingly complex functions within the abduction scenario. In spite of

commonly held belief, the evidence for abductions being an experiment or a study of humans did not materialize. Rather, the evidence pointed to a systematic program with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It seemed to be goal-directed, and abductees indicated that they were possibly being trained for future events. More importantly, for serious researchers it was increasingly evident that the phenomenon had a life of its own completely unrelated to the abductees' lives or to the society.¹²

In the meantime, abductees were coming forward in ever-growing numbers. Thousands of people were contacting researchers and telling them of abduction-related experiences; non-alcohol, drug, or brain disorder-related missing time, memories of lying on a table in a gray circular room, awakening in the morning wearing their clothes inside out or wearing an unknown person's clothes. They lived in "haunted houses" no matter where they moved. They saw deceased relatives and religious figures; they talked to owls, raccoons, deer, and other large-eyed animals. They found themselves driving on a highway and suddenly it was 2 hours later and they were still in the car driving on the same spot they had been before.

These experiences were bolstered by researchers' rising knowledge of the physicality of abductions. They found that when abducted, people were physically missing from their normal environments. When they were returned, they often had physical anomalies including fully-formed scars, bruises, and other sequelae that were nonexistent before the event. They were often abducted in groups. They could verify each other's abduction accounts. The repeated precision of the detail dovetailed exactly with other accounts even when those accounts had never been publicized. Furthermore, the randomness of abduction claimants spread across all socio-economic, intellectual, educational, racial, religious, geographic, political, and gender lines. Ph.D.'s, M.D.'s, L.L.D.'s, academics, scientists, business people, and other high functioning individuals told of the same events as did high school and middle school dropouts, some of whom could not hold a job. Researchers were now realizing that the original cases of Villas Boas and the Hills were reflective of a consistent narrative that had continued for over half a century.

By the end of the 20th century other researchers began to specialize in certain aspects of abductions and make suggestive discoveries. Roger Leir, a doctor of podiatry in Los Angeles, began a program of removing what abductees thought were implants from their bodies. Australian investigator Bill Chalker searched for forensic evidence of alien abductions. Although ridiculed by other researchers, Michael Menkin began experimenting with head covering devices that might prevent individual abductions. Those who used them reported positive results. More importantly, abduction researchers using hypnosis properly were building a depth of knowledge of the subject unlike any other scientifically fringe phenomenon in modern times.¹³

In spite of the gains made in understanding abductions, the scientific and academic community never deviated from the assumption that the phenomenon

was psychologically generated. Lay and academic explanations for the phenomenon ranged from celebrity-seeking to fears of the new millennium, to sleep paralysis, to any number of bizarre and familiar human fears, desires, and influences. To the extreme frustration of abduction researchers, all of the more than 30 published explanations exhibited a lack of knowledge of the evidence, a disregarding of the evidence, and/or a distortion of the evidence. Not a single explanation took into the account the totality of the abduction evidence. Very few in the academic field, with notable exceptions like SUNY Brockport psychology professor Stuart Appelle, Hobart and William Smith University political science professor Jodi Dean, and a few others, could think even neutrally about the subject.

The academic community seemed secure in its outlook because of the charlatans and hoaxers who came forward with information about aliens coming here to spread the word of God, or to protect us from bad aliens, or to help us ascend to a higher state of consciousness. Some of the more egregious characters claimed to have been named ambassadors to the aliens who have their own interplanetary governmental structure. Conspiracy theorists claimed that the U.S. government was behind all the abductions. The media did not help much by broadcasting shows like the dubious *Alien Autopsy*. All this placed the subject squarely in the middle of a less than savory science fiction classification. Most academics, rather than even examining the idea that the phenomenon was anomalous, resorted to the Space-is-Big-You-Can't-Get-Here-From-There argument and then dismissed it all. Other academics insisted on pursuing the psychologically-based arguments that made abduction cultural artifacts. Their theories did not reflect any previous research into or substantive knowledge about the subject.¹⁴ In the face of the obstacles, a few academics quietly researched the abduction phenomenon. Psychology professors Don Donderi at McGill University and Stuart Appelle, working with researchers Budd Hopkins and Ted Davis, were exploring more systematic ways to evaluate abductee accounts through questionnaires.

By 2008, the outlook for any widespread scientific or academic involvement with the abduction phenomenon seemed as implausible as the phenomenon itself. For UFO researchers, scientists' retreat from studying abductions extended now to the ubiquitous UFO sightings. For them, scientists' attitudes could be best understood using ostrich and sand analogies. Independent researchers, along with a few academics, were carrying on research into the subject without the aid of institutional funding, academic backing, and scientific curiosity or even passing interest by other academics. In fact, hostility had replaced the mild interest shown in past decades. The layering of New Age theories, channeled information, government conspiracy theories, popular culture, hypnosis as a research instrument, the fallibility of memory, and the seeming scientific implausibility of UFO abductions buried the phenomenon virtually out of reach of academic interest and created resistance, disinterest, and even hostility among academic professionals. This hostility made it difficult, if not impossible, for scholars and scientists to study the situation within the context of normal academic activities, even in the unlikely

event that they wanted to. That lack of academic or institutional support not only prevented research into the subject, it added to the presumed illegitimacy of it. If academics were not studying it, it must be unworthy of attention, thus there is no need for academics to study it. Abductions were caught in a perfect cultural storm—a storm that had no effect on the narratives given by competently investigated claimants.

In 2000, I edited a collection of articles about UFOs and abductions that included 10 serious researchers. Published by the University Press of Kansas, it was aimed at showing the academic community that the UFO and abduction phenomenon had substance and was amenable to rational inquiry devoid of cultural infusion. I and others involved with the project were hopeful that the publication of the university press book would stimulate interest in the subject. It did not.¹⁵

But indications were that this fringe-of-the-fringe, unlikely, improbable, implausible, dubious, and unbelievable phenomenon was, in all likelihood, not going to go away. It had continued for quite a long time and it exhibited no decrease in the number of abductees and there was evidence that they were increasing. The abduction phenomenon appeared to have an internal integrity that was logical, complex, and assertive. It was global, cross cultural, and devoid of personal idiosyncratic aspects that would make it obviously psychologically generated. It was not amenable to easy answers, and no matter how hard researchers tried, they could not find internally generated causative factors for it. The lack of a viable psychological theory about abductions that takes into account all the evidence is the anomaly that, in a Kuhnian sense, continues to challenge the prevailing paradigm of what is possible, what is occurring, and what could not possibly be. By 2009 the academic community was further away from resolving this anomaly than ever before.

References

- ¹ Clark, J. (1998). Florida scoutmaster case. In *The UFO Encyclopedia* (pp. 412–414). Omnigraphics.
- ² Clark, J. (1998). Villas Boas CE3. In *The UFO Encyclopedia* (pp. 974–977). Omnigraphics.
- ³ Fuller, J. (1966). *The Interrupted Journey*. Dial Press.
- ⁴ Clark, J. (1998). Pascagoula abduction case. In *The UFO Encyclopedia* (pp. 714–719). Omnigraphics. Walton, T. (1996). *Fire in the Sky*. New York: Marlowe.
- ⁵ Bullard, T. E. (1987). *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery*. Mount Ranier, MD: Fund for UFO Research. Druffel, A. (1980). *The Tujunga Canyon Contacts*. Prentice Hall. Lorenzen, C. (1977). *Abducted! Confrontation with Beings From Outer Space*. Berkley Medallion. Fowler, R. E. (1979). *The Andreasson Affair*. Prentice Hall. Ring, K. (1992). *The Omega Project: Near Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large*. William Morrow.
- ⁶ Hopkins, B. (1981). *Missing Time*. New York: Richard Marek Publishers.
- ⁷ Hopkins, B. (1987). *Intruders*. Random House.
- ⁸ Strieber, W. (1987). *Communion*. Morrow.

- ⁹ Hopkins, B., Jacobs, D., Mack, J., & Westrum, R. (1991). *Unusual Personal Experience: An Analysis of Data from Three National Surveys*. Las Vegas, NV: Bigelow Holding Corporation.
- ¹⁰ For a discussion of the Roper poll see Jacobs, D. (1998). *The Threat*. Simon & Schuster. For a critique of the poll see Hall, R. L., Rodeghier, M., & Johnson, D. (1992). The prevalence of abductions: A critical look. *Journal of UFO Studies*, n.s. 4, 131–135.
- ¹¹ Mack, J. E. (1994). *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. Scribner. (1999). *Passport to the Cosmos*. Crown.
- ¹² Jacobs, D. M. (1992). *Secret Life: Firsthand Accounts of UFO Abductions*. Simon & Schuster. (1998). *The Threat*. Simon & Schuster.
- ¹³ Leir, R. (1998). *The Alien and the Scalpel*. Columbus, NC: Granite Publishing. Chalker, B. (2005). *The Hair of the Alien*. New York: Paraview Pocket Books. Menkin, M. Available at: www.stopabductions.com. Accessed March 2009.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Clancy, S. (2005). *Abducted: How People Come to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens*. Harvard University Press. For a critique of Clancy see www.ufoabduction.com.
- ¹⁵ Jacobs, D. M. (Ed.). (2000). *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.