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## Abductions: The Boundary Deficit Hypothesis by Martin Kottmeyer

As claims about the reality of alien abductions multiply, the assertion is increasingly heard that psychology offers little or no insight into how such experiences could occur if they are unreal. Abductees are normal people. Tests prove it. How, then, could normal people make such impossible claims as those found in abduction narratives and not be right? If this assertion is true, the theatre version of the UFO phenomenon is in jeopardy. To the extent that the UFO phenomenon is a genre of theatre and an expression of the human imagination, it must be amenable to psychological study. Clearly this is a paradox that needs to be addressed.

Drama is quintessentially involved with conflict, the exercise of power. Aliens and their magical technology represent an elementary extreme in the spectrum of power relationships seen in theatre. The vitality of the UFO mythos lies precisely in its ability to provoke fear and desire over the power symbolised in the role of the alien. Studies of UFO belief repeatedly implicate the frustration of the will to power. (1)

The clearest evidence for this fact is Stephen P. Resta's study which found strength of UFO belief is well correlated with externality, a generalised attitude that one has little control over one's life. (2) The significant correlation between UFO belief and belief in witches, necromancy, and ghosts doubtless derives from this general sense of powerlessness. (3) Witchcraft in some form is found in all societies and practised most avidly by those lacking, but desiring, power. A subtle sociological datum worth noting is Donald Warren's Gallup poll analysis which found elevated levels of UFO belief among individuals who failed to achieve the economic level of status that their education would lead society to expect. (4)

UFO reports themselves give ample testimony to the predominance of powerlessness as a shaping factor of UFO experiences. The dominant emotion in reports is fear. If UFOs represent a symbol of wholeness, as Jungians claim, this is assuredly a counterintuitive finding. We should see serenity and fulfilment. UFOs, in the great majority of cases, behave like agents of chaos. Vehicles lose power. Witnesses are paralysed. Life is disrupted. Entropy reigns. Abduction is so natural an extension of the core of UFO belief, the mystery is not that it appeared, but why it took so long as it did to be accepted.

Even a person totally naive in psychological analysis should be able to satisfy himself that the overarching theme of abduction narratives is powerlessness. This is manifest not in the mere sense of capture and involuntary scrutiny, but in the extraordinary variety of dramatic intrusions imposed on the abductee.

Among the accounts in the literature one will find pain inflicted in many different parts of the body including the head, the neck, the chest, the stomach, the back, and the navel. Needles, absurdly big at times, are used to penetrate a variety of points including the nose, the arm, the navel, an eye socket with the eye removed, and wires have been inserted into one man's penis and anus. Organs have been removed and replaced. Sometimes the body is completely ripped apart and put back together. One abductee had her eye scraped with a knife. Some people have their limbs pulled sharply, their hair pulled, even their head pulled and squeezed by aliens. Abductees are subjected to rape, castration, impregnation, abortion, choking, drowning, freezing, bleeding profusely, temporary blinding, hand cramps, being stripped, having their brains scrambled, and being confronted with their personal phobia.

Abductees have also reported sensations of weakness, of hurtling or tumbling through space, of spinning, of being stuck, of being buried alive, and, once, of crashing to the ground with a saucer. Though there is no reason to be discerned in such a pattern, there is clearly a rhyme with the theme being unfolded.

It should be no surprise that intense expressions of powerlessness are not unique to ET settings. Fictive past-life regressions are commonly quite dramatic. (5) In some individuals daytime stream-of-consciousness fantasies can take on embarrassingly vivid facets that provoke fear. (6)

Alvin Lawson precedes me in noting the striking correspondence between bad LSD trips and abduction experiences in terms not only of emotive engagement, but of bizarre somatic threats such as umbilical pain being a common narrative sub-plot. Far and away the most useful observation, however, is that nightmares provide the ideal model to map abduction experiences. Nightmare overwhelmingly involve powerlessness. They commonly reflect certain basic fears of childhood: fear of completely dissolving or being destroyed; fear of mutilation, castration, loss of body parts; fear of isolation and abandonment; fear of loss of sustenance and love; and an inability to control the body. They are intensely rendered dramas which utilise numerous motifs familiar among abduction stories: chase, capture, torture, imminent catastrophe, wild kinetic sensations, and eerie background scenes. Regarding the last, it is especially damning how fog frequently finds its way into abduction tales, this being a form of artistic license utilised in dozens of SF movies and programmes and possessing a lineage stretching back to Lovecraft and probably beyond.

The phenomenon of an introductory eerie silence just prior to encountering aliens, a commonplace noted by Raymond Fowler, similarly has a lineage that dates back at least to H.G. Wells and "The War of the Worlds". As Colin Greenland might say, everyone subconsciously recognises such things as an Indication of Monsters. (7) It follows that the abductionologists' appreciation of the "emotional authenticity" and validity of abductee writings should not lead us to leap to the conclusion that such accounts are materially authentic and valid. The unconscious can and does invest fictions with expressions of passion.

It seems logical at this point to ask if the psychology of nightmares can throw any light on what is happening in alien abduction experiences. While not all the puzzles of nightmares have been solved, psychology has recently made significant strides in understanding why some people develop them and others do not. In building a profile of nightmare sufferers Ernest Hartmann developed a conceptual model termed boundary theory which expands on a set of propositions about boundaries in the mind formulated by a handful of earlier psychoanalytic theorists. It is from Hartmann's study "The Nightmare" that we will develop the blueprint of our argument. (8)

Boundary theory begins with the axiom that as the mind matures, it categorises experiences. It walls off certain sets to be distinct from other sets. Boundaries become set up between what is self and what is non-self, between sleep and waking experiences, between fantasy and reality, passion and reason, ego and id, masculine and feminine, and a large host of other experiential categories. This drive to categorise is subject to natural variation. The determinants of the strength of that drive appear to be biochemical and genetic and probably have no environmental component such as trauma. When the drive is weak the boundaries between categories are thinner, more permeable or more fluid. When the boundaries become abnormally thin one sees psychopathologies like schizophrenia. Hartmann discovered individuals who suffer from nightmares have thin boundaries. From this central mental characteristic one can derive a large constellation of traits that set these people apart from the general population.

From earliest childhood, people with thin boundaries are perceived as "different". They are regarded as more sensitive than their peers. Thin character armour causes them to be more fragile and easily hurt. They are easily empathic, but dive into relationships too deeply too quickly. Recipients of their affection will regard them as uncomfortably close and clinging and they are thus frequently rejected. Experience with their vulnerability teaches them to be wary of entering into relationships with others. Adolescence tends to be stormy and difficult. Adult relationships - whether sexual, marital or friendships - also tend to be unsettled and variable. A slight tendency to paranoia is common. One-third will have contemplated or attempted suicide.

Experimentation with drugs tends to yield bad trips and is quickly abandoned. They are usually alert to lights, sounds and sensations. They tend to have fluid sexual identities. Bisexuals are over-represented in the nightmare sufferers' population and it is rare to find manly men or womanly women in it. Macho pigs apparently do not have nightmares. They are not rule followers. Either they reject society or society rejects them. They are rebels and outsiders. There is a striking tendency for these people to find their way into fields involving artistic self-expression; musicians, poets, writers, art teachers, etc. Some develop their empathic tendencies and become therapists. Ordinary blue or white collar jobs are rare.

Hartmann believes the predominance of artists results from the fact that thin boundaries allow them to experience the world more directly and painfully than others. The ability to experience their inner life in a very direct fashion contributes to the authenticity of their creations. They become lost in daydreaming quite easily and even experience daymares - a phenomenon people with thick boundaries won't even realise exists. This trait of imaginative absorption should also make nightmare sufferers good hypnotic subjects. (9) Boundary deficits also contribute to fluid memories and a fluid time sense.

To be considered a candidate for the hypothesis that one is a victim of alien abduction a person must present certain symptoms. Among the factors which are looked for are conscious memories of an abduction, revealing nightmares, missing time, forgotten scars, or dramatic reactions to seemingly trivial stimuli like distant nocturnal lights. The last four factors act as screening devices to yield a population of boundary deficit individuals. This is blatant in the case of people whose candidacy is based on nightmares of aliens. It is subtler in the other symptoms.

People who have thin boundaries in their time sense virtually by definition will experience episodes of missing time. People with fluid memories could easily lose track of the event that led to the creation of a scar. People with weak ego-id boundaries and a sense of powerlessness probably would over-react to distant inexplicable lights as symbols of power. These candidates, in turn, are subject to further screening by their performance under hypnosis. The thicker the boundary, the less likely it is that a convincing narrative will emerge or be accepted as emotionally valid. We would predict the final population of abduction claimants would be biased in favour of a high proportion of boundary-deficit personalities.

The evidence that abductees have boundary-deficit personalities is, if not definitive, reasonably convincing. The points of correspondence between abductees and nightmare sufferers are several and consistent.

Ufology regards the Slater psychological study of nine abductees as an experimentum crucis for the view that abductees are victims of real extraterrestrial

intrusions. It affirmed not only the normality of abductees, but offered a hint of traumatisation in the finding that abductees showed a tendency to display distrust and interpersonal caution. It is time to remind everyone, however, of what Slater's full results were reported to be. Slater found abductees had rich inner lives; a relatively weak sense of identity, particularly a weak sexual identity; vulnerability; and an alertness characteristic of both perceptual sophistication and interpersonal caution. (10)

All four of these traits are characteristic of boundary-deficit minds. Clearly the abduction-reality hypothesis is, in this instance, unparsimonious. It fails to explain the presence of rich inner lives, weak identities and vulnerability. (I reject Slater's post hoc attempt to account for the weak sexual identity via childhood trauma induced by involuntary surgical penetrations as undocumented, and just plain weird.) It should not be overlooked that Slater volunteered the opinion that her test subjects did not represent an ordinary cross-section of the population. She found some were "downright eccentric or odd" and that the group as a whole was "very distinctive, unusual, and interesting". (11)

This nicely parallels Hartmann's observation that boundary-deficit personalities are perceived as "different" from "normal" people. Slater's study does indeed seem to be an *experimentum crucis*, but the conclusion it points toward is perfectly opposite from what ufologists have been assuming.

The boundary-deficit hypothesis evidently can also be invoked to explain the unusual proportion of artist-type individuals that I discovered in testing Rimmer's hypothesis. Roughly one-third of abductees showed evidence of artistic self-expression in their backgrounds in my sample population, as you may recall. Hartmann's study would also lead us to expect an unusual number of psychotherapists among abductees. In a recent paper, Budd Hopkins reported that in a population of 180 probable abductees he found many mental health professionals: two psychiatrists, three PhD psychologists and an unstated number of psychotherapists with Master's degrees. (12)

It would obviously be child's play to pick and choose isolated bits of confirming or discordant biographical information from the abductee literature and argue about the fit of Hartmann's boundary-deficit profile to various individual cases. It would be a pleasant diversion, but would ultimately not prove much one way or the other given the scanty nature of background information in almost all abduction narratives. I exempt Whitley Strieber's autobiography from dismissal, however, for it is both detailed and highly revealing.

Strieber's experiences resound with emotions of powerlessness. He speaks eloquently of the despair, extreme dread, crazed terror and panic inspired by his experience. The incident with the faecal probe is recognisably a

pseudo-homosexual rape fantasy of the form discussed in Ovesey's studies. (13) As the emotions prove, the incident has nothing to do with eroticism but everything to do with the expression of powerlessness. Psychiatrists would predict that Strieber was repressing resentment and hostility from having to be subordinate in an undesired social relationship. The incident with the mind wand - "You'll ruin a beautiful mind" - is more interesting since it reflects the childhood fear of the dissolution of self. This was very much on Strieber's mind at the time. We can see it in his story "Pain" where his narrator dreams of friendly tormentors with a high-powered rifle who he asks to hug him. The core of the narrator's identity ebbs away and he suffers through the torture of the tearing down of his personality. (14) Strieber's picture-drama of the world blowing up with horns of smoke streaking out from it similarly bespeaks the fear of dissolution, since world destructions commonly precede the onset of psychosis as the mind projects the internal catastrophe into the world at large. (15)

The evidence for thin boundaries in Strieber's personality is highly convincing. Strieber's curious assessment that he is "80% convinced" of the reality of his experiences immediately impresses one that his demarcation between reality and fantasy is rather fluid. Strieber's memory is disturbingly fluid as revealed in his willingness to accept another person's word that he wasn't present at the historic bell-tower sniper incident at the University of Texas - an event he elsewhere discusses in gruesome detail. (16) The manner in which he strips away his memory of past anomalies and tosses them out as screen memory fictions covering alien encounters has an almost ghoulish self-mutilation quality like making his identity self-destruct before our eyes.

Strieber is an outsider. This is less indicated by his questioning of Catholic faith than by his seeking spiritual values in witchcraft, mysticism and Gurdjieff. Strieber's wife volunteered the opinion that her husband has "a very unique head" and is openly distressed over the vulnerability he manifests at one point. Strieber confessed he contemplated suicide before contacting Budd Hopkins about his fears. Paranoid mentation is clearly evident in his book and has at times led to bizarre speculations. In a radio interview with Tom Snyder, Strieber wondered aloud if a gagster who was selling alien abduction insurance wasn't a dishonest dupe of Cosmic Watergate because ridicule was a known MO of the UFO cover-up. (17) Strieber's encounters with critics consistently show projective hostility and a thin character armour, probably best shown in his pre-emptive strike to Thomas Disch when he found he would be reviewing his book "Communion" for The Nation. Strieber's success as a writer of horror fiction lastly clinches the argument that he is a boundary-deficit personality.

It is interesting to note, parenthetically, that Strieber also manifests a constellation of traits that object-relations theory explains as resulting from traumas early in childhood when the child is first developing the character armour during the phase

of separation and individuation. Prominent among these traits are threats of inner fragmentation like those cited above; primitive emotional defences including paranoia and, most primitive of all, splitting; archaic narcissistic formations involving grandiosity; inability to integrate the hostile and living aspects of parental introjects; and a tendency to project hostility.

A couple of reviewers of "Communion" were quite confused as to how Strieber failed to be repelled by the prospect of communion with aliens who threatened his beautiful mind and caused such body terror as he described. The answer is found in the trait of splitting which allows the individual to hold contradictory emotional stances and not see the contradiction. Strieber never developed the higher forms of emotional defence found in those with thicker boundaries in adulthood. If Strieber has indeed suffered separation trauma as a child, it is apparent that is why communion is such a central concern to him. He never resolved the problem of separating his self from his parental object relations. The upshot of all these observations is that Strieber's alien experiences form a unity with the issues of his unconscious. I am 0% convinced of the objective reality of his abduction. (18)

In addition to forming a coherent assembly of the known facts about the psychology of abductees, the boundary-deficit hypothesis is richly testable. Hartmann's profile offers numerous predictions about the inner world of abductees. Those listed above are just a fraction of the possibilities. If you want to know if missing time derives from a fluid time sense or a fluid memory, you can test people who report this for concomitant phenomena: frequent episodes of *deja vu* or *jamais vu*, primal repression dated to two or three years of age as opposed to four or five, days organised according to flexible rather than rigid schedules, future plans lacking specific time frames, and a tendency to not answer questions in a temporally structured pattern. The core claim about a low categorisation drive can be tested by cognitive tests like those cited in a book by Theodore Sarbin. (19)

The boundary-deficit proposition has in it the implicit resolution of the paradox of how people without significant psychopathology can entertain the belief that they are victims of alien abduction. The abduction myth has opportunistic features wherein boundary-deficit traits act to justify id material crossing ego boundaries being considered real. Whether the crossing is prompted by leaky sleep/wake boundaries (as in "Communion"'s hypnopompic nightmares) or by the opening of the boundary for role-taking behaviour, the narrative material is no more evidence of pathology than an LSD trip is proof that LSD is a toxin, (20) or a symphony arising from a composer's unconscious can be called a product of psychosis. Belief in the reality of the material need not evoke thin reality/fantasy boundaries, since a logic is present within the received myth which requires a trusting, or rather distrusting, demeanour for its acceptance. If you have a forgotten scar and a ufologist unleashes a creative id to pull together a dramatic nightmare, is it illogical to wonder if the myth is right and the nightmare explains the scar? In the

context of a belief in furtive extraterrestrials, it is not.

As developmental psychologists well understand, unconformative behaviour and absurd beliefs often owe more to pathological contexts than organic dysfunction. If there is any pathology to abduction belief it is within the science of ufology itself - a point I explore elsewhere. (21) Normal people will necessarily not waste their time or the money needed to develop a thoroughgoing scientific judgement on all the facts and systems of belief they are exposed to in life. Since it has been a relatively harmless and a glorious entertainment (in Jacques Barzun's sense of science as a glorious entertainment) the concept of UFOs survives to haunt the imaginations of millions and attract the attention of individuals who have been the victims of life's conflicts. From the alchemy of ideas and passions transformed by the human unconscious emerges the fertile and labyrinthine myth and mystery of the UFO drama.

[Whitley Strieber's homepage](#)

## Notes

1. For the best treatment of the will to power concept I recommend Kaufmann, Walter; "Discovering the Mind", Vol. 2, McGraw Hill, 1980
2. Resta, Stephen P.; "The relationship of anomie and externality to the strength of belief in unidentified flying objects", dissertation, Loyola College Graduate School, Baltimore, Maryland, 30 October 1975. Resta failed to find a significant correlation between anomie and UFO belief. This could be consistent with a paranoid orientation. Paranoia acts as a defence against depression and meaninglessness.
3. Zusne, Leonard and Jones, Warren H.; "Anomalistic Psychology", Lawrence Erlbaum, 1982, 184-185
4. Warren, Donald I.; "Status inconsistency theory and flying saucer sightings", Science, 170 (6 November 1970), 137
5. Watson, Ian; "All in the Mind", Doubleday, 1984, 137
6. Caughey, John L.; "Fantasy worlds and self-maintenance in contemporary American life", Zygon, 23, No. 2 (June 1988), 138, n. 3
7. Greenland, Colin; "An indication of monsters"; in Slusser, George E. and Rabkin, Eric S.; "Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction", Southern Illinois University, 1987, 208-217

8. Hartmann, Ernest; "The Nightmare: The Psychology and Biology of Terrifying Dreams", Basic Books, 1984
9. Sarbin, Theodore R. and Coe, William, C.; "Hypnosis: A Social Psychological Analysis of Influence Communication", Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1972
10. "Abductees are "normal" people", International UFO Reporter, 9, No. 4 (July/August 1984), 10-12
11. Bloecher, Ted; Clamar, Aphrodite; and Hopkins, Budd; "Final Report on the Psychological testing of UFO Abductees", Fund for UFO Research, 1985
12. Hopkins, Budd; "UFO Abductions - the Skeleton Key", "MUFON 1988 International UFO Symposium Proceedings", 105
13. Karlen, Arno; "Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View", W.W. Norton, 1971
14. Etchison, Dennis; "Cutting Edge", Doubleday, 1986, 279-280
15. Eidelberg, Ludwig; "Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis", Free Press, 1968, 351
16. Strieber, Whitley; "On the road (with visitors)", International UFO Reporter, January/February 1987, 9. Winter, Douglas; "Faces of Fear", Berkeley Books, 1985, 192-206
17. Tom Snyder interview with Whitley Strieber, WIS Radio, Chicago, 2 March 1988
18. Meissner, W.W.; "Narcissistic personalities and borderline conditions: a differential diagnosis"; in Morrison, Andrew P. (ed.); "Essential Papers on Narcissism", New York University Press, 1966, 403-437. Rinsley, Donald B.; "Borderline and Self Disorders: A Developmental and Object relations Perspective", Jason Aronson, 1982
19. Sarbin, Theodore and Mancuso, James C.; "Schizophrenia: Medical Diagnosis or Moral Verdict?", Pergamon, 1980, 203-206
20. LSD acts specifically on the dissolution of mental boundaries. Stanislav Grof's studies of LSD experiences reveal systematic correspondence to Hartmann's profile of boundary-deficit experience. Hartmann even reports that some of the nightmare sufferers volunteer the observation that they don't need LSD because their lives are always like a trip! Most criticism of Lawson's birth trauma study I have heard fails to display any recognition of his primary discovery, namely that

Grof's "Realms of the Human Unconscious" provides the blueprint to the emotional subtext of UFO experiences. To me, the concern over foetal self-imagery being the origin of the humanoid image is a side issue and a distraction. Reading Grof for oneself after being immersed in a series of abduction reports gives one a much better appreciation of Lawson's excitement. It clicks.

21. "Ufology considered as an evolving system of paranoia", Artifex, forthcoming

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