

Alien Abduction: Is it Real or Imagined?

John Smith
Lakisha Richards
Reymond Galindo
Maria Perez

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore a research study conducted by Clancy (2002) and her coworkers designed to test a hypothesis that an alien abduction experience might be a false memory. Researchers recruited participants who claimed to be abducted by aliens and participants without that experience. Participants' memories were tested by asking them to memorize a set of words (like tooth, pie, bitter) that were all related to one particular word (like sweet), which was not presented to the participants. It was found that those who claimed to be abducted showed more false memories of words not presented on the list than those participants without abduction experience, an indication that alien abduction, too, might be a false memory. In the future, studies should investigate more research participants so that the findings are more representative of the entire population of abductees. Our research comes from the journal articles and textbooks.

Introduction

Humans continue to be attracted to the idea of contact with aliens; thus, this theme is today, just like in the past, a usual content of books, movies and discussions among lay people and scientists too. UFO sightings, for example, have attracted a famous Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. When he was asked about these sightings, he said that humans have a tendency to see spherical objects (UFOs) in the sky. To Jung, these UFO sightings were not objective events; instead, he perceived them as our subjective projections (Bem, 2003). Claims of alien abduction have become more frequent than before (Bartholomew & Howard, 1998), and the scientific community is currently interested in exploring the question of whether these phenomena are real or imagined (Clancy et al., 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to explore a research study conducted by Clancy and her coworkers (2002) designed to test a hypothesis that an alien abduction experience might be a false memory. Although people have some general idea of what alien abduction is, it would be important to more precisely define this term. Alien abduction is a complex experience consisting of the following: hearing loud buzzing, seeing bright light coming from above, experiencing the feeling of levitation, having the feeling of being taken up into the spacecraft; feeling of being positioned on an examination table while shadowy figures conduct exploration of one's body; the exploration involves probes giving rise to uncomfortable tingling sensations in one's body. An alien abduction experience also involves one's paralysis and high levels of anxiety (Clancy et al., 2002).

The term false memory refers to having a mental record of something that never happened in reality. False memories can also contain a combination of real and imagined events. This

erroneous/constructive nature of memory has been confirmed in a variety of research studies (Lindsay & Read, 1994; Loftus, 1993; Schacter, 1999).

Researchers of Clancy's study suggest that false memory of alien abduction can be triggered through certain hallucinations (perceptions of unreal events), which happen in most people (though infrequently) right after they wake up (Clancy et al., 2002).

Method

Our group consisted of four members. John Smith was working on the abstract and the title page; Maria Perez on the introduction section; Lakisha Richards on method and discussion, and Reymond Galindo on references and future directions. After we decided what topic to address in our paper, we made copies of the material (books and articles) we used to collect the data, and we all read the same material. During the process of writing the paper we helped each other by reading each other's sections and making revisions. We also went to the writing center to improve the grammar of our paper. We collected the data on alien abduction mostly through the internet search. In addition, we obtained the data by going to the LBCC library and asking reference librarians for help. We checked out several books and decided what book chapters to read. Also, we checked out research articles from the library.

In her study, Clancy and collaborators (2002) recruited participants through a newspaper ad looking for research participants who believed they were abducted by aliens, and those participants who did not have this kind of experience. Her team was able to recruit 6 men and 5 women who claimed to be abducted. Also, 7 men and 6 women were recruited who did not have abduction experience.

The participants were exposed to lists of words. One such list was composed of the following words: sour, candy, sugar, bitter, good, taste, tooth, nice. The rationale for using this list was that the word sweet was not on the list, yet it was a theme word (it was related to all words on the list). If participants had a tendency to generate false memories, they would remember hearing the word sweet (when it wasn't really there on the list). Each word was played on a tape recorder, and the next word followed after 3 seconds. Shortly after hearing the list of words, the

participants were asked to use provided pencils and write the words they remembered into a booklet. Participants' responses were carefully analyzed by the researchers.

Discussion

Clancy's study (2002) was designed to test the hypothesis that people who claim to be abducted by aliens had a tendency to generate false memories. After the data were collected and analyzed, it was found that those participants who claimed to be abducted by aliens had more recollections of theme words that were not on the list than the participants who did not report having an abduction experience. It is likely, researchers suggest, that the alien abduction experience too (just like perceiving the word "sweet") is a false memory, due to "source-monitoring error." This error refers to participants' inability to determine with accuracy what the origin/source of their memory is. If "abducted" participants believed that the source of the word sweet was the list they studied (instead of their imagination), then it is likely that these "abductees" perceived their abduction as a real event when in reality it happened only in their imagination (Clancy et. al, 2002).

Researchers of Clancy's study suggest that false memory of alien abduction can be triggered through certain hallucinations (perceptions of unreal events), which happen in most people (though infrequently) right after they wake up. These so called hypnopompic hallucinations closely resemble the content of alien abduction experience. The hallucinations are characterized with perceiving shadowy figures hovering next to one's bed; seeing light; hearing loud, buzzing sounds; experiencing a feeling of weightlessness and levitation; experiencing a tingling sensation in one's body; feeling anxiety and body paralysis. Since the "abductees" make the source-monitoring error, it appears to them that abduction happened in reality; however, the abduction experience was triggered by their own hypnopompic hallucinations. Researchers suggest that one's memories of movies and books featuring alien abduction, can mix with hypnopompic

hallucinations and influence the genesis of false memory of alien abduction (Clancy et al., 2002).

Future Directions

In our opinion, one of the major limitations of Clancy's study was that the number of participants was very small. To be able to make generalizations about the entire population of people who claim to be abducted by aliens, the subsequent study would need to increase the sample size (to recruit more participants). After the increase in the number of participants, we suggest, this study would need to be replicated; if the same results can be obtained with a larger sample of research participants, then the findings can be considered reliable/consistent.

When we read the method section in the study by Clancy, we did not notice any steps taken by the researchers to make sure that the "abductees" were in fact truly believing that they had alien abduction experience. It is possible that these participants just wanted to benefit financially from the study, and just said that they had the experience, when they, in fact, did not have that type of experience. It would be important in the subsequent study to address that issue. We suggest that researchers obtain verification from family members or friends stating that the participant indeed discussed in the past alien abduction experience. We believe the study would benefit from any records demonstrating that the experience genuinely happened to the participants.

The study did not attempt to answer the question of what causes more source-monitoring errors in the participants who claimed to be abducted in comparison to less source-monitoring error in the participants without the abduction experience. The study just states that "abductees" display more of this error, but it is not clear why this is so. A future study should attempt to determine if certain traumatic experiences (child abuse, for example) could influence memory problems/source-monitoring error, since research shows that trauma can induce memory problems (Bremner et al., 2000).

In the future, when we attempt to write a similar research paper, it will be important that we submit both drafts and also meet with our professor during his/her office hours, since we feel that we did not do these aspects sufficiently (we missed one draft submission and we haven't met with our professor to discuss the paper).

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