

# Close encounters of the psychological kind

Christopher C. French considers explanations of UFO sightings, alien encounters and even abductions

**In recent years astronomers have discovered an ever-increasing number of earth-like planets, fuelling speculation that we may not be alone in the universe. Many members of the public are already convinced that not only is there intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, but also that aliens visit our planet regularly. Indeed, many claim to have had personal experiences that prove that this is so. Are there plausible alternative explanations for such claims?**

## questions

What are the possible implications for our view of ourselves and our place in the universe if contact is ever made with an advanced extraterrestrial civilisation?

Some attempts to estimate the number of intelligent civilisations that might live in our galaxy, such as the famous Drake equation, imply that such civilisations might be surprisingly common. Physicist Enrico Fermi asked the question, 'Why, if this is so, is there little convincing evidence of contact from such civilisations?' How might you answer this question?

## resources

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It is a pretty safe bet that virtually every reader of this article has heard of, and possibly even seen, Steven Spielberg's 1977 blockbuster UFO movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. However, I suspect that most readers are not entirely sure what the film's title really means. In fact, it refers to J. Allen Hynek's classificatory system for alleged alien contact of various kinds. Hynek was an American astronomer who acted as a scientific adviser to the US Air Force on a number of high-profile projects investigating UFOs beginning back in the 1940s. He began as a sceptic and debunker – but ended up as a strong defender of both the so-called 'extraterrestrial (ET) hypothesis' and the even more controversial 'extradimensional (ED) hypothesis' as possible explanations for such reports. Specifically, close encounters of the third kind (CE3s) refers to alleged encounters that involve actual human–alien interaction.

Opinion polls routinely show that many members of the general public also believe in the ET hypothesis. To give but one typical example, a 2013 HuffPost/YouGov poll of 1000 US adults ([tinyurl.com/moa2ez6](http://tinyurl.com/moa2ez6)) found that half believed there is life on other planets, 38 per cent believed there is intelligent life on other planets, and a quarter believed that aliens have visited the earth. It is important to note in this context that right back to Carl Sagan, many scientists involved in the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Project have fully accepted the possibility of

intelligent life elsewhere in the universe but are far from convinced that alien visitation of our home planet has ever happened. Even if our own galaxy is teeming with life, it may well be the case that the vast interstellar distances between inhabited planets is such that any direct human–alien contact is simply not possible.

If indeed the earth has never been visited by ET, how are we to explain the numerous reports of UFO sightings and even alien contact and abduction that have taken place in the last 60 years or so, and arguably even before that? I will argue that psychology provides plausible counter-explanations for close encounters of all kinds.

## The first kind

A simple sighting of a UFO with no other supporting evidence is referred to as a close encounter of the first kind (CE1). Ever since human beings first looked up at the sky, they have seen objects that they could not identify – literally unidentified flying objects. In modern times, however, the acronym UFO has become synonymous in many people's minds to that of ET. A moment's reflection will reveal that this is a huge inferential leap.

Our readers will be well aware that



**How are we to explain the numerous reports of UFO sightings?**

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both perception and memory are constructive processes greatly affected by the top-down influences of the observer's pre-existing beliefs and expectations. UFOs are typically observed unexpectedly under less than ideal viewing conditions, often at night. It is precisely under such viewing conditions that top-down influences will have their strongest effect upon the perceptions of the viewer. Thus, details may be perceived (e.g. aliens peering back at the observer through windows) that were not actually present at all. It should also be borne in mind that there are typically few, if any, cues to size, distance and speed in the sky. An object that is small, near and slow-moving will produce the same image on the retina as one that is large, far away and fast-moving.

It may initially seem incredible that people could misperceive a wide variety of stimuli (such as bright stars and planets, meteors, weather balloons, aircraft seen from unusual angles, laser displays and Chinese lanterns) as alien spaceships, but even the most fervent proponents of the ET hypothesis accept that over 95 per cent of all reported sightings can be explained in such terms. The reason we can often be sure that such explanations are correct is because the precise time and direction of the sighting exactly corresponds to a known event occurring in that part of the sky. However, proponents of the ET hypothesis insist that unless such explanations can be provided for 100 per cent of all reported sightings, the ET hypothesis is supported. Is this reasonable? Of course not. Just as the police cannot solve all of the crimes they investigate, sometimes there is simply not enough evidence to allow for a definitive explanation of a sighting. Even those who could be thought of as professional observers, such as pilots, astronomers, military personnel, and police officers, are not immune to such misperceptions – as illustrated in several well-documented cases (see e.g. Bartholomew & Howard, 1998; Brookesmith, 1995, 1996; Clarke &

Roberts, 1990; Frazier et al., 1997; Klass, 1983; Randles et al., 2000; Sheaffer, 1998; Watson, 2013).

### The second kind

A sighting that appears to be supported by physical evidence is referred to as a close encounter of the second kind (CE2). Such evidence is typically in the form of a photographic record, but these cases also include sightings accompanied by radar readings or else indentations and/or raised radiation levels at alleged landing sights.

The old adage 'The camera never lies' has never been true and has never been less true than it is in our modern digital age. Ever since the earliest days of photography, cameras have been used to fake paranormal phenomena, such as apparently capturing ghostly images of the deceased (Nickell, 1994). With software such as Photoshop, it has never been easier to produce hoax photographs of all kinds. Many classic photographs of flying saucers have been shown to be deliberate hoaxes (see, for example, Hines, 2003; Hoggart & Hutchinson, 1995; Korff, 1995). In other cases, photographs or videos are simply sincerely misinterpreted natural or manmade phenomena.

Mundane explanations can also often be provided for other types of physical evidence. For example, radar readings can sometimes be misleading. False positives, sometimes referred to as angels, can be caused by flocks of birds or unusual atmospheric conditions. This was particularly a problem for pre-1960s systems, which may explain why reports of UFOs detected on radar are much rarer these days (Clarke, 2012).

The problems of interpreting other types of physical evidence are nicely illustrated by the notorious case of the alleged UFO landing in Rendlesham Forest in 1980, often referred to as 'Britain's Roswell'. One aspect of this complex case was the claim that both indentations in the ground and raised

radiation levels were found at the alleged UFO landing site. In fact, the indentations were in all probability made by rabbits and the reported raised radiation levels were actually not particularly high and were based upon the use of inappropriate technology by inexperienced personnel (Randles et al., 2000). Confirmation bias on the part of both witnesses and some investigators leads to the interpretation of any apparent anomaly, no matter how minor, being interpreted as support for the ET hypothesis.

### The third kind

As stated, the title of Spielberg's influential film refers to actual direct contact between aliens and humans. In 1952, George Adamski claimed to have met a rather attractive female Venusian in the Californian desert (Bartholomew & Howard, 1998). He even claimed that he had been taken for a ride in her spaceship, and wrote several bestselling books recounting his adventures. Adamski was just one of several so-called contactees in this era who made such claims, often involving the contactee in the transmission of important messages from the aliens to humanity warning of the dangers of, say, nuclear war or pollution. The claims themselves became more elaborate as time went by, but the accounts were generally positive in tone and the aliens clearly viewed humanity benevolently. The contactees were not taken seriously even by the ufologists of the day, who preferred instead to concentrate on what they perceived to be more reliable reports of CE1s. However, things were soon to take a more sinister turn and an additional category was added to Hynek's original tripartite scheme.

### The fourth kind

One of the earliest cases of alleged human abduction by aliens, referred to as a close encounter of the fourth kind (CE4), was that of Brazilian farmer Antonio Villas

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Boas who claimed that in 1957 he was dragged into a spaceship by aliens and forced to have sex with an attractive female alien (who made barking sounds during intercourse).

The first alien abduction claim to receive worldwide media attention was that of Betty and Barney Hill. The Hills claimed that in September 1961 they had spotted a UFO while driving from Montreal to New Hampshire and that they had arrived home much later than expected, unable to account for a full two hours. Betty then started having dreams about being taken on board a spaceship by aliens and being medically examined. Years later, the couple consulted Dr Benjamin Simon, a psychiatrist, with respect to problems in their marriage. They were regressed back to that fateful night in 1961 and apparently recovered detailed memories of their car being stopped by aliens at a roadblock and both being taken on board an alien craft and being medically examined. Although there is little reason to doubt the Hills' sincerity, there is every reason to doubt the accuracy of their account (see Klass, 1989, for a detailed critique). It is worth noting that Dr Simon did not believe the account produced during hypnotic regression (Klass, 1989), and it is now generally accepted that hypnotic regression, far from being a useful technique to recover true memories, is very likely to result in false memories (Baker, 1992; Spanos, 1996). However, at the time this account was taken much more seriously in many quarters than previous tales from contactees and many of the features reported – a UFO sighting, 'missing time', memories being 'recovered' through dreams and hypnotic regression – have recurred routinely in subsequent alien abduction accounts.

In 1987 two bestselling books served to raise public awareness of such claims even higher: *Communion* by Whitley Strieber and *Intruders* by Budd Hopkins. The first, from the pen of a successful horror fiction writer, was the allegedly true story of his own terrifying abduction

experiences. The second, by a New York artist turned ufologist, described his own research with abductees, often involving the use of hypnotic regression. Hopkins claimed that his evidence showed that the aliens were engaged in a sinister cross-breeding project with the intention of producing human-alien hybrids. Much to the surprise of many, in 1994, Professor John Mack, a psychiatrist at Harvard University and a Pulitzer Prize winner, published a book on alien abduction claiming that 'these accounts are not hallucinations, not dreams, but real experiences'.

Although many psychologists and psychiatrists would disagree with Mack's conclusions, there is little doubt that alien abduction claims constitute an intriguing phenomenon in need of explanation. It is certainly the case that speculation on this topic far outweighs actual empirical evidence, yet there is enough of the latter to support plausible psychological explanations for the majority of alien abduction and contact claims without any need to involve ET. We should be very wary, however, of proposing any kind of 'one size fits all' blanket explanation for such a rich and multifaceted phenomenon: for the interested reader there are numerous detailed reviews covering a wide range of psychological factors (e.g. Appelle, 1996; Appelle et al., 2014; Baker, 1992; Bartholomew & Howard, 1998; Blackmore, 1994; Brookesmith, 1998; Devereux & Brookesmith, 1997; French, 2001; Holden & French, 2002; Newman & Baumeister, 1996, 1998; Randle et al., 1999; Rutkowski, 2000; Showalter, 1997; Spanos, 1996).

There is little doubt that deliberate hoaxes do occur (e.g., Klass, 1989; Korff, 1995), and sometimes people suffering from serious psychopathology will make claims. Yet there is also general agreement amongst both proponents and opponents of the ET hypothesis that the vast majority of those claiming alien abduction experiences are sane, sincere people who genuinely believe they have



Alien abduction claims constitute an intriguing phenomenon in need of explanation

experienced alien contact (French & Stone, 2014). How are we to account for this?

The most obvious explanation is that they are suffering from false memories, and there is increasing evidence to support such a claim (e.g. Clancy, 2005; French, 2003; French & Stone, 2014; McNally, 2012). A number of individual difference variables, such as dissociativity, absorption, and fantasy-proneness, have been shown to be positively correlated with both susceptibility to false memories and the tendency to report ostensibly paranormal experiences of all kinds (French, 2003). Several studies (reviewed by French & Stone, 2014) demonstrate that those claiming alien contact tend to score higher on such variables in comparison to control groups.

Another approach is to compare susceptibility to false memories in groups of individuals with conscious memories of being abducted by aliens, those who believe they have been abducted by aliens but cannot remember the experience, and others who do not believe they have been abducted by aliens. The Deese–Roediger–McDermott (DRM) task (Deese, 1959; Roediger & McDermott, 1995) presents series of associated words but with a critical lure word missing (e.g. the words *snore, dream, snooze, blanket, pillow, bed* might be presented but the word *sleep* is

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not). The number of critical lure words reported is an indication of susceptibility to false memories. Clancy et al. (2002) reported that a group with conscious memories of alien abduction demonstrated the greatest susceptibility and a group who did not believe themselves to have ever been abducted demonstrated the least. It should be noted, however, that we have found that although individuals reporting alien contact scored higher than a control group on dissociativity, absorption, paranormal belief and experience, self-reported psychic ability, fantasy proneness, and tendency to hallucinate, there was no difference in scores on the DRM task (French et al., 2008).

What about this interesting category of claimants who believe that they have experienced alien contact even though they cannot actually remember it? They typically do so because they have had one or more anomalous experiences that have led them to suspect that they may have had such contact but that the aliens have then wiped their memories for the rest of the event. Such ideas are widely believed within the ufological community. These experiences include seeing a UFO, having a 'missing time' experience, or finding puzzling scars on one's body, all of which in fact could have quite mundane explanations (French & Stone, 2014) – but perhaps the single most common cause of such suspicions is sleep paralysis (French & Santomauro, 2007; Santomauro & French, 2009).

Sleep paralysis is very common amongst the general population and consists of a temporary paralysis occurring just as one is about to fall asleep or as one wakes up. It typically lasts a few seconds and is a little disconcerting, but nothing more. However, in a minority of cases it can include a variety of other features that can result in a truly terrifying experience. These include a strong sense of an evil presence and difficulty breathing due to a feeling of pressure on the chest. Hallucinations may also be experienced

## 'Abducting' children

Otgaar et al. (2009) demonstrated that a considerable number of young children (aged either 7–8 or 11–12) readily accepted the suggestion that they themselves had been abducted by aliens at the age of four, especially if they were told that the researchers had been informed of this event by the child's mother and the child was shown a fake newspaper report suggesting that such abductions were fairly commonplace. The children were only classified as having false memories of the event if they provided additional details of their memory of the event.

This is an important study, being one of only two (the other being that of Lawson, 1984) that have attempted to directly implant false memories of alien abduction. However, implanting such false memories, especially in children, clearly raises some serious ethical issues. The only details provided by Otgaar et al. of the debriefing procedures used in this study are that the children 'were debriefed using ethical guidelines for false memory research with children (Goodman, Quas, & Redlich, 1998)' (p.120). This is somewhat ironic given that one of the recommendations for ethical false memory research with children stated by Goodman et al. is as follows: 'Although often there is little room for extraneous detail in scholarly reports, providing readers with the procedures used for debriefing is important in controversial areas of research' (p.215).

including seeing lights moving around the room or grotesque figures, hearing voices, footsteps or mechanical sounds, and feeling that one is being dragged out of bed. We have a reasonably good understanding of what causes sleep paralysis in terms of a disruption to the normal sleep cycle. During rapid eye-movement (REM) sleep, the phase of sleep typically associated with vivid dreams, the muscles of the body are actually paralysed, presumably to prevent the sleeper from acting out the actions of the dream. However, the mechanisms controlling the sleep cycle can sometimes go slightly awry. To put it simply, it is as though the brain has woken up but the body has not. This can result in terrifying episodes of sleep paralysis during which the sufferer is aware of their surroundings but cannot move – and creepy dream imagery is seeping through into wakeful consciousness.

Whatever the cause of the original suspicion that one may have experienced alien contact, the next step for many is to seek the services of a hypnotherapist in order to 'recover' the memories of the rest of the episode. It is worth noting here that whether one is attempting to recover memories of alien abduction, past lives, or ritualised Satanic abuse, the same techniques are used and typically deliver exactly the type of memories that were anticipated. The available evidence strongly suggests that these are false memories (French & Stone, 2014). It is interesting to note that when Lawson (1984) hypnotised eight volunteers with minimal prior knowledge of UFOs, none of whom believed they had ever been abducted by aliens, and asked them to

simply imagine that they had indeed been abducted, the accounts they produced were remarkably similar to those produced by people who claimed that they really had been abducted, even down to the level of minor details.

### The truth is in there

Arthur C. Clarke famously said: 'Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.' More recently, Stephen Hawking has warned against trying to make contact with any alien civilisations in case they respond by conquering and colonising our home planet. However, human curiosity is such that we cannot help but yearn to know whether we are alone in the cosmos or not. Indeed, Hawking himself has backed an ambitious \$100 million programme to scan the skies searching for evidence of ET – listening but not sending out any signals to give away the location of our planet. Should we ever prove that there are other intelligent civilisations, our understanding of our place in the universe will be transformed dramatically. For now though, the evidence relating to alleged close encounters would suggest, with apologies to *The X-Files*, that the truth is not 'out there' but within our own heads.



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