

# False Memories and False Memory Syndrome: An Explanation for Alien Abduction Stories

Saif R. Farooqi

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jamia Milia Islamia

## ABSTRACT

In the past decade and a half, more and more people are coming out in the open and sharing their traumatic experiences of being abducted by aliens. Skeptics have compared such narrations to a large number of child-sexual abuse cases that have no forensic evidence and were later termed as resulting from false memories caused due to hypnotherapy. A false memory is a fabricated or distorted recollection of an event that did not actually happen. False memories can be extended to such an extent within an individual that it may become a syndrome. This syndrome, known as the false memory syndrome, is the belief that one remembers events, especially traumatic and remote in time, which has not actually occurred. Apart from hypnosis there are number of causes of false memories leading to false memory syndrome. This paper discusses how the traumatic experiences of alien abductions may actually result from false memory syndrome. The paper explores various causes of false memory syndrome such as, hypnotherapy, fantasy proneness, memory dissociations, psychotics, confabulation, temporal lobe abnormality, and movement of tectonic plates (Tectonic Strain Theory) in the light of alien abductions. Strong associations of false memories and false memory syndrome have been found with a number of alien abduction cases. However, some aspects of alien abduction are yet unexplained, which further makes the debate about the existence of aliens and alien abductions inconclusive.

**Key Words:** Alien Abduction, False Memory, False Memory Syndrome, Hypnosis

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade and a half, more and more people are coming out in the open and sharing their experiences of being abducted by aliens. Alien abductions, supposedly, have been taking place for more than fifty years. Earlier people used to be very hesitant in talking about it publicly for the fear of being ridiculed and trivialized.

In the recent past, there have been a number of alleged UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) sightings all over the world and there has been a lot of curiosity about extra-terrestrial life. Quite a few people have been accepting the possibility of the existence of intelligent beings in the outer space. People are now becoming more aware about the concepts such as UFOs, aliens, extra-terrestrial life, etc.

Similar to the claims of alien abductions, there have been a large number of cases in which people have believed that they were sexually abused by their parents or relatives during their childhood. The surprising thing about these cases is that there has been no forensic evidence of them being sexually abused (Loftus & Davis, 2006). The lack of forensic evidence in these cases has led investigators to conclude that their belief in being sexually abused is actually false memories (Loftus, 1993; Loftus & Ketcham, 1994).

The belief of being sexually abused, in actuality resulting from false memories, creates several doubts about the many claims of alien abductions. Skeptics claim that these alien abductions could actually be false memories in the same way as the sexual abuse cases that lack in forensic evidence. This gives rise to the question that perhaps alien abduction stories do not occur in reality; they actually result from false memories.

### **The Alien Abduction Phenomenon**

Josef Allen Hynek, who was an astronomer and later became a UFO researcher (or Ufologist), has scaled various encounters with aliens into different levels. According to him, alien abductions are called close encounters (Hynek, 1972; Hynek, 1998; Vallee, 1998) of the fourth kind, in which people are actually taken inside a UFO. Most of the times, people, who are supposedly abducted by aliens, tend to forget about it. The whole incident of being abducted by aliens gets erased from their conscious memory.

People claiming to be abducted by aliens, out of nowhere, start suffering from a number of psychological and physiological symptoms, which include anxiety attacks, insomnia, vomiting, extreme thirst, loss of appetite, eye irritation, dry mouth, scars, rashes, and blisters. They also have vague dreams of being abducted by aliens. Many of them also develop a phobia of clowns and dwarfs (Dennet, 2008). They become extremely worried about all these symptoms, because they are unable to figure out the reasons behind it.

It is only when they go under hypnosis, they are able to recall all the series of events that had occurred recently and they come to realize that they were abducted by aliens.

In their description of events, the supposed alien abductees reveal that they were taken into a huge space-craft. They say that they were tied down to a bed, which was inside a large and extremely clean room and that they were surrounded by strange creatures (some describe them as human-like and some describe them to be not at all human-like). They also tell that the aliens completely undress them and do a full medical examination (Dennet, 2008).

According to them, the aliens take blood samples, saliva samples, skin scrapings, hair locks, and nail clippings. Some people also say that the aliens forcibly have sexual intercourse with them. All these descriptions are corroborated by putting them through a lie-detector test.

Another highly astonishing thing about alien abductions is alien implants in the body of the abductees. While getting a medical examination done by doctors, X-rays and magnetic resonance images (MRIs) have shown foreign objects in the body of many of the abductees. These objects are mostly found in the arms, legs, and head of the individuals (Dennet, 2008).

Many of such alien implants have been removed and studied in scientific laboratories. It has been found that they emit a strong electromagnetic field and that there is no foreign-body reaction in surrounding human tissue. The implants are metallic, made with iron that is usually found in meteorites. They are also fluorescent and glow under ultraviolet light. The implants, also, seem to be artificially created and not natural (Dennet, 2008). Urologists believe that alien implants are the best evidence of the existence of aliens. The purpose of putting implants in bodies has been speculated to be tracking or controlling the mind of the individual.

Apart from this, there are other intriguing stories associated with alien abductees. People who are abducted by aliens seem to have a history of abductions in their family. People from different generations of the same family have been victims of abduction. If a person is abducted then there is a strong possibility that the near and dear ones of that person will also be abducted sooner or later. A person may not be abducted only once. Some have been abducted a number of times, almost to the extent of getting used to it (Dennet, 2008).

### **False Memories and False Memory Syndrome**

A false memory is a fabricated or distorted recollection of an event that did not actually happen. False memories can be extended to such an extent within an individual that it may become a syndrome, known as false memory syndrome. False memory syndrome is the belief that one remembers events, especially traumatic and remote in time, which has not actually occurred (McHugh, 2008).

According to the Yale University psychologist John Kihlstrom, a false memory syndrome is a condition in which a person's identity and interpersonal relationships are centered around a memory of traumatic of experience, which is objectively false but in which the person strongly believes (Kihlstrom, 1994). Kihlstrom (1994), further, states that the syndrome may be diagnosed when the memory is so deeply ingrained that it orients the individual's personality and lifestyle, in turn disrupting all sorts of other adaptive behavior.

There are number of ways in which false memories are created. One of the most widely researched causes of false memory and false memory syndrome is hypnosis. Other causes of false memory are: fantasy proneness, memory dissociations, psychotic symptoms, confabulation, temporal lobe abnormality, and movement of tectonic plates.

### **Hypnosis**

As mentioned before, it is only under hypnosis that most of the abductees are able to recall that they were abducted by aliens. Under hypnosis they are able to recall each of the events that had occurred, which had been missing from their conscious memory.

Hypnosis is an artificially created state of consciousness that is characterized by an intense absorption with internal experience and a voluntary suspension of normal awareness of outside stimuli. It involves a high level of suggestibility (Stoner & Shrierer, 2010). In this dissociated state of focused awareness, it is possible to influence voluntary and involuntary behavior through suggestion (Hilgard, 1986). According to James Braid, the Scottish surgeon, who coined the term hypnotism in early the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hypnotism is a mental condition, which increases the susceptibility to suggestion (Braid, 1843).

The first use of hypnosis was by the French physician, Franz Mesmer, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Gauld, 1992; Alloy, Riskind, & Manos, 2006). He used it to treat his patients of hysteria, a disorder in which people complain about physiological symptoms that have no underlying biological cause. At that time hypnosis was called mesmerism (Alloy, Riskind, & Manos, 2006). Later, mesmerism went through many modifications and as it got renamed as hypnosis, it began to become very popular among physicians, who used it extensively to treat people with various psychological disorders.

Over the years, newer therapies began to emerge and it was found that, in some cases, hypnosis was not very effective compared to some of the other therapies. Research shows that, at times, the symptoms that are treated with hypnosis re-emerge within a few weeks or months. Even Sigmund Freud, one of the most popular figures in Psychology, and also one of the earlier users of hypnosis, was not satisfied with it. Freud used hypnosis in the beginning of his career, but did not find it to be very effective (Brennan, 2004).

Freud had three specific reasons for not being happy with hypnosis (Brennan, 2004). First, not everyone can be hypnotized; hence, its usefulness is limited to a select group. Second, some patients refused to believe what they revealed under hypnosis. Third, when one set of symptoms was alleviated under hypnotic suggestibility, new symptoms often emerged. It was because of these reasons that Freud rejected hypnosis as a form of therapy and began using catharsis, later modified as free association, in which patients were encouraged to speak of anything that comes to mind, regardless of how discomfiting or embarrassing it might be. The rejection of hypnosis by someone like Sigmund Freud in favor of another therapy tells a lot about its credibility.

Hypnosis majorly involves recovery of lost memories, when it comes to treatment of psychological disorders. Many a times, when people face some trauma in their childhood, the traumatic experience due to being extremely painful gets repressed in the memory. In the other words, the painful memories are forgotten unconsciously. The person does not deliberately forget everything, it just gets lost within the unconscious and subconscious mind of the individual.

As the person grows older, the same painful repressed memories somehow emerge as psychological symptoms that lead to dysfunctional behavior. The hypnotist, the person who induces hypnosis, then tries to recover those lost memories to know the underlying causes of the dysfunctional behaviors, which will lead to the treatment of the individual. This is where things become complicated.

Since hypnosis involves a lot of suggestibility, it has been found that many a times, the person under hypnosis says exactly what the hypnotist wants him/her to say. At times, the things that a hypnotist says may lead the narration of the individual to something that is completely off track. This suggestibility of the hypnotist leads the individual to narrate such instances that have never occurred in his/her life, which are mistaken as lost memories. This tendency of narrating events that have never occurred in the individual's life is known as the creation of false memories.

There has been no proper explanation of how such narrations emerge under hypnotic induction. One explanation is that people get to know about things through books and media and later get lost as hidden memories. While being under hypnosis, suggestibility on part on the hypnotist, leads them to recover those hidden memories, which are then falsely believed to have occurred in their own lives.

It is very likely that the narrations given by the supposed alien abductees are false memories that have been created exactly in the same way of those who believe that they were sexually abused in their childhood.

Folklorist and urologist Thomas Bullard has a different perspective on this. Based on a number of extensive studies, Bullard found that hypnosis does effect the narrations of alien abductees, but only the peripheral aspects of it and not the central or concrete aspects of the narrations (Bullard, 1994). He says that there are very minor distortions in the narrations of alien abductees and that their narrations are largely actual events (Bullard, 1989). Bullard is one of the first mainstream academicians to be extensively involved in urology. His work in urology is given high regard and even a few critics of urology find his work to be impressive.

### **Fantasy Proneness**

False memories may not always be due hypnosis. The personality characteristic of fantasy-proneness is also associated with false memories. The life of people who are high on fantasy-proneness is full of fantasies. They spend a lot of their time fantasizing and when they imagine something they find it to be very real. Their fantasies are so profound that very often they are unable to differentiate between reality and imagination. This makes them very likely to have false memories also. Fantasy-prone personalities are also high on the trait of hypnotizability, which makes them highly susceptible for hypnosis and further makes them likely to have false memories. Fantasy-proneness has been found to be related to a number of people who have paranormal experiences, such as out of body experiences (Bartholomew & Harvard, 1998). However, a strong link of it has not been found with people claiming to be abducted by aliens (Newman & Baumeister, 1996; Newman, 1997; Appelle, et al., 2000). Some supposed alien abductees have been found to be high on fantasy-proneness, whereas many of them have no association with fantasy-proneness.

### **Memory Dissociations**

Some people have memory dissociations, which may also cause false memories. Dissociation of memories is the segregation of mental processes from the conscious mind. Dissociativeness usually occurs among those who have faced traumas in their childhood. It has been found that the tendency to dissociate is a defense mechanism that allows traumatized children to escape the unbearable realities of their lives, thus, becoming more likely to have false memories.

Research shows that many of the people who claim to be abducted by aliens have had some kind of traumatic experience in their childhood (Powers, 1994). This is a very important finding and shows that perhaps alien abductions are in fact false memories. Harvard psychologist and author of the book *Remembering Trauma*, Richard McNally, through his research found out that the emotional and physical reactions of supposed abductees towards tapes of their alien encounters is strikingly similar to that of people when they recall the traumatic events that they experienced in their childhood (McNally, 2003).

### **Psychotic Symptoms**

False memories are also associated with psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations, which are usually found in disorders such as schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, and schizotypal personality disorder. But, research shows that none of the supposed alien abductees have any kind of psychological disorder (Parnel & Sprinkle, 1990; Spanos et al., 1993; Mack, 1994).

### **Confabulation**

Similar to false memory syndrome is confabulation. Confabulation involves spontaneous production of false memories of events that have never taken place or events that are displaced in time or space (Berrios, 2000). It results from neurological dysfunction.

A specific kind of confabulation known as fantastic confabulation, which involve spontaneous outpouring of irrelevant associations and bizarre ideas can be related to the narrations of alien abductees (Berrios, 2000). Like in false memory syndrome, distortions in the events are not deliberately created. People who are having confabulations are unaware that their memories are erroneous.

Confabulations are usually associated with Korsak off's syndrome (Talland, 1961), which is a severe dementia caused due to the effects of alcohol. It is also common in people who have abnormalities in their frontal lobe, the front-side of the brain associated with cognitive processes, and also those who have normal brain injuries.

Even though it seems to be very likely that some of the supposed alien abductees might be confabulating, none of such neurological dysfunctions associated with confabulations are found with such people.

### **Temporal Lobe Abnormality**

The cognitive neuroscientist, Michael Per singer, has given an interesting theory in order to explain alien abductions, which gave him a lot of public attention. According to Per singer, abnormalities in the temporal lobe, the brain area associated with hearing and memory, creates unusual mental activity that make the person believe that he/she is having paranormal experiences, including being abducted by aliens (Per singer & Valliant, 1985; Persinger, 1990).

### **Movement of Tectonic Plates**

Another theory of Persinger, known as the Tectonic Strain theory (Per singer, 1990) says that movements in the tectonic plates in the earth's crust has something to do with the feeling of being abducted by aliens. Per singer (1990) claims that the severe activity in tectonic plates due to earthquakes produce intense electromagnetic fields and create hallucinations in the

temporal lobes of individuals. These hallucinations are based on the events that are popular in the media, the most prominent being activities related to aliens and UFOs. Per singer says that this is what makes people believe that they were abducted by aliens.

There have been a few alien abduction cases that coincide with earthquakes, but there has been no such proof regarding it.

## CONCLUSION

There has been quite a lot of research that shows a strong association of false memories and false memory syndrome with that of alien abductions. This gives an idea that perhaps the narrations of alien abductions are actually false memories resulting from false memory syndrome and are not actual events.

On the other hand, there has been no explanation for the physiological symptoms such as the strange scars and blisters that alien abductees experience. The highly astonishing alien implants found in the bodies of alien abductees are also inexplicable. These things clearly have nothing to do with false memories.

Urologists as well as skeptics of alien abductions, both have their own strong point of views. It becomes difficult to take sides. It is hard to decide whether alien abductions are actual events or narrations resulting from false memory syndrome. However, proper scientific research gives a slightly more inclination of stories of alien abductions resulting from false memories and false memory syndrome.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Alloy, L. B., Riskind, J. H., & Manos, M. J. (2006). *Abnormal Psychology: Current Perspectives*, New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill
- [2]. Appelle, S., Lynn, S. J., & Newman, L. (2000). Alien Abduction Experiences, In: Cardena, E., Lynn, S. J., & Krippner, S. (Eds.), *Varieties of Anomalous Experiences: Examining the Scientific Evidence*(pp. 253-282), Washington D. C.: American Psychological Association
- [3]. Bartholomew & Harvard (1998). *UFOs and Alien Contact: Two Centuries of Mysteries*, Amherst: Prometheus
- [4]. Berrios, G. E. (2000). Confabulations, In: Berrios, G. E. & Hodges, J. R. (Eds.), *Memory Disorders in Psychiatric Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [5]. Braid, J. (1843). *Neurypnology or The Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism*, Buffalo: John Churchill
- [6]. Brennan, J. E. (2004). *History and Systems of Psychology*, Delhi: Pearson Education
- [7]. Bullard, T. E. (1989). Hypnosis and UFO Abductions: A Troubled Relationship, *Journal of UFO Studies*, 1, 3-40
- [8]. Bullard, T. E. (1994). The Influence of Investigators on UFO Abduction Reports, In: Pritchard, A., Pritchard, D. E., Mack, J. E., Kasey, P., & Yapp, C. (Eds.), *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference*(pp. 571 - 619), Cambridge: North Cambridge Press
- [9]. Dennet, P. (2008). *Mysteries, Legends, and Unexplained Phenomena: UFOs and Aliens*, New York: Chelsea House Publishers
- [10]. Gauld, A. (1992). *A History of Hypnotism*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- [11]. Hilgard, E. R. (1986). *Divided Consciousness: Multiple Controls in Human Thought and Action*, New York: Wiley
- [12]. Hynek, A. J. (1972). *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Enquiry*, Da Capo Press
- [13]. Hynek, A. J. (1998). *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Enquiry*, Da Capo Press
- [14]. Kihlstrom, J. F. (1994). Psychodynamics and Social Cognition: Notes on the Fusion of Psychoanalysis and Psychology, *Journal of Personality*, 681-696
- [15]. Loftus, E. F. (1993). The Reality of Repressed Memories, *American Psychologist*, 48, 518-537
- [16]. Loftus, E. F. & Davis, D. (2006). Recovered Memories, *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 2, 469-498
- [17]. Loftus, E. F. & Ketcham, K. (1994). *The Myth of Repressed Memories: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse*, New York: St. Martin's Press
- [18]. Mack, J. E. (1994). *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, New York: Scribers
- [19]. McHugh, P. R. (2008). *Try to Remember: Psychiatry's Clash over Meaning, Memory, and Mind*, Dana Press
- [20]. McNally, R. J. (2003). *Remembering Trauma*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press
- [21]. Newman, L. S. (1997). Intergalactic Hostages: People Who Report Abduction by UFOs, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 16, 151-177
- [22]. Newman, L. S. & Baumeister, R. F. (1996). Toward an Explanation of the UFO Abduction Phenomenon: Hypnotic Elaboration, Extraterrestrial Sadoomasochism, and Spurious Memories, *Psychological Inquiry*, 7, 185-197

- [23]. Parnel, J. O. & Sprinkle, R. L. (1990). Personality Characteristics of Persons who claim UFO Experiences, *Journal of UFO Studies*, 2, 45-58
- [24]. Persinger, M. A. (1990). The Tectonic Strain Theory as an Explanation for UFO Phenomena: A Non-technical Review of the Research, 1970-1990, *Journal of UFO Studies*, 2, 105-137
- [25]. Persinger, M. A. & Valliant, P. M. (1985). Temporal Lobe Signs and Reports of Subjective Paranormal Experiences in a Normal Population, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 903-909
- [26]. Powers, S. M. (1994). Dissociation in Alleged Extraterrestrial Abductees, *Dissociation*, 7, 44-50
- [27]. Spanos, N. P., Cross, P. A., Dickson, K., & DuBreuil, S. C. (1993). Close Encounters: An Examination of UFO Experiences, *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 102, 624-632
- [28]. Stoner, M. & Shrier, L. (2010). Hypnosis and Biofeedback as Prototypes of Mind-Body Medicine, In: Monti, D. A. & Beitman, B. D. (Eds.), *Integrative Psychiatry*(pp. 359 – 382), Oxford: Oxford University Press
- [29]. Talland, G. A. (1961). Confabulation in the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 132, 361-381
- [30]. Vallee, J. (1998). Physical Analysis in Ten Cases of Unexplained Aerial Objects with Material Samples, *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 12 (3), 359-375