

## BOOK REVIEW

### The reliability of UFO witness testimony

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This mammoth 700-page book contains over 50 chapters, with each chapter being produced by a different writer. As might be expected with a book of this size, it covers a vast amount of material relating to UFO-related experiences, including strange aerial sightings, alien abductions and extraterritorial communications. The focus is on assessing the reliability of testimony relating to these anomalous experiences, with many of the authors exploring the role played by a range of potential perceptual and memorial biases and psychological mechanisms. The overall tone of the book is deeply sceptical. The Introduction refers to the possible existence of 'alien encounter disorder' and suggests that mental health professionals might view this delusional experience as a novel form of dissociation. This scepticism also threads its way through many of the chapters, with the majority of writers clearly viewing the alleged phenomena as illusory and only a handful taking a more positive or even neutral stance. It is impossible to discuss all this vast amount of content in detail, and instead, this review will focus on some of the more interesting contributions in each of the main sections.

The first section contains 17 chapters and presents analyses of several case studies involving alleged alien and UFO encounters. These chapters are at their strongest when the author has clearly discovered a convincing normal explanation for the reported experiences. For example, in his fascinating and thorough chapter on The Phoenix Lights (in which onlookers reported a large V-shaped craft flying over their heads), Tim Callahan clearly demonstrates that the lights were military flares dropped during a training mission. In a similar vein, Alexander Keul argues that some UFO reports might be due to ball lightning. Other chapters in this section question the reliability of eyewitnesses associated with several well-known cases (including those involving Betty Hill, Richard Price and Claude Vorilhon) and find them wanting. Finally, in a valuable contribution, Tim Printy tackles an important issue often overlooked by sceptics, namely whether the testimony provided by professional pilots should be seen as especially reliable (he argues that this is not the case).

Section 2 explores some of the psychological processes that are likely to underpin UFO-related experiences. This section contains 12 chapters that discuss a diverse series of interesting hypotheses. In one chapter, David Forrest suggests that some alien abduction experiences maybe the result of poorly recalled memories of actual surgery. Several parallels are drawn, including green figures (surgeons tend to wear green gowns in operating gowns), a focus on the alien's eyes (often the only part of a surgeon's face on show), a sterile/medical setting and a sense of the body being penetrated. Based on these speculations, Forrest suggests that researchers might benefit from exploring whether some abductees' reports might reflect a kind of intra-operative awareness. In another interesting chapter, Chris French provides a comprehensive overview of hypnotism and outlines the considerable amount of work showing that it rarely helps people to recall past events. French argues that, if anything, individuals in a hypnotic state are more likely to be persuaded of the reality of events that never actually happened. Taking a more

clinical perspective, Giulio Perrotta argues that those reporting being abducted by aliens might be likely to display a variety of dysfunctional tendencies, including those associated with self-control, security and sexual behaviour.

The 14 chapters that form the third section of the book focus on eyewitness testimony. Unfortunately, much of this work is surprisingly short on references and tends to ignore the vast amount of relatively recent psychological work on eyewitness testimony and lying. Instead, there is a tendency to make general arguments about witnesses not being especially reliable and citing a small number of well-known studies, such as Elizabeth Loftus' 1970s work into suggestibility. This is a pity, in part, because it is a missed opportunity to discover how well mainstream work on eyewitness reliability maps onto a new and interesting terrain. Also, the authors tend to generalize from mainstream studies to those who report UFO-related experiences without testing whether the findings apply to this rather narrow group of participants. In an exception to this trend, the chapter by Daniel Mavrakis reviews a series of experiments that have involved those claiming to have had such experiences. Some of the results highlight the need for a nuanced approach to the issue showing, for example, several significant differences between those claiming to have been abducted by aliens versus those who feel that they have been in contact with extra-terrestrials. Additional results question some of the hypotheses that might flow from associated areas of psychology (e.g. that witnesses claiming to have been in contact with aliens will obtain higher scores on measures of fantasy proneness than those reporting more banal sightings). Other interesting experimental work shows that many reports of alien activity are likely to be triggered by altered states of consciousness (e.g. hypnagogic and hypnopompic imagery, and sleep paralysis), and that a general group of participants are capable of generating UFO-related experiences that are remarkably similar to those who claim to have actually been abducted.

Section 4 contains seven chapters that focus on empirical research, with several chapters describing some interesting but relatively small-scale studies. For example, Hans-Werner Peiniger looked at the reliability of testimony for UFOs by showing people either a colour transparency or print of a fire balloon in the sky for 10 seconds, and then asking them to describe what they had seen. Participants' testimony was then rated on a scale between 1 (a good match) to 5 (a poor match), with the results showing that very good descriptions were as rare as those that were very poor, and that 'Most are either good or wishy-washy'.

Section 5 contains just three chapters and focuses on a more anthropological approach. For example, Carlos Reis argues that many paranormal and supernatural illusions (including those relating to angels, gods and extra-terrestrials) are the result of society facing uncertainty and fear. Given that some of the current political upheaval is likely to produce such feelings, it is predicted that there will be a rise in UFO-related sightings and experiences. The final two sections contain four chapters that discuss metrics and epistemological issues respectively.

This book is a curate's egg. On the one hand, it contains a wealth of information and ideas that will both inform researchers and provide invaluable food for thought. On the other hand, the book avoids certain perspectives that are not consistent with the sceptical position (e.g. that some UFO-related experiences might have a positive impact on people's lives), lacks a thorough exploration of relevant articles within the enormous literature on lying, eyewitness testimony and false memory and does not discuss several well-known ideas about the phenomena under review (e.g. Susan Clancy's work on how UFO-type experiences can be seen within a Christian narrative, Roy Baumeister's comments regarding the parallels between accounts of UFO abduction and masochistic fantasies, and Carl Jung's idea that extra-terrestrials might be a type of technological angel). But these issues aside, this book represents a huge and impressive achievement, and deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone with a serious interest in the psychology associated with this most curious of phenomena.

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