

Hypnosis and UFO Abductions

Hypnosis can encourage fantasy and implant pseudo-memories. Its validity in UFO abduction cases is questionable.

Philip J. Klass

Nearly two hundred persons now claim to have been abducted by "UFO-nauts," taken aboard a flying saucer, typically for a physical examination, and then safely released, and the number of such tales is mushrooming. If extraterrestrials are indeed visiting the earth, their curiosity is understandable; but one might expect that they would carry a few earthlings back to their native planet for a more useful dissection, rather than simply repeat the superficial examinations reported.

If only one of the alleged abductees had managed to bring back a single souvenir, the UFO question would be resolved incontrovertibly. But since this has not occurred, UFO proponents rely on regressive hypnosis as their principal tool to substantiate the tale of abduction, and almost invariably it seems to confirm the account. The key question is whether hypnosis is really an effective "lie-detector."

James A. Harder, one of the principal practitioners of hypnosis for UFO incidents, claims that "it is impossible to lie under hypnosis." Harder, director of research for APRO, one of the nation's oldest UFO organizations, is a professor of civil engineering. On the strength of Harder's use of hypnosis, he has endorsed the alleged UFO abductions of Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker in Pascagoula, Mississippi, in 1973 and Travis Walton in Arizona in 1975. (My own investigations indicate both incidents are hoaxes.)

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The first known use of regressive hypnosis in connection with a reported UFO abduction occurred in 1963-64. The case involved Betty Hill and her late husband, Barney, who were treated by Dr. Ben Simon, a respected Boston psychiatrist. Simon achieved fame in psychiatric circles during World War II when he used hypnosis to successfully treat military personnel suffering battle-induced psychoses at the U.S. Army's Mason General Hospital, where he was chief of neuropsychiatry.

When the full story of the Hill case was made public in the fall of 1966, in two widely read articles in *Look* magazine and in a book entitled *Interrupted Journey*, leaders of the UFO movement generally were *not* impressed with the tale. Possibly this was because the story was too incredible by the movement's then current standards. Simon sharply disagreed with the conclusions of the book's author, and in a brief introduction he wrote for the book he cautioned that hypnosis is not a "magical and royal road to the Truth."

Shortly after the *Look* articles were published I interviewed Dr. Simon, and he told me he was certain that the alleged UFO abduction was fantasy, not fact, although he was equally certain that the Hills had seen a bright light in the night sky that they had found frightening. To demonstrate the basis for his conclusions, Simon played some tapes for me of Barney reliving under hypnosis his experience of looking at the bright light. I could hear the terror in Barney's voice, and Dr. Simon told me he had never before had a patient become so agitated under hypnosis.

But when we listened to Betty and Barney reliving the alleged experience of being taken aboard a flying saucer by strange-looking creatures, their voices were relaxed and casual, as if they were describing a visit to a neighborhood shopping center. Simon cited numerous other reasons for his conclusion that the tale of abduction was fantasy. Much later, when he appeared on NBC-TV's "Today" show on October 20, 1975, prior to that network's two-hour pseudo-documentary on the Hill incident, Simon was asked whether he believed a UFO abduction had really occurred. He responded that "the abduction did *not* happen," and he characterized it as "fantasy."

When so experienced a practitioner of hypnosis as Simon rejects the idea that simply because a tale of UFO abduction is told under hypnosis it must be true, one might expect that far less experienced practitioners would be cautious in its use for this purpose. But this has not deterred R. Leo Sprinkle, an APRO consultant, who is the leading practitioner of hypnosis in UFO-abduction cases. (Sprinkle, a psychologist, is director of counseling and testing at the University of Wyoming.) In a paper presented to the American Psychological Association in Toronto, on August 28, 1978, Sprinkle reported that he had used hypnosis on 25 persons and had

“obtained information . . . which supports their claims of ‘abduction’ experiences.” He said he was inclined “to accept, tentatively, the claims of UFO abductions as ‘real.’ ” He added: “I do not know if these ‘abductees’ have experienced physical abduction, or whether they have experienced ‘out of the body’ events [an alleged psychic phenomenon]. In either case, the experiences seem ‘real’ to the ‘abductee.’ ”

The crucial issue is not whether the tale “seems real” to the subject but *whether the alleged abduction actually occurred*. On January 23, 1977, I wrote to Sprinkle: “To your knowledge, has anyone conducted controlled experiments to evaluate the effectiveness of regressive hypnosis in determining whether the subject is intentionally trying to perpetrate a hoax or a falsehood?” I added that if such experiments had not been conducted it seemed to me that this should be done “before UFO investigators invest any more time in its use as a means of trying to sort out reality from non-reality.”

Sprinkle replied promptly, saying that when he first began to experiment with the use of hypnosis on abduction claimants in the mid-1960s he was unconvinced that an abduction had really occurred. But with further use of hypnosis, Sprinkle said, he “began to recognize that there was no way for me to ‘know’ whether the UFO witness did or did not experience an abduction.” Then Sprinkle made a remarkably candid admission: “Now I have persuaded (conned?) [*sic*] myself that . . . the apparent abduction experiences are ‘real’; at least they are real in the minds of these persons . . . I accept these experiences as ‘real,’ although I’m not in a position to determine the ‘level of reality.’ ” In my reply, I sought clarification of “level of reality.” Sprinkle tried to explain that there are *many* “levels of reality,” a concept my simple mind was unable to grasp.

In May 1977, the UFO movement’s growing reliance on hypnosis to support tales of UFO abductions was shaken by a paper published by Alvin H. Lawson, a professor of English at California State University, Long Beach. The paper was entitled: “What Can We Learn from Hypnosis of Imaginary ‘Abductees?’ ” Lawson had a long-standing interest in UFOs and had offered courses in UFO literature. He reported on an experiment in which imaginary UFO abductions were induced hypnotically in a group of subjects who were then questioned about their experience. The hypnosis was administered by William C. McCall, an M.D. with clinical experience in its use.

Not only were the subjects able to improvise answers about what had happened to them aboard the imaginary flying saucer, Lawson reported, but their stories “showed no substantive differences” from tales in the UFO literature by persons who claimed to have actually experienced an abduction. This prompted Lawson to observe: “The implications of the study for

"MAN ABDUCTED BY UFO FOR 4TH TIME ... Truth Serum and Hypnosis Confirm His Story"

—*National Enquirer*, January 15, 1980

"NBC-TV Movie Based on Tapes Made Under Hypnosis: ABOARD A FLYING SAUCER ... The Incredible Story of Two People Who Believe They Were 'Kidnapped' by Humanoids in a Spacecraft"

—*National Enquirer*, August 19, 1975

"Hypnosis tests show that UFO 'kidnap victims' are telling the truth, say doctors"

—*The Star*, November 7, 1978 (with photo of Dr. R. Leo Sprinkle)

"Under hypnosis, housewife tells of abduction by aliens"

—*Houston Chronicle*, April 29, 1979 (the Betty Andreasson case)

"Hypnosis & Truth Test Confirm Man's Story: I WAS ABDUCTED BY A UFO"

—*National Enquirer*, May 8, 1979

future hypnotic regression of Close Encounter cases, and for abduction cases now deemed of the highest credibility, are unclear at this time."

The results of this experiment, and Lawson's conclusions, were attacked sharply by Harder in the September 1977 issue of the *APRO Bulletin*. Harder said that, while Lawson admitted that the experiment did not prove that all UFO abduction reports were imaginary, "his paper may well lead naive readers to think that there is a strong case that they all are [imaginary]." Harder criticized Lawson's paper for pointing out the similarities between the stories told by "real" and "imaginary" abductees, while failing to point out "a very important difference." That difference, Harder claimed, "was that the 'real' abductees were convinced that their experiences were real whereas the 'imaginary' abductees were not."

Lawson offered a revised paper on the same experiment at the August 28, 1978, meeting of the American Psychological Association. He stuck by his original report that there were "no substantive differences" in the accounts given by "real" and "imaginary" abductees. But he added that "despite the many similarities, there are crucial differences — such as alleged physical effects and multiple witnesses — which argue that UFO abductions are separate and distinct from imaginary and hallucinatory experiences." However, Lawson also warned that "one should be cautious about the results from hypnotic regression in UFO case investigations . . . A witness can lie, or believe his own lies, and thus invalidate any investiga-

tion. A more common result may be that hypnotized witnesses subtly confuse their own fantasies with reality — without either the witness or the hypnotist being aware of what is happening.” It is clear that Lawson is much more knowledgeable about the limitations and pitfalls of hypnosis than Harder, who so often employs this technique.

The obvious lessons to be drawn from the Lawson/McCall experiments and papers have been largely ignored by the leaders of the UFO movement. For example, J. Allen Hynek, scientific director of the Center for UFO Studies, has strongly endorsed the tale of Mrs. Betty Andreasson, told under hypnosis, who claims not only to have gone aboard a flying saucer but also to have flown to its native planet. In the foreword to a book about the Andreasson case, Hynek wrote: “In the past, I frankly would not have touched an invitation to write the foreword for a book treating ‘contactees,’ abduction, mental telepathy, mystical symbolism, and physical contact and examination by ‘aliens.’ But across the years I have learned to broaden my view of the entire UFO phenomenon. Those who still hold that the entire subject of UFOs is nonsense will be sorely challenged if they have the courage to take an honest look at the present book.”

Martin T. Orne, past president of the International Society of Hypnosis and director of the Institute of Pennsylvania Hospital’s unit for experimental psychiatry, is an internationally recognized authority on hypnosis. In a paper published in the October 1979 issue of the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, entitled “The Use and Misuse of Hypnosis in Court,” Orne completely demolishes the basic premises upon which Harder, Sprinkle, and other UFOlogists have operated in using hypnosis in an effort to substantiate tales of UFO abductions. While Orne does not discuss the misuse of hypnosis in UFO cases, except for one oblique reference, it is obvious that his warnings and recommended safeguards apply to UFOlogy as well as to forensic use.

Orne notes that the courts “have recognized that hypnotic testimony is not reliable as a means of ascertaining the truth,” and he says this view “is supported by scientific data.” He cites experiments showing that “it is possible for an individual to feign hypnosis and deceive even highly experienced hypnotists . . . Further, *it is possible for even deeply hypnotized subjects to willfully lie*” (emphasis added). This flatly contradicts Harder’s self-serving claim.

Orne warns: “We should keep in mind that psychologists and psychiatrists are not particularly adept at recognizing deception.” (Surely this also applies to a professor of civil engineering.) “We generally arrange the social context of treatment so that it is not in the patient’s interest to lie to us . . . As a result, the average hotel credit manager is considerably more adept at recognizing deception than we are.” Orne acknowledges that

“military psychiatrists and other health professionals who are required to make dispositional judgments on a daily basis do become adept at recognizing manipulation and deception.” But Orne says that relatively few “who are experienced in the use of hypnosis have had this type of background. Consequently, they have little experience or concern about being deceived or used.”

Orne cautions: “Hypnotic suggestions to relive a past event, particularly when accompanied by questions about specific details, puts pressure on the subject to provide information for which few, if any, actual memories are available. This situation may jog the subject’s memory and produce some increased recall, *but it will also cause him to fill in details that are plausible but consist of memories or fantasies from other times*” (emphasis added). He adds: “It is extremely difficult to know which aspects of hypnotically aided recall are historically accurate and which aspects have been confabulated.”

“There is no way, however, by which anyone — even a psychologist or psychiatrist with extensive training in the field of hypnosis — can for any particular piece of information determine whether it is an actual memory versus a confabulation *unless* there is independent verification,” Orne states. He cites experiments by others that show that “free narrative recall will produce the highest percentage of accurate information but the lowest amount of detail. Conversely, the more an eyewitness is questioned about details, the more details will be obtained — but with *a marked decrease in accuracy*” (emphasis added). (Examination of transcripts of hypnosis sessions with “abductees” reveals that great pressure was applied for details rather than allowing the subject to use free narrative.)

Orne’s paper suggests that the use of hypnosis by pro-UFO investigators can generate what he calls “pseudo-memories,” which may enable a subject to tell a convincing story later when not under hypnosis. Such “pseudo-memories can and often do become incorporated into the individual’s memory store as though they had actually happened . . . If a witness is hypnotized and has factual information casually gleaned from newspapers or inadvertent comments made during prior interrogation or in discussion with others . . . many of these bits of knowledge will become incorporated and form the basis of any pseudo-memories that develop.”

One of Orne’s warnings is especially appropriate for hypnotic interrogations conducted by Sprinkle and Harder, both of whom lean strongly to the hypothesis that the earth is being visited by extraterrestrial craft. Orne writes: “Furthermore, if the hypnotist has beliefs about what actually occurred, it is exceedingly difficult for him to prevent himself from inadvertently guiding the subject’s recall so that he [the subject] will eventually ‘remember’ what he, the hypnotist, believes actually happened.”

(During my own investigation into the Travis Walton "abduction" case, I talked with Jean Rosenbaum, a Durango, Colorado, psychiatrist who was brought into the case and was in Scottsdale, Arizona, when Harder used hypnosis to interrogate Walton to probe for details of the incident. Rosenbaum told me that Harder's "interviewing techniques are very interesting in that all of his questions are loaded.")

Orne notes that "the more frequently the subject [describes] the event, the more firmly established the pseudo-memory will tend to become. In [conducting] the experimental demonstration, we are dealing with an essentially trivial memory about which the subject has no inherent motivations [to be untruthful]. Nevertheless the memory is created by a leading question, which, however, on casual observation, seems innocuous." Orne warns: "Hypnosis has not resulted in accurate memories but rather has served to produce *consistent memories*" (emphasis added).

After discussing these potential pitfalls, Orne proposes four important procedural safeguards. One of these is that hypnosis "should be carried out by a psychiatrist or psychologist with special training in its use." (In one instance, when Sprinkle had to return home after a hypnosis session with an "abductee" and UFO-writer Jerome Clark wanted to continue the investigation, according to Clark's subsequent article in the August 1976 *UFO Report*, Sprinkle urged Clark to "conduct hypnotic regression" himself. "Since I had never performed hypnosis before, I was dubious about the prospect, but Sprinkle had taught me the methods and said he could see no reason why Sandy [the subject] and I could not work together. So three weeks later . . . Sandy and I got together in an effort to continue the interview . . . Sandy fell quickly into a hypnotic trance and was able to reply quickly and easily to my questions," Clark wrote.)

Orne cautions that the hypnotist "should not be informed about the facts of the case verbally; rather he should receive a written memorandum outlining whatever facts he is to know, carefully avoiding any other communication which might affect his opinion . . . It is extremely undesirable to have the individual conducting the hypnotic sessions have any involvement in the investigation of the case." (Based on this safeguard, Sprinkle and Harder would be disqualified in their UFO investigations.)

Another important safeguard recommended by Orne is that "all contact of the psychiatrist or psychologist with the individual to be hypnotized should be *videotaped from the moment they meet until the entire interaction is completed* [emphasis added]. The casual comments which are passed before or after hypnosis are every bit as important to get on tape as the hypnotic session itself. (It is possible to give suggestions prior to the induction of hypnosis that will act as post-hypnotic suggestions.)"

Additionally, Orne says: "No one other than the psychiatrist or psychologist and the individual to be hypnotized should be present in the room before and during the hypnotic session. This is important because it is all too easy for observers to inadvertently communicate to the subject what they expect, what they are startled by, or what they are disappointed by." (This recommended safeguard almost invariably is violated in UFO investigations.)

Orne also recommends that tape recordings of prior interrogations be made "because the interactions which have preceded the hypnotic session may well have a profound effect on the sessions themselves." Orne cautions that a subject may unwittingly have been given cues to certain information "which might then be reported for apparently the first time by the witness during hypnosis."

After I read Orne's paper, it was obvious that it should have been of great importance to UFOlogists who make use of hypnosis, and so I wrote to Sprinkle on March 24, 1980, seeking his reactions. He replied on April 7, saying: "Dr. Orne is an acknowledged authority on the use of hypnosis . . . However, I am sure that he would agree with the principle that 'Science' is based upon accumulated evidence of many observations, as well as upon the views of authorities." This was a curious response inasmuch as Orne had cited 37 different scientific papers and court cases to support his conclusions and recommendations.

Sprinkle said that the safeguards recommended by Orne "seem most appropriate for the forensic uses of hypnosis in court," but he questioned whether they were also applicable to UFO investigations because there is no "crime" and no "criminal" or "victim." (Sprinkle takes a curious view of "UFO abductions." He does not consider "abductees" to be "victims" even when they claim to have been taken aboard a flying saucer against their will and subjected to physical examinations. Sprinkle explained his benign views: "They do not seem to perceive themselves as 'kidnapped.' In fact, they see themselves as citizens of a 'higher civilization.'" In response to my subsequent questions, Sprinkle told me that if a member of his immediate family were kidnapped by an earthling, he *would* report it to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. But if a member of his family were kidnapped by an extraterrestrial, he would report it "to the world," *not to the FBI.*)

In subsequent correspondence, Sprinkle indicated that he had begun to use video-taping of hypnotic sessions, when the subject was willing, but other than this he indicated no plans to introduce the rigorous safeguards recommended by Orne. Sprinkle explained: "In my opinion, there are three general 'models' of UFO investigation involving hypnotic procedures. One is the 'forensic model,' as indicated by Dr. Orne; another is the 'psychotherapy model,' indicated by Dr. Simon in his work with Betty and

Barney Hill; and a third model is one of a combination of the forensic/therapeutic models, which I call the 'educational model.' ”

“The educational model is based upon the view that two goals are important in UFO investigation: as much information as possible should be obtained, but not at the expense of the dignity of the individual . . . In the legal model, the search for 'truth' is intense . . . In the therapy model, the truth is less important than the personality structure and the welfare of the individual . . . The educational model is one which suggests that the individual's growth is important, but sharing that information with others can assist the individual, and others, in their educational development,” Sprinkle wrote. This “educational model,” he admitted, “may be considered a 'loose' model by proponents of either the therapy or legal models, because [of] the manner in which 'truth' is being explored, sought, and shared.”

Asked to respond to the crucial question of whether he believed that hypnosis was of any value in determining that a UFO-abduction had actually occurred, Sprinkle replied: “I believe that the use of hypnotic techniques is helpful to UFO abductees and contactees in exploring their memories of their experiences and that it is helpful to them in assisting them to come to terms with the abductions which have occurred — in this very reality!” ●