

Alien-Abduction Claims And Standards of Inquiry

*The following discussion of recent alien-abduction claims and the use of appropriate standards of investigation and scientific reasoning in examining such stories is excerpted from an edited transcript of "Extension 720," a radio talk-show program on WGN-Radio in Chicago. The host of the show is Milton Rosenberg, professor of psychology and chairman of the graduate program in social psychology at the University of Chicago. His guests were Charles L. Gruder, professor and chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago; Budd Hopkins, author of *Intruders*, a book based on Hopkins's interviews with alleged "abductees"; and (by telephone) Martin Orne, professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.*

Milton Rosenberg: Larry, if you were a consultant for Random House and they called and said, "Professor Gruder, we have a manuscript we want you to read. We want to get your evaluation as a social psychologist interested in the dynamics of human interaction as that might affect research findings. Give us a critical reading of Mr. Hopkins's book before we decide whether or not to publish it." What would you have told them after completing the reading?

Charles (Larry) Gruder: I would want to keep it at arm's length probably. It's not the kind of thing that scientists turn to easily. It poses very difficult questions, and it's easy to dismiss them. One of the points in the book that I take issue with is whether skeptics are really *believers*—believers that this can't possibly happen. I don't doubt that all of us try to keep it at a distance, but I think true skeptics—and I would count myself in their number—would look for answers using what we know are the best, soundest scientific tools. I would have many problems with your [Hopkins's] methodology, your way of gathering data, and your way of interpreting data. You touch on many important factors in doing this kind of research: the nature of observation, the nature of measurement, the reliability of the measures. You're obviously sensitive to the issue of biasing the people you're interviewing. Yet I saw many places in the book where I would have problems accepting the data.

Rosenberg: List those problems. Let's put them on the table. You're a gentleman and you've approached this in a very gentle way; but to come directly to the case, what do you see to be the major methodological problems and interpretative flaws?

Gruder: One of the issues is quite important in science, and that's repeat-

ability or reliability. You [Hopkins] say that one of the factors in these cases that convinces you is that similar experiences keep coming up. For example, people describe the craft—the UFO—in the same way; they tend to describe the aliens in the same way. Well, being a behavioral scientist and an empiricist, I decided that I was going to collect some data myself. So I asked a number of students to draw a UFO and an alien. I didn't tell them why I wanted them to. They didn't know I would be here talking with you or that I was reading *Intruders*. I looked at their drawings, and it was surprising that many were quite similar to the drawings in the book. How can this be?

“The layperson believes that hypnosis is a very powerful, somewhat mystical technique for getting at the truth. Unfortunately it is not.”

—Charles L. Gruder

Budd Hopkins: I don't think that's surprising at all.

Gruder: Well, it isn't surprising, because how do people know what a UFO should look like? They read the same stories, the same magazines, see the same science-fiction movies. You mentioned a particular shape of the head, or the fact that the mouth was a line. I found that most of these drawings were of humanoids. Of the 23, 18 were humanlike. Of these, one-third had big heads, one-third had a line for a mouth. I figured out that most people who are not artists don't know how to draw a mouth so they draw a line. There were no drawings that looked exactly like the pictures in the book, but there were many similarities. It was the same with the UFOs.

Hopkins: I should mention, of course, that Allen Hynek had many drawings that he gave to Steven Spielberg for use when he made *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—which was of course one of the biggest box office successes of all time. There was a serious attempt to follow the data that Allen Hynek and other people had gathered. So I think you can say that Steven Spielberg popularized the essential physical type that the UFO reports had engendered before that time.

Rosenberg: Let me raise a very basic question. It touches on methodology and on the substantive aspects of this study as well. There are subjects who are somewhat disturbed but don't quite know what happened until you submit them to hypnotic induction and hypnotic regression. Then they produce versions of this by now rather standard tale of somebody being picked up, taken onto a spaceship, and given a medical examination. Now we have the extra finding from Budd Hopkins's investigations that the purpose of the medical examination is to perform artificial insemination that will blend the two species, the earthbound and the visiting species. Now Larry, is there a parsimonious way of interpreting the fact that so many people under hypnotic regression come up with the same memories—with essentially the same story?

Gruder: There certainly is a more parsimonious explanation. Budd does

use hypnotic regression as a technique and thereby elicits memories. One of the effects of stressing the hypnotic recovery of these memories is that it lends credibility. The lay person believes that hypnosis is a very powerful, somewhat mystical technique for getting at the truth. Unfortunately, it is not. The evidence is absolutely clear that hypnosis does not refresh memory. We know this not so much because of investigations into UFOs and aliens but because of extensive use of hypnosis over the past 20 or 25 years in the legal system in investigations of crimes and also in the courtroom. I know you have cited the AMA report. The AMA report makes it clear that there is no evidence that in fact hypnosis can effectively refresh memory. What hypnosis appears to do is to increase the number of recollections people report; and, as you correctly say, these include both accurate and inaccurate recollections. Another interesting feature of hypnosis in refreshing memory is that subjects are less able to distinguish the accurate from the inaccurate reports than if they were not hypnotized.

Rosenberg: If you have inaccurate memories recalled only under hypnosis, what would be the source of their content?

Gruder: One of the things they think happens under hypnosis when you're trying to refresh memory is what they call "confabulation," or pseudomemories. The subject transforms prior beliefs into thoughts or fantasies that they come to accept as memories. . . .

Hopkins: I also have a quote from the American Medical Association report: "In the case of fugues, in which an individual forgets his identity, hypnosis can be an effective clinical procedure to help the person recover his identity. When used in this manner, hypnosis may serve to reinstate the individual's former recollections." And of course we have something quite analogous to this in these UFO cases.

Furthermore, in 14 of the cases I worked with, the recollections were very complete through the whole UFO experience, without hypnosis having been employed. Hypnosis is not in any sense essential to these although it seems to be essential in a large number of them. So we have a case where what's recalled under hypnosis and what's recalled normally are very similar. But even more important than that, I think we're sort of picking up the dog by the wrong end. The thing is that we talk about whether or not hypnotic recollection is accurate. I don't think hypnotic recollection is very different from normal, nonhypnotic recollection, which is not necessarily valid either. I don't see that we should necessarily take in a court of law someone's eyewitness report of something that occurred very quickly, [for example under] gunfire at a bank as somebody runs out; we know that under those conditions a person can misinterpret a lot of things. I think that we have problems of just normal observation, normal recollection, in any kind of case worth investigating at all. The situation of hypnosis, I think, simply adds more of those recollections, which can be just as bad or just as good.

Rosenberg: I want to put a proposition to the two of you. It's terribly simple. With such memories—whether you recover them by hypnosis or by direct, fully conscious interchange between the person who claims to have

had the experience and the person who is interviewing him or her—what you're probably dealing with is a pervasive modern myth that has been much propagandized, circulated, and diffused through the telling and the retelling and the re-retelling of the story. The more it's told, the more all kinds of people on the border are prone to pick up the myth and share it with others.

"What you're probably dealing with here is a pervasive modern myth, propagandized, circulated, and diffused through its telling and retelling."

—Milton Rosenberg

I don't mean on the border of nuttiness. I mean on the border of confusion about their own lives, their own past, and maybe with some present emotional crisis or merely some unbearable loneliness. In that state, they could be lying. More typically they are probably attempting to grope their way out of their own confused identity toward some order and meaning by having this "recall," which grows upon itself and becomes a spun fantasy. But the fact that the stories are similar from one to another across maybe a set of hundreds of cases would suggest that they are all drawing upon past versions of the story they have encountered. That some investigators take it seriously and find confirmation suggests to me that some of these investigators—and Budd, I say this with all due regard to your utter sincerity—don't fully honor, perhaps because they haven't been fully trained in them, the hard canons of empirical science.

I suggest then that abduction and extraterrestrial impregnation comprise a modern myth. Indeed, it is a bit of urban folklore, to use the term that has been employed for certain kinds of stories that circulate as having happened to somebody who is the best friend of my cousin's wife's aunt. My view then is that the easiest explanation of all of this, of your research and lots of other research of the same sort, is that the subjects are credulous and susceptible and have picked up a modern myth; and for one or another reason they find it valuable to themselves, or tension-reducing for themselves, to give you back that myth as if it really happened to them. Often, of course, they have convinced themselves in and through the telling.

Hopkins: Well, we'll leave aside a lot of problems with your theory, such as the physical evidence, the fact this might happen to four, five, or six people at once, simultaneously, with the same descriptions, and so forth. But this is the basic problem. I think it's a wonderful theory you've brought up. It's been looked into before. People ask, "Exactly what is this modern myth, how does it get to us, how does it turn up in science fiction?" I go into this at some length in the book, that there are two essential modern myths of extraterrestrial contact. One is the space-brother myth and the other is the paranoid myth of destruction from outer space. These are extremely common, and they have been the basis of most of our films. *Close Encounters* was of

course an example of the space-brothers myth. Finally they land, and it's all quite wonderful.

What we're getting at here is something totally, absolutely neutral. One of the psychologists who has done interviews with people whom I've worked with—quite a few of them—said to me, "Why would anyone fantasize a thing like this?" It doesn't give you the satisfaction of a paranoid image where you struggle against overwhelming odds and evils that are following you. On the other hand, it doesn't give you the satisfaction of having been chosen for some wonderful quasi-religious role in the world. In fact, you have been turned into a kind of neutered, powerless figure with no autonomy whatever.

Rosenberg: Maybe it gives representation to your deep feeling that you are a powerless figure who is abused in the world.

Hopkins: Now that is very interesting, because this is exactly why we need a lot of psychological help in investigating these cases. One can test exactly the statement you made by doing psychological therapy, psychoanalysis, whatever. One of the projects I would like to see—and I would fund this myself if my book makes any money—would be to take a few of our abductees whose accuracy I have enormous faith in—I don't like to believe in their accuracy, but I'm forced to—and submit them to psychotherapy with someone who came from any point of view whatsoever psychologically, [including] the position you just stated, and see after a period of perhaps two or three years of very thoroughgoing psychoanalysis and psychological testing whether the theory you stated has any basis in reality.

Rosenberg: But the immediate issue before us is to formulate a parsimonious hypothesis—one that meets the requirements of Occam's Razor, the general rule in science that one should explain things as simply as possible, making as few assumptions as possible. I think I have offered a parsimonious explanation that cannot be rejected by the available evidence. What do you think, Larry?

Gruder: I think that that's one. As I said earlier, I am a skeptic in the sense that I'm not willing to accept any hypothesis, regardless of how plausible or reasonable or implausible or unreasonable it is, until I see some convincing evidence. Convincing evidence is evidence that meets the scientific standards that are generally accepted. I don't think the evidence that you [Hopkins] provide in your book meets that, and so I can't accept it. But it doesn't mean that I couldn't if I had the right evidence.

Rosenberg: What would the right evidence be?

Gruder: The research would have to be designed to eliminate some of the problems we talked about earlier, possibilities of biasing. You [Hopkins] have interviewed most of these people. Many have read about what you've done, which is how they get to you, and they may already be influenced toward your view. One of the features of hypnosis is that people are more suggestible. You told us earlier that you recognize this and tried to avoid the problems. But even the most well-intentioned person, even the most well-intentioned scientist, knows you can't avoid producing this kind of bias in an interpersonal exchange.

Rosenberg: That is to say you lead and cue them not because you intend to deceive but because your own desire to have your own hypothesis confirmed affects the way you deal with them.

“... The individual whose story is a response to the demands of the hypnotic situation truly believes that what he tells you must be true, though he has not known it before.”—Martin Orne

Gruder: There are other parsimonious explanations, and this is part of one: namely, that you have attracted and have focused on people who tend to confirm your hypothesis. In fact, you say that after you had appeared on a television show, or a radio show, you got hundreds and hundreds of calls, and many letters in response to the book.

Hopkins: Hundreds of letters.

Gruder: The point is that you focused only on certain ones, those you said you had judged to be more plausible. Well, immediately you're selecting out, and that was my point with my little experiment. There were lots of descriptions and lots of drawings of different types of UFOs and different types of aliens, but some were what you were looking for, and I could have picked ones that meant something else.

Hopkins: Well, I wouldn't ever worry about that, since the film *Close Encounters* based itself on the case material and was one of the biggest box-office hits of all time. Now here's the point: If your theory is right, this is a social phenomenon and there is some kind of collective myth. We can study the science fiction, the popular imagery that we've been shown; and I described it, I think accurately, as falling into those two groups. As far as I know, there has only been one film ever made that really dealt with, let's say, the scenario that appears in my book.

Rosenberg: The immediate issue before us is: Are these veridical accounts? From the stories that have been elicited from these various respondents—by hypnosis or by other modes of inquiry—can we conclude that alien invaders have been landing, snatching up people, and submitting them to medical examination, and furthermore that these medical procedures involve a forced intermingling of the two gene pools?

Hopkins: All I can say is I don't try to prove anything in this book. I don't think I can prove anything to anybody. That is not my goal. I'm doing exactly at this very moment what I wanted to do. I'm bringing this to the attention of scientists. I can blow it all away by saying: "It's just unbelievable. I just can't believe it. Who can believe it?" That isn't the point. I would like from both of you a set of proposals about how to go about investigating a particular, specific case.

Rosenberg: We might put the question not only to Larry Gruder but also to another guest via telephone. This guest is probably the most eminent

student of hypnosis in the country, Dr. Martin Orne, who holds both an M.D. and a Ph.D., and is professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. The AMA panel on hypnosis and its use in the courts, which Larry Gruder referred to earlier, was chaired, in fact, by Martin Orne.

Martin, I'm very glad you could join us. The basic question I would raise is: What about the use of hypnosis and other modes of inquiry with people who give reports of having been abducted and medically examined on landed extraterrestrial vehicles?

Martin Orne: To get all of that in perspective, we could go back to when Freud used hypnosis with hysterics at the turn of the century. When he hypnotized them and asked them to remember the time they first had the symptom, they would remember things with intense effect and they would relive typically something that seemed to be a seduction by an adult male, usually their fathers. And Freud actually developed his theory of hysteria based upon these observations. It appeared that not only did people seemingly remember all kinds of things that you couldn't know if you weren't there—a facial expression, a torn tapestry, a picture that's crooked, all kinds of things like that—they also, when they woke up afterward, felt a lot better. They lost the symptom. It's for that reason that Freud argued that this really was a reliving of a past event. He put forth this view at the time and it has stayed with us to the present day. Actually, he himself realized within a couple of years that these weren't actual memories, that they were mixtures of memories, fears, fantasies, hopes—all kinds of things mixed up.

Rosenberg: Now show me exactly how you go from that to the question of the hypnotic recall of people who claim they've been abducted onto UFOs.

Orne: Well, you know we can't really look at the accuracy of the subjects' descriptions of the UFOs and their occupants because these beings aren't nice enough to come on television. So we don't see them. But you can ask, "What about the accuracy of memories that you recall, going back to when you were six and before that? How accurate is your memory when you relive it in age regression?"

I did the first study of this type back in 1951. For the first time, we actually got the drawings somebody did when he was six years old, which he hadn't seen since then. His father had saved everything the little boy did as he grew up. He had some drawings in the attic that his son had done at age six, of a house, a teepee, a man, a number of things. So we age-regressed the individual. He hadn't seen those drawings and to that day he hadn't drawn the same things. We asked him to draw a house, a tree, a man, and so forth. His drawings looked great. It seemed as if he actually relived it. Two weeks later we repeated it. He gave us a somewhat different drawing, but again it looked really like a child's work. And then when we compared it to the real thing, it became clear that it was totally different. If you didn't have the real thing, it would have looked as if it were an actual recollection and reliving.

Now we have a good deal of data along this line that shows that what people remember is not an accurate recall. It is something that is emotionally

accurate. That's why it is very useful in psychotherapy, but it isn't what really happened.

Rosenberg: Now what kind of emotional utility might one get through adopting the "abduction onto a UFO" myth? For those who recover that memory through hypnosis or through other inquiry, what sort of resolution of what kind of deeper conflict just might be involved? It's a matter of speculation, of course, but what are your speculations?

"I don't try to prove anything in this book. . . . I'm bringing this to the attention of scientists."

—Budd Hopkins

Orne: There are a lot of secondary gains. For one thing, you've become the object of interest of a significant person, a psychiatrist who has some high status, and he will spend hours and hours with you working out what those little green men did to you. He is fascinated by it. We all love an audience, and we get a fascinated audience and become the center of attention. Many of these people don't have much to attract people interpersonally, and now they suddenly become celebrities.

Gruder: Hypnosis has been used to emphasize that everything we experience is recorded in memory, as though it were on a videotape, and that all we need to get it out is hypnosis itself. Thus there is a tremendous demand on these people to produce something, which is one reason perhaps that we find with hypnosis that you generate more recollection. But it is a false model of memory as well as a false model of hypnosis. The system is just too fallible to rely on for the kind of evidence we need to convince us of a particular explanation of the phenomenon.

Orne: Precisely. But I'd like to go just a step further. Not only does hypnosis cause you to do that, but it also causes you to become more convinced about what is talked about. That's the most interesting thing. You see, hypnosis causes less accurate memories, but the individual believes that they're more accurate than their waking recollections. That's a really fascinating thing. . . . The individual whose story is a response to the demands of the hypnotic situation truly believes that what he tells you must be true even though he may not have known it before.

Hopkins: We have two basic options here; they're very simple. We can make this go away by saying I can amass a sufficient amount of theory around it to blanket it completely and smother it. And the other is simply to say I find it intriguing enough that I would like to actually work with these people and investigate their situations, their cases, with every kind of psychological and physiological tool that we can use.

* * * * *

Rosenberg: As we end our discussion, Larry, do you feel any temptation toward a hemidemisemiquaver of persuasion in the direction of Budd Hopkins's argument?

Gruder: I don't feel that there's any evidence that supports his explanation of the experiences these people had. I don't doubt that these people had experiences and that they are fascinating from the point of view of a lay person or a psychologist. They're certainly worthy of explanation.

Rosenberg: What can we learn from this book? If you were to use it in a classroom at the University of Illinois, you'd use it for what purpose, to make what point?

Gruder: If I were to use it, I would use it as a tool to teach scientific methodology, because it demonstrates all of the problems involved in doing science, as a social scientist and as a psychologist: observation, measurement, reliability, validity, the problems in conducting experiments and of gathering data—demand characteristics, experimenter bias, evaluation apprehension, controls. All of these issues are present in the book and would provide probably a very compelling example for students. It would keep them involved.

Rosenberg: What you apparently mean, but haven't directly said, is that this book is a perfect example of errors in all of those areas.

Gruder: Certainly, but Budd recognizes and has admitted that he is not a scientist. He doesn't claim to be. What disturbs me about it, if anything disturbs me, is just that the presentation is as though the book were scientific, and in fact it's not. ●

*For further discussion of these claims and the issues surrounding them, see the reviews of Budd Hopkins's *Intruders* and of Whitley Strieber's *Communion* in our Fall 1987 issue; psychologist Robert A. Baker's article "The Aliens Among Us," in our Winter 1987-88 issue; articles on misperceptions about hypnosis, by Nicholas Spanos and Peter Reveen, also in our Winter issue; and of course the article in this issue by folklorist Bill Ellis, "The Varieties of Alien Experience."—THE EDITOR*