

# ANTIMATTER

## UFO UPDATE:

Are UFO researchers using hypnosis to manufacture memories in abductees?

Are UFO abductees describing true-to-life kidnappings at the hands of space aliens, or is the abduction experience all in the mind? Members of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) say they have an answer: Abductees weave their strange tales based on the suggestions of overzealous therapists who may be unaware of the new studies on hypnosis and suggestibility. In fact, say false-memory advocates, abductees may soon start suing for malpractice like any patient claiming abuse by psychiatrists, psychologists, and other assorted shrinks.

The False Memory Syndrome Foundation got its start in March 1992 in response to the cries of parents claiming they'd been wrongly accused of sexual abuse. Made up of both mental health professionals and family members trying to get to the bottom of some of these charges, the group has found that while sexual abuse is real, some claims emerge only after biased practitioners ask leading questions during therapy, casting doubt on whether actual abuse ever occurred.

Foundation Executive Director Pamela Freyd, who has a Ph.D. in education, admits her group does not investigate UFO abductions per se. However, she explains, their findings suggest abductions are the product of similarly biased practitioners who ask their clients leading questions during therapy. "Memories are reconstructed from bits and fragments and reinterpretations; they are not videotape," says Freyd. "In other words, hypnosis is not a reliable tool, and memory is not a fixed thing. People can recall what they want to recall or what they are encouraged to recall, even if the events never occurred."



"People who are confused may be led to interpret experience in light of what the hypnotist believes and suggests," notes Steven Lynn, an Ohio University psychologist who studies hypnotically induced pseudomemories. "The person becomes primed in one way or another to want to believe it," adds Concordia University psychologist Campbell Perry. Perry, an FMSF board member in Montreal, also suspects that abductees are highly responsive to hypnosis, have intense imaginations, and find it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

The scientific issues central to the false memory debate worry Toronto therapist David Gottlieb because, he notes, it means "at least some abductee memories recalled under hypnosis may not be true."

But Temple University historian and abduction researcher David Jacobs doesn't know if the false-memory work is applicable to abductees at all. "First of all," he says, "much of FMS is based on adult recollections of childhood events, while many abductees are trying to figure out what happened to them last week." Throwing a further wrench into the works, Jacobs adds that "abduction researchers have uncovered false memories of childhood sexual abuse that masked the memory of the abduction itself."

Still, Jacobs, who often hypnotizes the abductees he works with, is concerned about lawsuits. "That's why I'd rather have competent mental health people dealing with this than lay people."

Perry is not reassured. "When I consider some of the flaky claims—like past lives—that people with M.D.s and Ph.D.s have accepted uncritically," he says, "I'm not surprised that some of them buy into the abduction stuff."—PAUL McCARTHY