

Alvin Lawson's important study of imaginary UFO abductions is the first attempt by serious investigators to test the validity of accounts related under hypnosis. Lawson and his co-workers made a number of fascinating discoveries, one of which is not—contrary to what some skeptics would lead you to believe—that all such reports are fantasies. Indeed the differences between “real” and imagined abduction stories are as interesting—and potentially as significant—as the similarities. If Lawson has found no firm answers (which is hardly surprising, since firm answers to any UFO-related question are in short supply), he has at least taught ufologists to temper their enthusiasm with caution and shown us that hypnosis is not necessarily the royal road to the truth.

Hypnosis of Imaginary UFO “Abductees” by Alvin H. Lawson

I. Abstract

In an attempt to evaluate objectively the claims of UFO “abductees,” imaginary abductions were induced hypnotically in a group of volunteers who had no significant knowledge of UFOs. Eight situational questions comprising the major components of a typical abduction account were asked of each subject.

Although the researchers expected major dissimilarities, an averaged comparison of data from four imaginary and four “real” abduction narratives showed no substantive differences. Also, extensive patterns echoing well-established details from “real” UFO reports emerged from the “naïve” subjects’ imaginary sessions.

There is as yet no satisfactory explanation for the patterns and other similarities between imaginary and "real" abductions. But, more significantly, there are parallels between these patterns and the "image constants," or recurrent descriptions of form, color, and movement reported by subjects in drug-induced hallucination experiments, and in so-called death narratives, among other mental processes. Thus there is reason to accept at least some parts of "real" abductees' stories as accurate reflections of what their sensory mechanisms have reported.

However, 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. With these distinctions in mind, an abduction model is proposed.

Witnesses *really perceive* images—from whatever source—such as bright and pulsating lights, lattice-textured forms moving randomly in the sky, lighted tunnels, humanoid figures, etc. These abduction constants are combined with data from the imagination, memory, and existing UFO data known by witnesses to create a "real" UFO encounter. The subjective reality of the intense hallucinatory structure convinces the witnesses that the entire experience is a physically real event. Subsequently they may report the "truth" as they have experienced it, although actual occurrences remain unclear.

The complexities of the UFO phenomenon are affirmed by the above model since still unexplained are many puzzling matters, including the greatest mystery of all, the nature of the stimulus which initiates the imagery in the witness and so triggers the abduction sequence.

The writer prefers a dualistic UFO hypothesis. But while there is a continuing absence of unambiguous physical evidence, this study concludes that UFOs are—in psychological terms—unquestionably real, and further, that nonphysical UFO research is promising.

II. Introduction

Since early 1977, sixteen volunteers have been hypnotized and given imaginary UFO "abductions" by a clinical hypnotist working with a group of Southern California ufologists.* The purpose of this paper is to describe the series of experiments and to discuss their implications for UFO research in the light of several analogs to abduction experiences, particularly drug-induced hallucinations.

The imaginary "abductees" were volunteers from local colleges and communities. The group was composed of ten females and six males and ranged in age from twelve to sixty-five. Based upon a brief questionnaire, the oral portion of which was administered before and again during hypnosis as a check, all subjects were judged to be "naïve"—that is, generally ignorant about UFOs and the extensive if uneven literature about them. (See Appendix I for additional data on the subjects and on the experimental protocol.)

The imaginary abduction study came about primarily because of researchers' dissatisfactions with results from allegedly real abduction case investigations. Objections included: (1) the uncertain credibility of witnesses; (2) the ambiguous nature of the anecdotal and other evidence supporting abduction witnesses; and (3) unresolved questions as to the efficacy of hypnosis and/or hypnotic procedures followed in particular cases. The researchers began the study with the assumption that imaginary abductions would be clearly distinct from "real" cases and so would offer some proof of the "reality" of actual abductions. But what we found was both surprising and unsettling, and much of the intervening time has been spent in trying to deal with the implications of those results.

* The group included Dr. W. C. McCall, John De Herrera, and the author. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1977 MUFON UFO Symposium (Scottsdale, Arizona), and at the 1978 meeting of the American Psychological Association (Toronto).

III. Materials and Methods

As the case literature indicates, most of the two hundred or so reported abductions typically contain several distinct stages, the whole of which can be thought of as the abduction sequence:

- I. Witness in normal physical and mental environment
- II. Witness in "preabduction condition"
- III. Initiation of experience
 - A. Loss of control
 - B. Witness senses UFO
 - C. Witness senses being taken aboard UFO
 - D. Witness senses UFO interior
 - E. Witness senses UFO entities
 - F. Witness senses being "examined"
 - G. Witness senses being given a "message"
 - H. Witness senses being returned to normal physical/mental environment
- IV. End of abduction experience
- V. Aftermath of abduction experience

A series of eight situational questions based on this abduction sequence was incorporated into an interrogation form which was used with all subjects involved in the experiment. An abstract of this question form follows:

- I. Preliminary statement to subject describing the general nature of the experiment.
- II. Hypnosis.
- III. Idea of imaginary UFO encounter is presented, with the subject urged to tell all details eagerly.
- IV. Questions are asked about each of eight segments of an imaginary UFO encounter/abduction:
 - A. Imagine you are in your favorite place, relaxed and comfortable, when you suddenly see a UFO. Describe what you see.
 - B. Imagine you are aboard that UFO. How do you get aboard?

- C. Imagine you are inside that UFO. Describe what you see.
- D. Imagine you are seeing some entities or beings on board that UFO. Describe them.
- E. Imagine the beings give you a physical examination. Describe what is happening to you.
- F. Imagine you get a kind of message from the occupants of that UFO. What does the message say, and how is it made known to you?
- G. Imagine you are returned where you were before you sighted the UFO. How do you get there, and how do you feel?
- H. Imagine it has been some time since you have had that UFO encounter. Is there anything which indicates that your personality or your physiological and/or psychological functions have been affected in any way by your UFO experience?

In order to gain perspective on the experiment, an attempt was made to quantify the data from both "real" and imaginary abductions. Transcripts of four "real" and four imaginary cases were analyzed line by line and compared under the following eight categories:

1. Pattern (obvious parallel with previous cases in the literature)
2. Possible pattern (parallel which the analyst judged probable)
3. No recognizable pattern
4. Strangeness of data
5. Subject's objectivity (response judged to show absence of bias)
6. Subject's bias (response deemed to indicate cueing or prejudice)
7. Possible paranormal data (i.e., alleged ESP data such as telepathy, etc.)
8. Emotional component (strong emotional factor in subject's responses)

The following two categories were used in the analysis but not in the comparison in Figure 1:

9. Intentional cue (a planned, deliberately leading question)
10. Unintentional cue (unplanned and/or accidental cueing or questioning)

The four "real" abduction cases were selected mainly because they were credible dual or multiple-witness cases for which regression transcripts or other narrative records were readily available. The "real" abductees included: (A) Betty Hill, whose abduction along with her husband Barney in New Hampshire in 1961 is perhaps the most well-known such case. The imaginary study used Mrs. Hill's "dream narrative" (5)—a detailed report of a series of dreams which she says followed her alleged abduction—rather than her hypnosis tapes because of its greater conciseness and its essential identity to the Hills' regression records. (B) Judy Kendall (7), one of three sisters who allege they were abducted near Woodland, California, in 1971. The Kendall case was investigated by the same team of researchers involved in the imaginary study. (C) Sandy Larson (8), who says she was abducted with her daughter and a boyfriend in North Dakota in 1975. (D) Elaine Thomas (15), one of three women allegedly abducted near Liberty, Kentucky, in 1976.

The quantification attempt is subjective and uses a tiny sample, but the same analytical machinery was applied to both types of abduction narratives. It is emphasized, also, that well-investigated, multiple-witness abduction cases are very rare.

IV. Results

The eight-category analysis computed its results simply by totaling the number of information bits in each category and dividing to get percentages. While individual

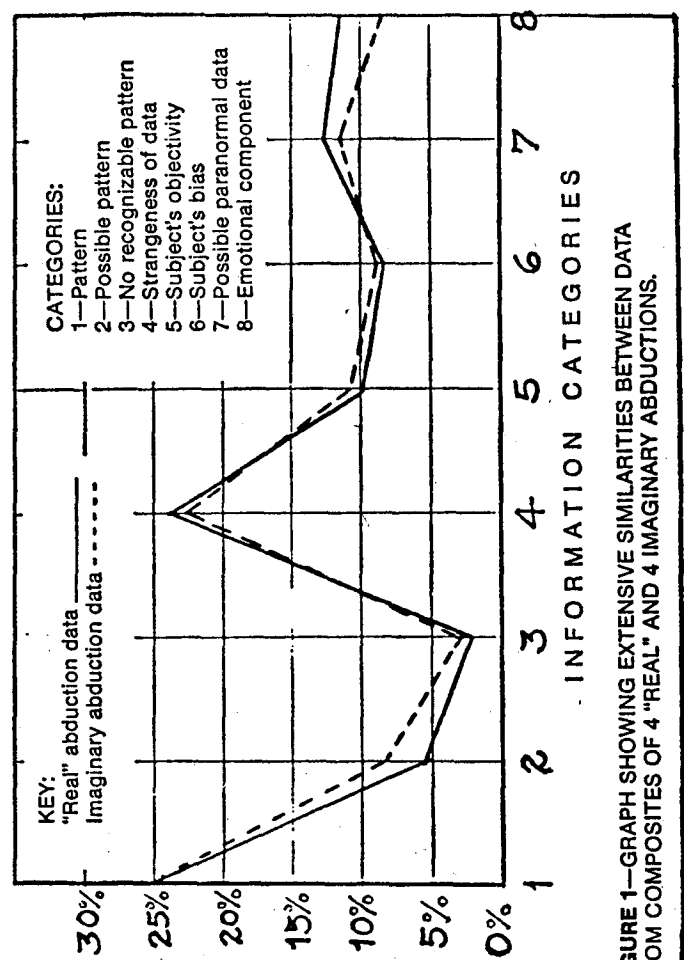


FIGURE 1—GRAPH SHOWING EXTENSIVE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DATA FROM COMPOSITES OF 4 "REAL" AND 4 IMAGINARY ABDUCTIONS.

categories varied as much as ten points, striking similarities emerged when averages of four "real" and four imaginary cases were compared, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Whatever the possible weaknesses of the quantification and comparative analysis, all of the imaginary subjects described many patterns or details identical to those found with varying frequency throughout UFO report literature (not only abduction cases). The patterns range from the obvious ("saucer-shaped") to rare or even obscure though established details of high strangeness ("tunnel of light"). Some of the interesting patterns from the first eight imaginary sessions which the author noted are listed below (classified into "obvious" and "rare" categories for additional clarity):

Obvious Patterns

Rare Patterns

"UFO Sighted"

UFO too bright to see	UFO more brightness than color
Disc-shaped UFO (3)*	Saturn-shaped UFO (3)
Haze surrounds UFO	Saturn rings move counter to body
Erratic movement	UFO becomes "larger and smaller"
	S senses UFO is "observing" her

"Aboard UFO"

S carried aboard in trance	S taken through "tunnel of light" (3)
S "blacked out"	Boarding seemed "long journey"
	S taken through solid bottom of UFO

* Numerals indicate the number of times a pattern was mentioned.

Obvious Patterns (cont.)

Rare Patterns (cont.)

"UFO Interior"

Consoles, furnishings (5)	No consoles, furnishings
Very bright lights (6)	Fumes and mist present (2)
Cold inside (3)	Cold and warm by turns
Loud humming	Humming almost "hypnotic"
	TV-screen "windows" inside
	S inside "bubble" throughout exp.

"Entities"

Human (2)	Animal
Humanoid	Exotic (3)
Robot	Apparition (2)
Lacking some facial feature (6)	Two entity types on same UFO (2)
Webbed fingers, toes	Retracting beam from entity's eye
S senses entities telepathic (3)	

"Examination"

Head-to-foot, orderly (3)	Blood sample "vacuumed" from S
Entities kindly but business-like	S senses "mind-probe" (2)
Paralysis during exam (4)	Bleeding is stopped, healed quickly
S calmed by entity (3)	S sleeps long time after exam

"Message"

Telepathic (4)	Verbal (2)
Content of message: ecological, scientific, "will return," "you will forget" (2)	Other (2)
	No message (3)
	Entity's mouth moves, no sound

Obvious Patterns (cont.)

Rare Patterns (cont.)

"Return"

Fatigue, disorientation	Itchy skin, dry throat
"No one will believe me"	Skin "burns"
S feels "good" about UFO exp.	S feels "taller" afterward

"Aftermath"

S has "more open mind"	S puzzled about "time lapse"
S forgets experience	S expects "something will happen"

One of the most intriguing patterns relates an imaginary narrative with a 1974 Rhodesian abduction report, both of which describe apparitional entities that assume whatever form the observer wishes. This pattern suggests provocatively that "real" witnesses are somehow responsible for significant elements of their own abduction experiences:

Imaginary Apparition Description

... The more I look at it, the more it—it—it actually becomes more human as I look at it. It—it started out very elongated . . . it had the parts of a human face, but they—it didn't look right somehow. It—it's like there was no ears, or—the more I look at it—it begins to conform to what I want to see as being human. . . . I wonder if it's giving me this illusion of itself, strictly through my mind . . . be-

"Real" Apparition Description

... We were programmed inside the motorcar. . . . And then the form which was beamed straight to the backseat and sat there the entire journey told me I would see what I wanted to see in and around and at itself. I would only see what I wanted to see: if I wanted it to look like a monster, then it looked like a monster. I don't know . . . what they did . . . Same basic form as humans, with large

Imaginary Apparition Description (cont.)

"Real" Apparition Description (cont.)

cause it keeps changing as it walks toward me. I get the feeling that it's changing for me. . . .
—Imaginary subject #4

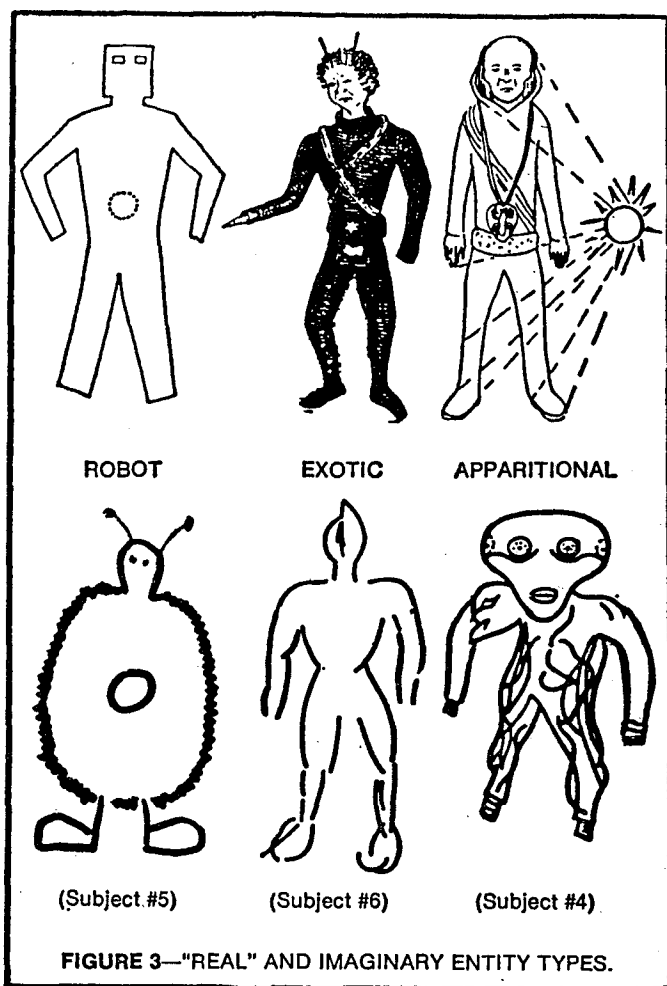
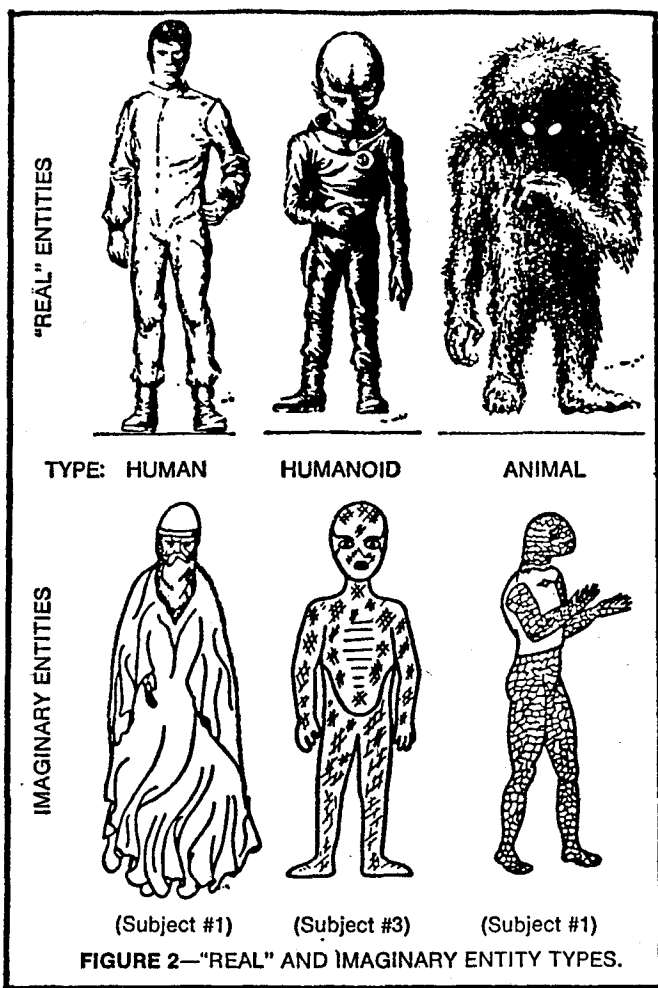
trunks, necks, hairless, two arms, two legs. . . .
—Witness (under hypnosis) in Rhodesian case (from *Flying Saucer Review* 21, No. 2, 9)

Entity types from "real" and imaginary cases make a remarkable pattern. It is noteworthy that all of the six known categories of entities (human, humanoid, animal, robot, exotic, and apparitional) were described in just the first eight imaginary regression narratives. The sketches in Figures 2 and 3 provide the most compelling evidence of the extensive in-depth pattern parallels between imaginary and "real" abductions.

V. Discussion

The imaginary/"real" patterns are as a group too abundant and complex to have sprung from ordinary pop culture sources such as TV, film, magazines, or other media. A thorough knowledge of UFO case literature would be essential for references to pattern details such as a retracting light beam, a UFO which changes its size, being levitated through a tunnel of light, and reports involving unusual entity types. Yet our protocol made significant UFO knowledge by the volunteers improbable.

Whatever their origin, the patterns seem to prove that the imaginary abductees were not fantasizing in absolute freedom—they did not, for instance, describe kelp-like entities or UFOs that breathe. The absence of such far-out whimsy suggests that the patterns provide a structure around which subjects fantasize their experiences, following a limited imaginative range which parallels the bulk of "real" abduction cases.



It should be pointed out that the patterns apparently confirm that imaginary narratives are substantially reliable indices of "real" case details. This baffling development may well become significant for future abduction research, but at present there seems no way to account for it.

The question remains, where have these nontrivial patterns in imaginary UFO abduction narratives come from? Several suggestions follow.

A. *The hypnosis procedure.* Since hypnotic regression has been used increasingly in recent years to obtain information about alleged abduction experiences, it is reasonable to ask whether the patterns are encouraged by the hypnosis procedure. Certainly one should be cautious about the results from hypnotic regression in UFO case investigations. As experienced hypnotists know, "mesmerization"—whatever its nature and whatever else it might be—is no sure road to the truth. A witness can lie, or believe his own lies, and thus invalidate any regression. 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. As far back as 1947 an attempt to use hypnosis in a UFO investigation resulted in apparent examples—though completely unwitting ones—of imaginary abduction narratives⁽²⁾. It may be impossible to know for certain when witnesses are fantasizing in this way.

However, hypnotic regression has been employed in only a tiny percentage of the thousands of reports which provide the known details about the UFO phenomenon, and yet many unusual pattern details (such as retracting light beams) have been reported in cases where no hypnotic regression was used. Thus while the imagination may embellish and so corrupt a regressed witness's testimony, hypnosis can be a valuable research tool when properly employed. There the question will have to rest—albeit uncertainly.

B. *Leading questions.* A related inference is that the patterns are caused by a series of leading questions which bias the protocol of the imaginary abduction experiment. In reply, I quote from imaginary regression narrative #7. Note that the hypnotist merely asks a single question, whereas the subject responds with an extended descriptive passage in which I count more than thirty-five observational details—none of which can be said to result from cueing or otherwise improper procedure:

Q: Now, imagine that you're seeing some entities, or beings . . . Describe them as completely as you can.

S#6: They seem to be humanoid in form. They have round heads that are much larger than—humans. It's almost as though they're kind of—checking out to see if I'm hostile or not. Their bodies are colored different from their faces and hands. Maybe—maybe clothes . . . Their skin is kind of—waxy—waxy yellow. They don't have any hair. They have kind of bumpy-like . . . skin. . . . Their faces seem kind of humanoid. But their hands are the same waxy yellow, and they have humps on the top. They don't really have fingers. They seem to be kind of webbed. Yet I don't see definite projections, or fingers. Kind of bumps on the end of—of the—the hand. They don't seem—to have—I can't see any legs, or feet, because they're—what looks like possibly a—an article of clothing goes right to the floor. Both of them are dressed alike. Costume is . . . oh . . . more purplish than blue in color. Seems to be all one—all made in one piece. There don't seem to be any seams on the costume. Their eyes are very, very deep-set. Can't really see eyes or pupils. What may be a nose is in the middle of the face, but doesn't really project from the face at all. And the mouths are—round openings, without lips. . . . They seem

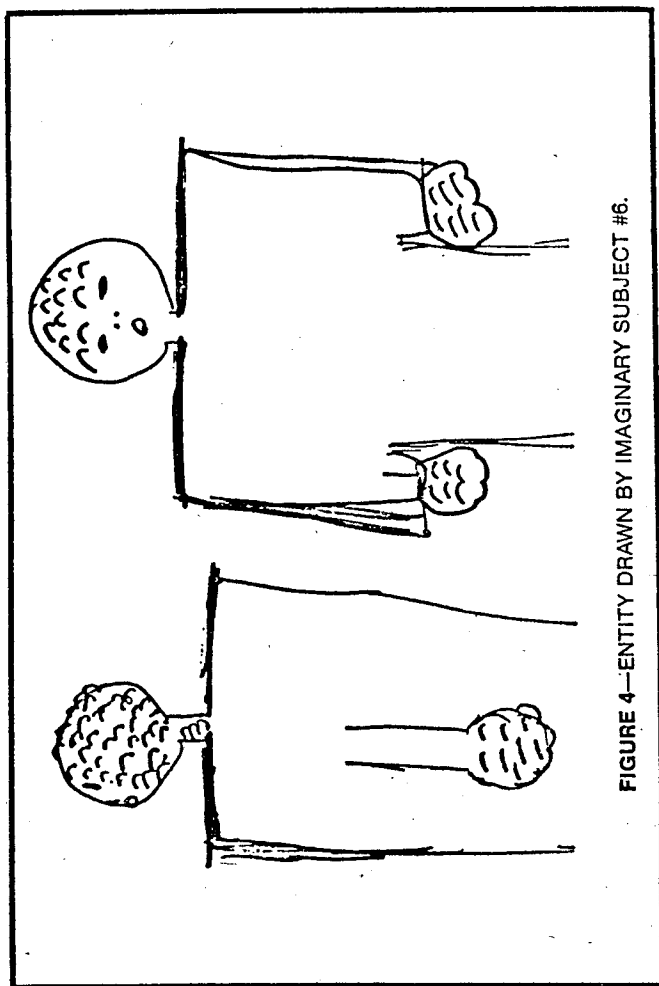


FIGURE 4—ENTITY DRAWN BY IMAGINARY SUBJECT #6.

to have very short necks, and very broad shoulders. . . . They stand about four feet, two inches tall. Maybe a little taller. . . . They have no tools or weapons with them. They're just kind of walking around me. . . . And the floor seems to be going down, as if it's an elevator. And—and the door seems to be going up. I think we're traveling down. Doesn't really seem to upset them at all. I think they're probably examining me as well as I'm examining them.

(The subject's sketch of the entities described above appears in Figure 4.)

While no hypnosis session can entirely avoid unconscious bias and cueing, the imaginary series was generally free from such flaws. Perhaps I should repeat here that our comparative analysis checked for subjects' bias and for leading questions, discounting both where appropriate.

C. Are "real" abductions imaginary? The existence of extensive and nontrivial patterns between imaginary and "real" narratives leads easily to the inference that "real" abductions are imaginary. But there are major differences between the two experiences, as the following comparison shows:

<i>Imaginary Abduction Experiences</i>	<i>"Real" Abduction Experiences</i>
Voluntary	Involuntary
Witness usually controls emotion	Witness often frightened, emotional
No enduring sense of "time lapse"	Often involves "time lapse"
No physical effects	Physical effects alleged
No physiological effects	Physiological effects alleged
No amnesia	Amnesia common
Few dreams, nightmares	Dreams, nightmares, etc.
No apparent aftermath	Aftermath of disturbing psy-

Imaginary Abduction Experiences (cont.)

Usually no conscious "memory" of UFO encounter experience

"Real" Abduction Experiences (cont.)

chic, emotional effects
Often a conscious memory of UFO encounter

An interesting sidelight on one imaginary session was that the subjects involved (a couple) could *not* say for certain they had not experienced an encounter when awakened from hypnosis. Similarly, some "real" abductees were unable to say for sure whether they had imagined parts of their narratives or not. There are few simple answers in ufology.

In any case the investigators are aware that any explanatory theory must confront some considerable distinctions.

D. The ETH inference. UFOs, and certainly their popular misnomer, "flying saucers," imply for most people the possibility of extraterrestrial visitors, superior beings with advanced technology who may treat humans as specimens. Although there is no more certain evidence for the extraterrestrial hypothesis than for any other, none of the several viable UFO theories—psychic manifestations, extradimensional objects, exotic natural phenomena, divine emissaries, etc.—rivals the prevalence of the ETH. The "nuts-and-bolts" theory, then, may have distorted UFO report data by creating a complex set of ETH-oriented expectations which emerges in witnesses' narratives in the form of patterns.

The *standard* imaginary patterns may originate from excessive ETH awareness. If imaginary data were completely culture-free, we might expect evidence of other hypotheses to manifest itself, but it apparently has not done so. Of course, ETH patterns may dominate simply because other theories are invalid.

However, the *unusual* data patterns probably do not stem from an ETH inference since, unlike the standard

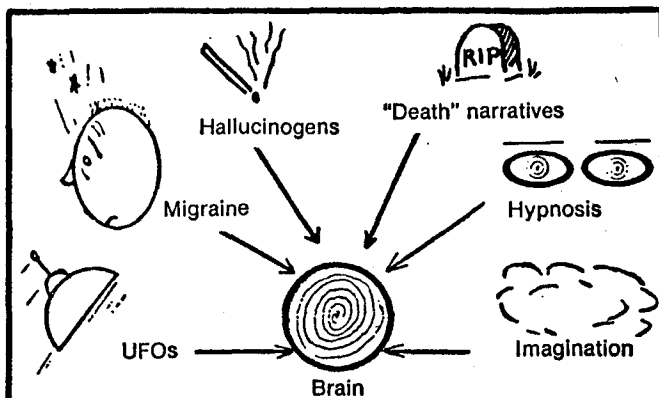


FIGURE 5—DIAGRAM OF THE BRAIN'S HYPOTHESIZED SIMILAR RESPONSES TO A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT STIMULI.

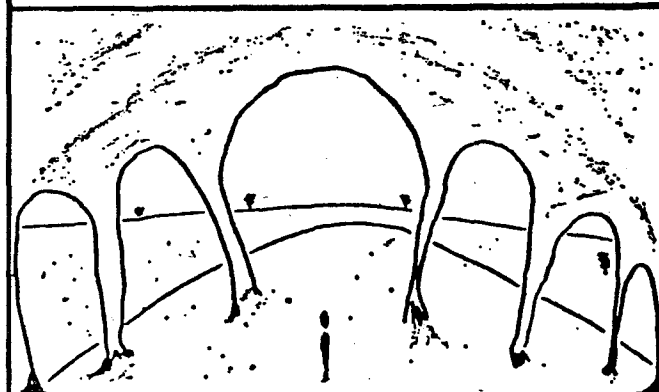


FIGURE 6—SKETCH SUGGESTED BY DRUG-INDUCED HALLUCINATION. NOTE RESEMBLANCES TO UFO INTERIOR AND "BIG ROOM". (AFTER HALLUCINATIONS.)

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