

UFOs/Aliens and Psi

Reports on unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and 'alien encounters' have accumulated around the world since the 1940s. Prior to this, since at least the eighteenth century, reports of contacts with beings from other planets circulated in Western culture. In all these contexts, with variations consistent with time and place, witnesses have claimed paranormal experiences of other kinds: out-of-body experiences, channeling, extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), past life memories, spiritual healing, and others.

This article reviews the literature on alleged alien contacts and related paranormal experiences, covering historical developments, types of experience, and psychological and cultural aspects. It considers the experiences as they are understood by protagonists, making no assumption about their reality.

Introduction

The emphasis on ESP experimentation in twentieth-century parapsychology has coincided with a relative loss of interest in spontaneous paranormal experiences. Yet reports continue to be made of [mediumship](#), [out-of-body experiences](#), [precognitive](#) dreams, [poltergeist episodes](#) and suchlike, for which surveys have found prevalence of around 50% in European and North American nations,¹ and around 80% or more in Brazil.²

The scientific disinterest applies especially to experiences relating to UFOs and 'alien encounters'. These are reported in many cultures and are diverse. They include:

- visions of lights and highly unusual objects in the sky (or ground, when landed)
- encounters with humanoid entities who present themselves as extraterrestrial (or are understood as such)
- entry into 'spaceships', voluntarily or by abduction
- verbal transmission of extraterrestrial messages
- [spiritual healings](#)
- memories of past lives in which alien beings appear to have made contact with the witness in other epochs
- encounters with aliens during out-of-body experiences

There are several points of intersection between traditional UFO/alien encounters and other types of paranormal experiences. UFO experiencers often claim to have acquired paranormal abilities as a direct consequence of contacts with aliens, such as extrasensory perception and [psychokinesis](#), temporarily or for extended periods.

Historical Development

Extraordinary experiences now termed 'paranormal' have been reported throughout human history. Some involve strange phenomena seen in the sky: apparitions of

lights and forms, human-like entities and the like. The apparitions are commonly seen as supernatural, for their unusual character and for the association of the sky with a religion heaven, and growing scientific knowledge has impacted relatively little on this popular interpretation.

Melton found religious and mystical elements in his analysis of more than a hundred reports made in the period from the mid-eighteenth century to the twentieth century: spiritual messages, the experience of aliens as divine beings, and contacts through altered states of consciousness and out of body experiences.³ Mention of spaceships or similar is not found before the twentieth century; until that time, aliens were perceived as originating from Mars, Venus or the Moon. Representative examples of the genre are found in reports by the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist [Emanuel Swedenborg](#) and the French medium [Hélène Smith](#).

Perhaps the first significant adoption of naturalistic explanations was with regard to the wave of reports about mysterious 'flying dirigibles' that surfaced in the United States between 1896 and 1897. But it was only in the mid-twentieth century that natural explanations were widely adopted. During World War II, pilots on both sides reported the uncomfortable presence of lightballs accompanying their planes during missions; these 'foo fighters', as they were termed, were first thought to be a new enemy weapon, until they were found to lack apparent hostile intent. In 1946, there were several reports of 'ghost rockets' in northern Europe. From June 1947 reports of 'flying saucers' proliferated around the world, beginning with a sighting by a civilian pilot, Kennedy Arnold, multiplying in number and in perceptions of their shape. They were widely explained at first as hoaxes, misinterpretations of known phenomena, or secret military aircraft, but then the 'extraterrestrial' hypothesis gained popularity.⁴

Types of Alien Contact

The following descriptions are based on first-hand accounts presented in the academic and non-academic literature,⁵ using the experiencer's terms and meanings.

Sky Sightings

The simplest and most common experience is the fleeting glimpse of strange lights or metallic objects in the sky. These are seen at great distances and are said to have unnatural characteristics that distinguish them from phenomena such as balloons, meteors and airplanes. For instance they accelerate and decelerate abruptly, appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, with peculiar luminous patterns. They also follow erratic and apparently intentional trajectories, at speeds impossible for human artifacts. All this encourages the belief that they are artifacts from outer space.

Close Encounters

The next category is the alleged interaction with UFOs and/or aliens, which tends to be richer in detail. With rare exceptions the UFO is described as a sphere, a disc

or a cylinder, either small, typically between a few centimeters in diameter and one meter (usually spherical), or large, between three and fifteen meters in diameter or extension (usually disc or cylinder). Portholes or windows are sometimes reported, suggestive of a transport vehicle. Perhaps as a result of New Age influences, UFOs are increasingly described as a non-physical 'energetic' phenomena, appearing to be transparent and without solid surface.[6](#)

Descriptions of aliens cover a variety of characteristics in terms of aspect, stature, and body mass. Some are seen to be animalistic, but most are anthropomorphic, having a head, body, two arms and two legs. The greater the correspondence to humans, the more likely they are to wear clothes and carry equipment. Their attitude also varies according to the degree of anthropomorphism: animalistic entities tend to be rude, while those that appear like humans tend to be more gentle and interactive, communicating by gestures, by speaking an incomprehensible language, or by telepathy.

Abduction

Alien abduction experiences may constitute the most scientifically-investigated category of UFO experience, because of their intriguing complexity and implications.[7](#) The accounts typically allude to an UFO or alien sighting, followed by the involuntary entry of the witness into the ship to be subjected to meticulous medical and psychological examinations. Sometimes they are forced to have sex with another abductee – both in a state of trance – or with an alien. Technological extraction of semen and ova are often reported, and such genetic material is allegedly used for the manufacture of 'hybrid' babies, which are sometimes seen inside the spacecraft at various stages of development.

Many abductees lack initial recollections of the experience,[8](#) and instead note disturbing signs of something anomalous having happened. These typically include a memory gap of one to three hours ('missing time'),[9](#) scars that were not there before the event, and recurrent clear dreams about having been examined by frightening creatures.[10](#)

Some do not feel the need a need for further enlightenment, retaining no subjective conviction of having been abducted. But others come to this conclusion, drawing on ideas in popular culture or their own recollections.[11](#) A significant number resort to hypnosis to try to recall the content of that missing time, usually recovering detailed recollections of complex abductions.[12](#)

Friendly Contacts

Another kind of UFO experience involves friendly and spiritually uplifting interactions with aliens who are felt to be majestic and benevolent. Such experiencers are usually called 'contactees'.[13](#) The episodes resemble alleged contacts with supernatural entities, often associated with altered consciousness, mediumistic trance, out-of-body experiences, and subtle intuitions. Here too, because of New Age influences, entities with purely physical characteristics are becoming less common.[14](#) The figures tend to be described as tall, beautiful and bright, like angels or enlightened spirits, despite wearing metallic clothes and being

equipped with technological instruments. The dialogues tend to be instructive and esoteric, taking place by means either of telepathy or by conventional vocalization.

Associated Paranormal Experiences

Reports of associated paranormal experiences were uncommon in relation to early 'flying saucer' sightings. This makes sense, considering that the popular explanations at the time did not mention extraterrestrials.

When aliens entered the scene in the 1950s, the extraordinary possibilities conceived for allegedly advanced beings began to overlap with the daily lives of witnesses. This occurred subtly at first, with prophetic messages being transmitted by aliens through contactees. In the mid-1960s and early 1970s, witnesses typically reported associated ostensible paranormal experiences. Cases in Brazil were verified earlier: the first widely reported abduction case was that of a young Brazilian farmer, Antônio Vilas Boas, who claimed in 1958 that he'd been forcibly taken inside a flying saucer; family members and other locals subsequently reported apparitions and poltergeist activity occurring on his farm and adjacent region.[15](#)

With the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s – and its consequent emphasis on altered states of consciousness and exceptional human possibilities – the nature of reports of alien contacts underwent a shift. For example, communication as described in early UFO reports was by grunts or by gestures; it was only in later decades that the notion of aliens communicating telepathically began to emerge. Many abductees and contactees today report telepathic communication having occurred in earlier episodes (including pre-1947),[16](#) but in the absence of reports of such being made at that time it is uncertain whether this is in fact the case.

Telepathic communication is perhaps the most common associated paranormal phenomenon, but UFO experiencers progressively began to report other types. Some claimed to have been able to read the thoughts of friends and family members following the episode, or move small objects by psychokinesis, or effect cures – abilities that faded after a few days. In several cases investigated by Martins, experiencers reported instances of poltergeist-type phenomena similar to those presented in the 1977 movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* preceding the abduction of the child: toys, appliances and various other objects move by themselves, bolts spin and fall, lights invade the house. Martins also reports mention of unexplained noises, premonitory dreams, cures and unexplained illnesses.[17](#)

Witnesses who report a series of episodes rather than a single encounter appear to develop paranormal abilities as a result of the spiritual evolution urged on them by the alleged aliens. It is common to find contactees carrying out healings, channeling messages and having out-of-body experiences in a voluntary and progressive way. Several contactees studied by Martins have set up clinics that facilitate alternative, religious or esoteric practices, attributing successes to the direct or indirect intervention of the aliens.[18](#)

It is increasingly common for out-of-body experiencers to report having met during their journeys with aliens, who themselves are said to be outside the body and interact by transmitting messages and energies. This is true especially of regular practitioners, as in some groups investigated by Martins, and could be a result of the increasing familiarity on the part of OBE practitioners with the theme of UFOs and aliens.

Something similar occurs during regressions to alleged past lives, where an increasing number of people report memories of having lived centuries or millennia ago, and of having had UFO/alien experiences during that time. This classic abduction-type scenario typically begins with sighting an unusual light in the sky or room followed by an approach by an alien, encouraging the idea that such beings have followed them from previous lives.

Alien message channeling is becoming common, especially in Kardecist (from the French spiritist writer Allan Kardec) and other spiritualistic contexts. In Brazil, where investigations in this respect are growing in number,¹⁹ the messages refer to conventional religious values such as devotion to God and Christ and to New Age themes such as the Cosmic Confederation, the Ascended Masters, healings and energies, and so on. Just as mediums report seeing the spiritual guides of people walking or standing beside them, in everyday situations or during religious practices, visions of alien entities acting as guides for different people are also becoming common. In Martins's field investigations, psychics often reported seeing an alien guide standing beside a person to provide protection and inspiration. This could be an effect not just of New Age influence, but also of the religiosity inspired by it: since the first half of the twentieth century, spiritist texts (such as those written by famous Brazilian medium [Chico Xavier](#)) make mention of other inhabited planets and related spiritual issues.

Few studies have been carried out on the association between paranormal and UFO experiences. Conventional surveys that include the UFO category usually do not verify links that connect the experiences discussed here, or identify a hierarchy, and more research is needed to verify the prevalence and impact of the association between the two.

Research on Experiencers

UFOs and aliens are understood by experiencers as concrete entities that leave physical traces. Despite this, almost all scientific research has taken place in fields such as psychology, anthropology, sociology and history, more concerned with beliefs and ideas than with objective facts. The research presents statistical data on sightings, correlates between UFO claims, esotericism, folklore and religion, studies perceptual and memory pronenesses, carries out psychological testing and examines clinical issues. It also elucidates cultural and scientific controversies on the ontology of UFO phenomena, studying the implications of collective ideas on the plurality of inhabited worlds.

Psychological Profile and Mental Health

Several studies in the second half of the twentieth century, especially the 1990s, have sought to correlate UFO experiences and personal characteristics, traits or disorders such as false memories proneness²⁰ sleep paralysis,²¹ fantasy proneness,²² specific neurological substrates,²³ and tendency to dissociate,²⁴ among others. Two embracing reviews of this literature²⁵ illustrate the divergences of the field and the need for further research (see below). Most of these studies are devoted to abductions, and research is needed to consistently cover other categories.

Hough and Rogers investigated emotional intelligence, fantasy proneness, and the Big Five personality factors in abductees.²⁶ Contrary to persistent claims in the literature, they did not find a significant difference in almost all variables, concluding that abductees have a psychological profile similar to that of the general population. The only exception was conscientiousness, the tendency to show discipline and sense of duty, where abductee scores were significantly higher than in the control group, possibly indicating effort on the part of abductees to appear as reliable witnesses.

French and others²⁷ performed a review of the literature and concluded that UFO experiencers have a psychological profile more predisposed to fantasies, suggestibility, dissociation, and beliefs in the paranormal. The authors replicated the findings and added the tendency to hallucinate. However, unlike earlier studies, they did not find greater susceptibility to false memories.

McLeod, Corbisier and Mack suggest that abduction experiences cannot be readily attributed to simple lies, mental illness, desire to draw attention to the abductees, masochistic fantasies, birth trauma, sleep disorders, or biased memory regressions, as claimed by most sceptics.²⁸ Despite continuing claims of psychopathological characteristics in individual abductees, there is some consensus of parity between abductees and the general population regarding the prevalence of formal mental disorders.²⁹

These studies usually do not consider the Brazilian context, which is rich in UFO claims and general paranormal experiences. To address this, Martins and Zangari examined the relationship between mental disorders and UFO experiences (not just abductions) in Brazilian samples. In line with the international norm, no association was found between UFO experiences and mental disorders. However, abductees and contactees presented a significant prevalence of premorbid signs in childhood and adolescence, although there was further psychological development without prominent mental disorders. Given this data, the authors viewed the role of culture as a facilitator of psychological health, giving meaning to that ambiguous, distressing and premorbid experiences in childhood and adolescence.³⁰ Also, 'healthy schizotypy'³¹ was shown to play a role, these ambiguous early experiences being seen as unconventional ideas and hallucinations, but not necessarily psychotic.

Martins and Zangari³² then discuss personality traits in UFO experiencers in general using the Big Five model.³³ The authors refuted their initial hypothesis that experiencers would be vulnerable to emotional difficulties in confronting reality (neuroticism), be fantasy prone and show a desire for excitement. Instead,

they stood out in personality factors not initially considered, such as openness, positive emotions, aesthetics, assertiveness, feelings (appreciation of the emotional dimension), ideas (intellectual curiosity and sense of contestation), values, activity (dynamism) and actions (preference for variety over routine). Their scores were significantly lower in effort for achievement and weighting.

In sum, personal traits or disorders do not appear to be a comprehensive, adequate or uncontroversial explanation for the experiences. On the other hand, apparently minor symptoms and signs are often found to follow the episodes: stress reactions, phobias, generalized anxiety, acute thirst, gastrointestinal complications, anemia, feeling of disgust, memory lapses, profound personality changes, recurrent nightmares, secondary mental disorders, burns, rashes and other marks on the skin, among others.[34](#)

Psychological and Cultural Aspects

UFO experiences can cause the same subjective effects as other paranormal experiences, metaphorizing the journey of psychological maturation and restoring a sense of mystery to life.[35](#) However, they tend to differ significantly in being a) more extensive, complex, and perhaps standardized,[36](#) b) associated with particular signs and symptoms,[37](#) and c) susceptible to scientific interpretations through unconventional technologies,[38](#) thus offering potentially naturalistic explanations.

Although UFO experiences are partly dressed in familiar modern technology (ships, spacesuits) and appear timeless in essence, reported in all places and epochs,[39](#) their effect on the worldview of individuals and groups is shocking and disorienting. As such, they are a source of cultural deconstruction, confronting hegemonic scientific and religious beliefs and distressing witnesses.[40](#) Here too they diverge from other categories of anomalous experience, which tend to be better suited to the world view of their experiencers and their social environment, to be subject to certain control and to generate less psychological suffering or functional impairment in daily life.[41](#)

Bullard recognizes the interface between UFO experiences and folk traditions regarding their form and function. But he nevertheless considers that the way they have adapted to contemporary ideas makes them the quintessential basis of modern myths, mixing contemporary topics – such as genetic engineering during abductions and the expression by the aliens of ecological anxieties – with timeless concerns such as the journey of psychological maturing and the search for transcendence.[42](#)

Lewis recognizes traditional supernatural elements in UFO experiences, comparing modern UFO sightings with the tendency of pre-modern cultures to attach divine significance to unusual celestial phenomena such as the appearance of strange lights. Likewise, aliens and divinity, being essentially mysterious or numinous,[43](#) are seen to exceed human capability in power, able to perform ‘miracles’ such as healing, appearing and disappearing, floating, even potentially saving the planet. In its opposing dimension, aliens are demonized when the same superhuman abilities are linked to disgusting appearance or questionable intentions.[44](#) In line with Jung[45](#) and Bullard,[46](#) Lewis concludes that aliens, our ‘cosmic brothers’,

perform functions attributed to supernatural beings, becoming ‘technological angels’.[47](#)

In one of the earliest scholarly works to address UFOs, Carl Jung[48](#) saw emerging rumors of strange objects and lights in the sky as a projection, a modern myth arising from the psychological need to appease Cold War anxieties, aggravated by the weakening of traditional religions and expressed through certain archetypes. Martins, revisiting Jung’s proposal half a century later, looked for evidence of effects of the ending of the Cold War and of significant changes in the cultural environment, with emphasis on Brazilian episodes.[49](#) He concluded that current collective tensions, for instance over global terrorism and ecological concerns, played the same theoretical role as the Cold War in Jungian analysis. The aliens continue to symbolize literal and symbolic death, explicitly exerting divine functions.[50](#) With the 1960s crisis of rationalism, bringing a rediscovery of the value of religion and esoterism, the need for Jung’s projective and unconscious mechanisms might seem to have weakened, yet UFO experiences continue to provide the same apparent benefit as before.

Martins[51](#) investigated three Brazilian religious/esoteric contexts centered on UFO claims to see how they make sense of human suffering. In all three, suffering is understood as an effect of materialism and the ‘backward’ attitudes that have caused the Earth to become desacralized. The aliens are presented as ‘cosmic brothers’ who under divine guidance offer mankind paths to salvation, for instance by transportation in spacecraft to a more spiritually evolved planet or by converting the spiritual body into ‘spiritual energy’ without going through physical death. In this way the aliens take on divine roles. Veronese[52](#) came to a similar conclusion from a sociological perspective.

Martins[53](#) used the ethnographic method to investigate Brazilian abductees, contactees, groups and ‘UFO hot spots’, regions marked by the high frequency of alien experiences (not just abductions). Comparisons were then made in terms of religious dimensions, narrative characteristics, and psychological and cultural variables. In summary, Martins concluded that UFO experiences share essential elements (similar to Bullard[54](#) and Jung[55](#)) with variations that reveal their cultural origins. In sum, UFO experiences are the product of psychological, social and even biological variables and processes, which however need not obscure a possible mystery dimension transcending these three dimensions.

Future Research

Contacts with aliens and UFOs, from the most fleeting to the most complex and time-consuming, have always been associated with paranormal experiences. Although they are not one and the same, the overlaps are diverse and profound. Arguably it is not possible to understand the UFO phenomena without studying parapsychological experiences, while parapsychology can gain important insights by taking UFO experiences into account. More studies are needed to take advantage of this overlap and to confront unresolved mysteries.

Such experiences can also impact the clinical and daily domains of experiencers and their social circles. Martins encountered cases in which, following a UFO

experience, marriages were broken, religious cults suddenly formed around ordinary contactees, witnesses were subjected to psychiatric hospitalization, and entire cities redefined their identity. Their study can therefore offer benefits to psychology and other areas of scientific knowledge besides parapsychology.

Given the complexity of the topic, multi- and interdisciplinary studies are also recommended, ideally with a greater focus on spontaneous cases in order to counterbalance the historical emphasis on experimental research in twentieth century parapsychology

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). E.g., Palmer (1979); Haraldsson (1985).
- [2](#). Machado (2010); Reichow (2017); Silva (2017).
- [3](#). Melton (1995).
- [4](#). See reviews in Santos (2009); Suenaga (1999).
- [5](#). E.g., Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Hopkins (1987); Jacobs (1993, 2008); Martins (2011b, 2015); Suenaga (1999).
- [6](#). See Martins (2015).
- [7](#). E.g., revisions in Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Hough & Rogers (2007/2008).
- [8](#). E.g., in 70% of the cases in McLeod, Corbisier & Mack (1996).
- [9](#). See Hopkins (1987).
- [10](#). Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Hopkins (1987); Jacobs (1993, 2008); McLeod, Corbisier, & Mack (1996); Mack (1994).
- [11](#). E.g., 30% of the sample in McLeod, Corbisier, & Mack (1996).
- [12](#). For more details see Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Bullard (1989); Hopkins (1987); Jacobs (1993); Mack (1994).
- [13](#). See Lewis (1995); Suenaga (1999).
- [14](#). See Martins (2015).
- [15](#). Mauso (2016).
- [16](#). E.g., Boaventura Junior (2015).
- [17](#). E.g., Martins (2015).
- [18](#). Martins (2015).
- [19](#). E.g., Maraldi (2014); Martins (2015).
- [20](#). E.g., Clancy et al. (2002); Paley (1997); Powers (1991).

- [21.](#) E.g., Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Clancy et al. (2002); Holden & French (2002); McNally & Clancy (2005).
- [22.](#) E.g., Bartholomew, Howard, & Basterfield (1991); Powers (1991).
- [23.](#) E.g., Don & Moura (1997); Holden & French (2002); Paley (1997); Persinger (1992).
- [24.](#) E.g., Holden & French (2002); Powers (1994).
- [25.](#) French et al. (2008); Hough & Rogers (2007/2008).
- [26.](#) Hough & Rogers (2007/2008).
- [27.](#) French et al (2008).
- [28.](#) McLeod, Corbisier & Mack (1996).
- [29.](#) E.g., Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014).
- [30.](#) Martins & Zangari (2012).
- [31.](#) McCreery & Claridge (2002).
- [32.](#) Martins & Zangari (2013).
- [33.](#) Costa & McCrae (2007).
- [34.](#) Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); McLeod, Corbisier & Mack (1996); Suenaga (1999).
- [35.](#) Bullard (1989); Lewis (1995); Mack (1994); Martins (2015); Suenaga (1999).
- [36.](#) E.g., Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Mack (1994); Martins (2015).
- [37.](#) Appelle, Lynn, Newman, & Malaktaris (2014); Bullard (1989); Martins (2011b); McLeod, Corbisier & Mack (1996); Suenaga (1999).
- [38.](#) Bullard (1989); Martins (2011b, 2015).
- [39.](#) Jung (1958/1988); Suenaga (1999).
- [40.](#) Bullard (1989); McLeod, Corbisier & Mack (1996); Suenaga (1999).
- [41.](#) Cardeña et al. (2014); Menezes Júnior & Moreira-Almeida (2009).
- [42.](#) Bullard (1989).
- [43.](#) As in Jung (1958/1988).
- [44.](#) Lewis (1995).
- [45.](#) Jung (1958/1988).
- [46.](#) Bullard (1989).
- [47.](#) Lewis (1995), xiii.
- [48.](#) Jung (1958/1988).
- [49.](#) Martins (2011a).
- [50.](#) Martins (2011c).
- [51.](#) Martins (2014).
- [52.](#) Veronese (2012).
- [53.](#) Martins (2015).
- [54.](#) Bullard (1989).
- [55.](#) Jung (1958/1988).