

Comments on Twemlow's Article

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ABSTRACT: Stuart Twemlow's argument for a psychodynamic approach to anomalous experiences contains some weaknesses. First, Twemlow argues for a primarily mental model of UFO abductions without addressing the presence of physical evidence in some UFO sightings. This omission may reflect the practical limitations of the therapist's role, which usually does not include fieldwork to collect and analyze corroborative physical evidence. Second, it may be difficult for some experiencers to understand or accept a purely psychodynamic approach. Kenneth Ring's imaginal model, which encompasses Twemlow's basic ideas, is suggested as a practical clinical model.

Stuart Twemlow's paper is an intriguing discussion of psychodynamic thoughts on anomalous experiences, and I thank the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* for presenting it. I hope that these ideas will come to the attention of all involved with the investigation and therapy of UFO abduction experiences. Even those who disagree with Twemlow's premise may at least pick up his message that these phenomena are indeed more constructively studied in a "dispassionate yet subjective way." In the end, such an approach is effectively an indirect form of advocacy, and may be more likely to persuade skeptics and uninterested parties to take this phenomenon seriously than the more vigorous and sometimes strident approaches often seen in the abduction field.

A number of questions came to mind as I read Twemlow's paper. First, consider those UFO investigators or "Ufologists" advocating the

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objective, physical, "really real" nature of UFO abductions. I have encountered two dominant arguments in conversations with researchers who support this position. They claim that the extraordinary convergence of narrative and phenomenological detail in abduction accounts can be explained only by abductions occurring at event-level reality just as they are remembered. Twemlow addressed this question effectively in his paper, and, based on my experience working intensively with dozens of abductees, I agree with his conclusion: there are other equally (if not more) plausible explanations for these observations.

The second argument Ufologists make is that the presence of physical evidence, such as landing traces, radar sightings, and interference with cars and electrical devices, argues for a physical phenomenon at work. Twemlow failed to grapple with this issue in his paper, and I found his paper unsatisfying because of this omission. He made passing reference to the unlimited potential of the human brain, "possibly even to creating physical reality itself," but that is more of a speculation than an explanation of physical traces.

The argument Ufologists make about the physical reality of abduction experiences has been well expressed by Bruce Maccabee in a recent letter in the *Bulletin of Anomalous Experience*, a newsletter I publish for mental health professionals and others interested in abductions. Though Maccabee acknowledged that "to date most abduction experiences are not accompanied by evidence that could establish a physical reality, e.g., physical effects on the environment or even independent witnesses," he pointed out that *some are*:

Of particular interest are the abduction cases in which there is a continuum between the apparently objective experience of seeing a UFO (bright light or structured flying object) and the abduction experience itself. The case of Kathy Davis (Debbie Toomey) in Budd Hopkins' book *Intruders* is an excellent example. Physical phenomena recorded in the ground in her back yard (a sizeable area in which the grass was killed, the soil seemingly sterilized because grass didn't grow back for a long time) during the abduction experience, plus the recollections of other members of her family at the time provide a considerable amount of evidence that something "real and physical" (whatever that means!) occurred during the abduction. (Maccabee, 1992, p. 1)

Maccabee also referred to the phenomenon of missing time as evidence that there is a physical effect. Referring to the 1962 Betty and Barney Hill case described by John Fuller in *The Interrupted Journey* (1966), he wrote:

When they arrived home [after their UFO encounter], about two hours late, they couldn't explain the *missing time*, yet the missing time was also a physical aspect of their experience (while not under the influence of the UFO, i.e., driving with total consciousness, their speed was such that the distance traveled should have taken two hours less time than it actually took that night; this was a trip they had made before, so they knew how long it should have taken). (1992, p. 22)

My activities in the abduction area have included a very limited amount of "field work" and I imagine that it would be the same for most therapists, who maintain busy practices and are not trained in methods for collecting and analyzing this type of information. In practice, this creates a gulf between the mental health professionals, who, like Twemlow, have a deep understanding of the psychodynamics that may be involved but little direct experience in physical effects, and the investigators, who have experience with the physical aspect of UFO sightings but frequently lack the mental health professional's training and understanding of the inner workings of the mind. In arguing for a primarily mental model of UFO abductions, without addressing the issue of physical evidence, Twemlow ignored one of the foundations of Ufology, and in fact may have inadvertently contributed to the mind-matter dualism he encouraged us to leave behind.

The second issue concerns the problem "frontline" therapists and counselors face in trying to apply concepts like those expressed by Twemlow. In practical terms, it is very difficult for some experiencers to understand, let alone accept, the psychodynamic model. The "Chandian effect" (and I am pleased I finally have a name for this) acts in powerful opposition to the acceptance of the idea that, in Twemlow's words, "these experiences have no meaning considered separate from the experiencer and the psychodynamic determinants of reality." It is fascinating to observe the struggle between these two ideas in the mind of each experiencer. It is also a challenge to the empathy and ingenuity of the counselor to maintain rapport with clients while presenting the psychodynamic premise to them.

I often think of therapeutic encounters of this type as microcosms of the struggle within society today, as new paradigms are trying to shake loose the stranglehold of Western scientific rationalism. One therapeutic approach that I have found useful is a kind of middle ground or transition state based on Kenneth Ring's idea of an "imaginal realm," an ontologically real "third kingdom" that has form, dimensions, and persons (Ring, 1990). As Ring described it, access to the imaginal realm is

dependent neither on sensory perception nor ordinary cognition (including fantasy). Normally hidden, it can be apprehended in what we would today call certain altered states of consciousness that destabilize ordinary perceptual modalities and cognitive systems. (p. 50)

According to Ring, UFO abductions are border phenomena between our material reality and imaginal reality.

Inherent in the imaginal model is the importance of the mind of the observer in shaping the experience. Twemlow's observation that UFO abductions have "no meaning considered separate from the experiencer and the psychodynamic determinants of reality" is just as true in the imaginal model as in the psychodynamic model. I have observed in my own work that the imaginal premise can, in some cases, be quite effective for experiencers who find the psychodynamic approach too abstract to understand, or who feel its focus on abductions as "primarily mental" is somehow saying, in a nice way, that they're imagining things.

Twemlow wrote he has "never fully understood why individuals need to search elsewhere for experiences of awesomeness and wonder, whether it be into the astral planes, other galaxies, or into heaven or hell." But many individuals *do* seem to need this sense of "other," of "elsewhere." Mind-matter dualism is at the heart of much of our culture and the conceptual models we have formed since infancy. In my experience, some clients are already suffering greatly under the strain of a shattered consensus reality, and are profoundly resistant to abandoning this fundamental dualism. For those people, an imaginal approach, one that still emphasizes the importance of understanding the experience in the context of the experiencer while preserving the concept of "other," may be just as effective, and more compassionate. It also leaves the door open to making a further, final step: recognizing that the awesomeness of the imaginal universe may simply be the awesomeness of the human psyche.

All this is not to discount Ring's imaginal hypothesis, but simply to suggest that, at the level of therapy with an individual experiencer, one does not have to be beholden to a particular idea to be effective. Both the psychodynamic and imaginal models share some common elements that can be therapeutic, depending on the situation.

Future work that translates the psychodynamic ideas into practical treatment suggestions would be of great benefit to both therapists and experiencers. I hope Twemlow will tackle this question in future papers. I would be most intrigued to see how he applies his psychodynamic perspective in the clinical setting.

References

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