

Past-Life Identities, UFO Abductions, and Satanic Ritual Abuse:

The Social Reconstruction of Memories (1)

Nicholas P. Spanos, Cheryl A. Burgess, and Melissa Faith Burgess (2)
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: People sometimes fantasize entire complex scenarios and later define these experiences as memories of actual events rather than as imaginings. This article examines research associated with three such phenomena: past-life experiences, UFO alien contact and abduction, and memory reports of childhood ritual satanic abuse. In each case, elicitation of the fantasy events is frequently associated with hypnotic procedures and structured interviews which provide strong and repeated demands for the requisite experiences, and which then legitimate the experiences as "real memories." Research associated with these phenomena supports the hypothesis that recall is reconstructive and organized in terms of current expectations and beliefs.

It is now generally acknowledged that recall involves reconstructive processes and is strongly influenced by current beliefs and expectations (Bower, 1990; Loftus, 1979). As pointed out by Bartlett (1932) many years ago, people typically organize their recall of past events in a way that makes sense of their present situation and is congruent with their current expectations. What they recall frequently involves a mixture of correctly remembered and misremembered information that is often impossible to disentangle. Often there is little or no correlation between the accuracy of recall and the confidence that people place in their recall. It is not unusual for people to be convinced about the accuracy of a remembrance that turns out to be false (Loftus, 1979; Wells, Ferguson, & Lindsay, 1981). Contrary to popular belief, hypnotic procedures do not reliably enhance the accuracy of recall and, at least under some circumstances, may lead subjects to become even more overconfident than usual in their inaccurate recall (Smith, 1983; Spanos, Quigley, Gwynn, Glatt, & Perlin, 1991). Leading questions and other suggestive interview procedures, whether or not they are administered in a hypnotic context, can produce a very substantial deterioration in recall accuracy even when subjects remain highly confident in their inaccurate remembrances (Spanos, Gwynn, Comer, Baltruweit, & deGroh, 1989).

To a large extent, these ideas about memory have been developed and refined in the context of studying eyewitness testimony. The implications of these ideas have been particularly influential at shaping the critical attitudes taken by many psychologists toward the reliability of eyewitness testimony, and toward the usefulness of hypnotic and other procedures that are touted as "refreshing" such testimony (Loftus, 1979; Orne, 1979; Smith, 1983; Wagstaff, 1989). In the typical eyewitness situation, however, the memory distortions under consideration involve inaccuracies in detail (e.g., identifying the wrong suspect of real crime) rather than fabrications of entire complex scenarios (e.g., detailed descriptions of an entire gun battle that never occurred). Little systematic research is available that examines the applications of reconstructive and expectancy-guided views of memory to situations in which people "remember" entire scenarios that never happened. This article describes research of this kind conducted in our laboratory and examines the implications of our findings for three phenomena that appear to involve the wholesale "remembering" of fictitious events; past-life identities (Warnbach, 1979), UFO alien contact and abduction reports (Jacobs, 1992), and reports of satanic ritual child abuse from patients diagnosed with multiple personality disorder (Fraser, 1990; Young, Sachs, Braun, & Watkins, 1991).

Experimental Creation of Past-Life Personalities

Several studies have examined factors that influence the formation of false memories by employing the phenomenon of past-life hypnotic regression. Some believers in reincarnation contend that people can be hypnotically regressed back to a time before their birth when they led previous lives (e.g., Warnbach, 1979). The available evidence does not support this hypothesis and suggests instead that "memories" of having lived a

past life are fantasy constructions (Baker, 1992; Spanos, Menary, Gabora, DuBreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991; Wilson, 1982). These fantasy constructions are important, however, because they can shed light on the processes by which people come to treat their fantasies as real, and because past-life identities are similar in many respects to the secondary or alter identities of multiple personality disorder patients. Like multiple personality disorder patients, subjects who report past lives behave as if they are inhabited by secondary selves. These selves display moods and personality characteristics that are different from the person's primary self, have a different name than the primary self, and report memories of which the primary self was previously unaware. Just as multiple personality disorder patients come to believe that their alter identities are real personalities rather than self-generated fantasies, many of the subjects who remember past lives continue to believe in the reality of their past lives after termination of the hypnotic session.

Kampman (1976) found that 41% of highly hypnotizable subjects reported a past-life identity and called themselves by different names when given hypnotic suggestions to regress back before their birth. Contrary to the notion that multiple identify experiences are a sign of mental illness, Kampman's (1976) past-life responders scored higher on measures of psychological health than did subjects who failed to report a past life.

In a series of experiments, Spanos, Menary, et al (1991) also obtained past-life identity reports following hypnotic regression suggestions. Frequently the past-life identities were quite elaborate. They had their own names and frequently described their lives in great detail. Subjects who reported past-life experiences scored higher on measures of hypnotizability and fantasy proneness, but no higher on measures of psycho-pathology than those who did not exhibit a past life.

The social nature of past-life identities was demonstrated by showing that the characteristics that subjects attributed to these identities were influenced by expectations transmitted by the experimenter (Spanos, Menary, et al, 1991; Experiment 2). Subjects provided with prehypnotic information about the characteristics of their identities (e.g., information about the identities expected race and sex) were much more likely than those who did not receive such information to incorporate these characteristics into their descriptions of their past-life selves.

A different study (Spanos, Menary, et al, 1991, Experiment 3) tested the hypothesis that experimenter expectations influence the extent for which past-life identities describe themselves as having been abused during childhood. Before past-life regression, subjects were informed that their past-life identities would be questioned about their childhoods to obtain information about child-rearing practices in earlier historical times. Those in one condition were further told that children in past times had frequently been abused. Those in the other condition were given no information about abuse. The past-life identities of subjects given abuse information reported significantly higher levels of abuse during childhood than did the past-life identities of control subjects. In summary, these studies indicate that both the personal attributes and memory reports elicited from subjects during past-life identity enactments are influenced by the beliefs and expectations conveyed by the experimenter/hypnotist. When constructing their past lives, subjects shape the attributes and biographies attributed to these identities to correspond to their understandings of what significant others believe these characteristics to be.

After termination of the hypnotic regression procedure, some past-life reporters believed that their past-life experiences were memories of actual, reincarnated personalities, whereas others believed that their past-life identities were imaginary creations. Hypnotizability did not predict the extent to which subjects assigned credibility to their past-life identities. Instead, the degree of credibility assigned to these experiences correlated significantly with the degree to which subjects believed in reincarnation before the experiment, and the extent to which they expected to experience a real past life.

in a final study Spanos, Menary, et al. (1991; Experiment 4) manipulated prehypnotic information that concerned the reality of past-life experiences. Subjects in one condition were informed that past-life experiences were interesting fantasies rather than evidence of real past-life memories. Those in another condition were

provided with background information which suggested that reincarnation was a scientifically credible notion, and that past-life identities were real people who had lived earlier lives. Subjects in the two conditions were equally likely to construct past-life experiences, but those assigned to the imaginary creation condition assigned significantly less credibility to these identities than did those told that reincarnation was scientifically credible.

Taken together these findings indicate that experiences of having lived a past-life are social creations that can be elicited easily from many normal people, and that are determined by the understandings that subjects develop about such experiences from the information to which they are exposed. Past-life identities can be quite complex and detailed, and subjects draw from a wide array of sources outside of the immediate situation (e.g., television shows, historical novels, aspects of their own past, wish-fulfilling daydreams) to flesh out their newly constructed identity and to provide it with the history and characteristics that are called for by their understanding of the current task demands. The most important factor in influencing the extent to which past-life experiences are defined as real memories appears to be the extent to which subjects hold a belief system that is congruent with this interpretation (i.e., a belief in reincarnation). Information from an authoritative source which legitimates or delegitimizes reincarnation beliefs also influences the extent to which subjects define either experiences as real memories rather than imaginings.

All of these past-life experiments either tested only highly hypnotizable subjects or found that the reporting of past lives was correlated significantly with hypnotizability. Hypnotizability refers to the extent to which subjects respond to hypnotic suggestions, and it correlates significantly with such dimensions as fantasy proneness and an openness to unusual experiences (see deGroot, 1989, for a review). One interpretation suggests that hypnotizability or its imaginal correlates may constitute cognitive abilities which predispose individuals to construct secondary identities when such experiences are called for by contextual demands, and when these subjects are motivated to respond to those demands.

However, an alternative hypothesis suggests that hypnotizability is correlated with the development of past-life identities because the suggestions that called for these experiences were administered in a hypnotic context and therefore were likely to call up the same attitudes and expectations as the hypnotizability test situation. Whether circumstances can be created that will elicit multiple identity enactments from low hypnotizables remains to be determined.

Encounters with UFO Aliens

Reports of seeing unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and belief that such objects are extraterrestrial spacecraft have increased dramatically since World War II. Nevertheless, the available scientific evidence fails to support the hypothesis that these reports reflect the sighting of alien spacecraft (Sheaffer, 1986). Initially, UFO reports focused on the purported sightings of the crafts themselves. However, by the mid-1960s purportedly true accounts of people who claimed to have been abducted by UFO aliens began to appear (e.g., Fuller, 1966). Some of these accounts gained a great deal of notoriety. In addition, uncritical and sensationalistic documentary-type television shows and movies that featured alien contact became popular (Sheaffer, 1986). At the same time, reports of contact and abduction by aliens mushroomed, and such reports appear to be increasing in frequency (Klass, 1989).

Recently, Spanos, Cross, Dickson, and DuBreuil (1993) interviewed subjects who claimed UFO experiences. One group of these subjects simply reported distant lights or shapes in the night sky that appeared to move in erratic patterns and that they interpreted as UFOs. However, a second group of 20 subjects reported more elaborate experiences that included close contact with alien spaceships and/or alien beings, and occasionally, abduction by the aliens. Subjects in both UFO groups failed to differ in hypnotizability or fantasy proneness from comparison subjects, and either failed to differ, or scored higher, than comparison subjects on indexes of mental health and IQ. However, subjects in both UFO groups believed more strongly in the reality of UFOs

than did comparison subjects, and those with elaborate UFO experiences also held other esoteric beliefs (e.g., reincarnation) more strongly than comparison subjects.

Subjects who reported elaborate UFO experiences were much more likely to report their experience was sleep related than were those who reported more mundane (i.e., lights in the sky) experiences. Many of the elaborate experiences were clearly night dreams or hypnagogic imagery. In addition, almost a quarter of those in the elaborate UFO group reported frightening experiences that included full body paralysis and, frequently, vivid multisensorial hallucinations. For example, one subject reported:

I was lying in bed facing the wall, and suddenly my heart started to race. I could feel the presence of three entities standing beside me. I was unable to move my body but could move my eyes. One of the entities, a male, was laughing at me, not verbally but with his mind. (Spanos et al., 1993, p. 627)

Experiences of this kind are most probably explicable as sleep paralysis; a phenomenon that is usually estimated as occurring in approximately 15% to 25% of the population, and that is commonly associated with feelings of suffocation, the sense of a presence, and hallucinations (Bell et al., 1984; Hufford, 1982). These findings suggest that at least some of the characteristics common to many elaborate UFO reports (e.g., being paralyzed by the aliens) may be grounded in the physiological changes that underlie sleep paralysis experiences.

Not all elaborate UFO experiences were sleep related. Moreover, the elaborateness of UFO experiences was positively correlated with questionnaire variables that assessed propensities toward experiencing unusual body sensations, and fantasy proneness. Hypnotizability, however, failed to correlate significantly with elaborateness.

Taken together, the findings of Spanos et al. (1993) indicate that elaborate UFO experiences that are later described as memories are particularly likely to occur in people who believe in alien visitation, and who also interpret unusual sensory and imaginal experiences in terms of the alien hypothesis.

People who believe that they might have been abducted by aliens but cannot remember, or who dream of aliens or experience gaps in memory that they are unable to explain, sometimes undergo hypnotic (or non-hypnotic) interviews aimed at uncovering, "hidden memories" of their alien abduction (Jacobs, 1992; Klass, 1989). Frequently, the interviews include two phases. In the first phase background information is obtained and clients are asked about unusual or inexplicable experiences that have occurred during their life. These include "missing time" experiences, unusual or bizarre dreams, and experiences that suggest hypnagogic imagery or sleep paralysis (e.g., having seen a ghost, strange lights, or a monster). Such experiences are defined as distorted memories of alien abduction that call for further probing (Jacobs & Hopkins, 1992). Moreover, making such experiences salient enhances the likelihood that some of their characteristics (e.g., paralysis, feelings of suffocation) will be incorporated into any abduction memories that are recalled in Phase 2. Phase 2 typically involves hypnotic or nonhypnotic guided imagery employed to facilitate recall. This may involve leading questions (Baker, 1992), or the subject may be pressed repeatedly for more details (Jacobs, 1992). In addition, subjects may be informed that some material is so deeply hidden that several such interviews are required. Subjects who have difficulty "remembering" some or all of their abduction are defined as "blocking" and are provided with strategies for facilitating recall. These include asking subjects to imagine a curtain and then to peek behind it to view their abduction, or to imagine a curtain and then to peek behind it to view their abduction, or to imagine a movie screen on which they see their abduction replayed (Jacobs & Hopkins, 1992).

Given that subjects in past-life experiments frequently reported elaborate past-life identities on the basis of much less prodding, it is not surprising that such interviewing procedures lead clients to generate imaginative scenarios in which they are abducted by aliens. It is also not surprising that clients typically interpret their abduction fantasies as memories rather than as fantasies. After all, they usually sought help because they believed that they might have been abducted. In other words, they already possessed a set of background beliefs and current expectations that facilitated the interpretation of such fantasies as memories. In addition, their abduction fantasies are legitimated as memories by the interviewers who treat them as such and who do not

provide alternative explanations. Finally, it is worth noting that people who believe that they have been abducted frequently join support groups that include other abductees (Jacobs, 1992). The sharing of abduction experiences in such groups can only serve to enhance their uniformity and further legitimate them as real memories.

Ritual Satanic Abuse and Multiple Personality Disorder

The large majority of patients who eventually receive a multiple personality disorder diagnosis do not display symptoms of multiplicity and are unaware that they have alter identities before they enter treatment with the therapist who "discovers" their multiplicity (Kluft, 1985). Moreover, this "discovery" frequently involves the use of highly leading hypnotic interviews in which patients are explicitly informed that they have alter personalities and attempts are made to communicate directly with these alters, learn their names, their functions, and so on (Bliss, 1986; Spanos, Weekes, & Bertrand, 1985; Wilbur, 1984).

Most studies find that multiple personality disorder patients report extremely high rates of childhood sexual and/or physical abuse (e.g., Ross, Miller, Bjornson, Reagor, & Fraser, 1991). Contrary to the majority opinion in the multiple personality disorder literature, however, these data do not demonstrate that child abuse causes multiplicity. At least three noncausal factors appear to influence the high rates of reported child abuse obtained from multiple personality disorder patients: (a) high base rates of reported child abuse in the clinical samples from which patients who will be diagnosed with multiple personality disorder are drawn, (b) one of a child abuse history to justify implementing leading "diagnostic" interviews that generate displays of multiplicity, and (c) confabulation of abuse in patients who generate such "memories" only after exposure to leading interviews that call for and legitimate such reports (Spanos, in press).

The strong connection between child abuse and multiple personality disorder is of recent origin. Early cases (i.e., pre-1920) were much less likely than modern ones to be associated with reports of child abuse (Bowman, 1990; Kenny, 1986), and the abuse that was reported in these early cases lacked the lurid ritualistic satanic elements that are becoming increasingly prominent in the abuse memories proffered by modern multiple personality disorder patients.

Although controversy remains concerning its actual rate of occurrence (Wakefield & Underwager, 1992), there is general agreement that the sexual abuse of children in our society is a good deal more common than was once believed (Finkelhor, 1987). Frequently, people who were sexually abused as children retain their memories of these experiences (Femina, Yeager, & Lewis, 1990). In some cases, however, adults in psychotherapy report for the first time remembering early child abuse. According to many multiple personality disorder therapists (e.g., Bliss, 1986), these reports reflect memories of actual abuse that was repressed at the time of its occurrence and recovered later during the therapeutic process. However, an alternative hypothesis suggests that these reports may frequently reflect confabulations induced by the unwitting suggestions of therapists (Loftis, 1993; Spanos, in press). Unfortunately, in such cases it is usually difficult or impossible to either corroborate or disconfirm the validity of these memory reports (Wakefield & Underwager, 1992). Reported memories of ritual satanic child abuse are an exception. These reports are of theoretical importance for memory researchers because the available data indicate that they are almost always believed-in fantasy constructions rather than memories of actual events (Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 1991; Mulhern, 1991b; Spanos, in press).

By 1980 the idea of a relationship between child abuse and multiple personality disorder was well established. In that year a book titled **Michelle Remembers** (Smith & Pazdec, 1980) reported on ritual satanic tortures that a woman had purportedly experienced during childhood and then forgotten until they were recovered during therapy. Michelle's story became a part of the propaganda used by the Evangelical Christian movement that became increasingly prominent in American social and political life during the 1980s. This movement reinvigorated the mythology of satanism -- the idea that there exists a powerful but secret international satanic conspiracy that carries out heinous crimes. These crimes supposedly include the kidnapping, torture, and sexual

abuse of countless children as well as mass murder, forced pregnancies, and cannibalism (Bromley, 1991; Hicks, 1991; Lyons, 1989).

Large numbers of therapists who identified themselves as active Christians joined the multiple personality disorder movement in the 1980s (Mulhern, 1993), and soon accounts like those of Michelle began to be reported by the alters of multiple personality disorder patients during therapy (Frazer, 1990; Young et al., 1991). By the mid-1980s, 25% of multiple personality disorder patients in therapy had recovered memories of ritual satanic abuse, and by 1992 the percentage of patients recovering such memories was as high as 80% in some treatment facilities (Mulhern, 1993).

If they were real, the ritual satanic crimes "remembered" by multiple personality disorder patients would require a monumental criminal conspiracy that has been in existence for at least 50 years and that has been responsible for the murder of thousands of people (Hicks, 1991). The FBI and other law enforcement agencies throughout North America have investigated many satanic abuse allegations made by multiple personality disorder patients but have been unable to substantiate the existence of the requisite criminal conspiracy (Lanning, 1992). These repeated failures to find evidence of satanic ritual abuse strongly indicate that the vast majority of these allegations are false, and that the "memories" on which they are based are fantasies rather than remembrances of actual events (Hicks, 1991).

Bottoms, Shaver, and Goodman (1991) surveyed psychotherapists across the United States about the frequency with which they had seen patients who reported ritual abuse memories. Seventy percent of the therapists who responded indicated no contact with such patients. A small minority, however, reported having seen large numbers of patients who reported ritual abuse. This pattern of findings suggests that therapists who regularly obtain such reports play an active role in shaping the ritual abuse "memories" of their patients.

Frequently, satanic abuse memories are elicited during hypnotic interviews that explicitly suggest such abuse. In such cases it is common for the therapist to explicitly describe satanic rituals and possibly to show the patient pictures of satanic symbols or photographs of possible cult leaders. The therapist then addresses the patient's alters and asks if any of them recognize the material or remember similar experiences (Mulberry, 1991a).

Multiple personality disorder patients are often chronically unhappy people with well-developed imaginations, who become strongly attached to and dependent on their therapists. Consequently, they are motivated to sue the information from such interviews to construct an autobiography that will make sense of their lives and their symptoms, and that will win approval and validation from their therapist (Spanos, in press). In this context it is worth recalling the ease with which highly hypnotizable college students were induced to report past life personalities who "remembered" that they had been abused as children, when the expectation of such abuse had been conveyed to them before their hypnotic regression (Spanos, Menary, et al., 1991).

Recently, Ofshe (1992) described the case of a fundamentalist Christian man named Paul Ingram who, after highly leading interrogations confessed to having participated in the satanic ritual abuse of his own children. The case provides a "real life" example of the ease with which false memories can be generated in people who hold a belief system that is congruent with the false information. Ingram was initially accused of incest by one of his daughters after she had attended a church-sponsored retreat intended to reveal sexual abuse. Ingram initially denied the charges, but after being convinced that his children would not lie, he agreed that Satan may have hidden from him his own crimes. Many of the events to which Ingram eventually confessed were suggested to him by the police officers and psychologist who interrogated him, and he was supported in his confessions by his minister. Along with repeatedly raping his children, Ingram confessed to belonging to a satanic cult and participating in the murder of 25 babies. Although Ingram had no history of mental illness before his arrest, he was diagnosed as suffering from multiple personality disorder by at least one psychologist. Ofshe (1992) demonstrated Ingram's willingness to accept suggested fantasies as real memories by concocting a set of ritual abuse events that had not been alleged against Ingram. When Ofshe questioned Ingram about these

false events using guided imagery and other interrogative procedures employed by the police, Ingram readily confessed to them. Later Ingram insisted that the false events had really happened and had not been suggested to him during the interrogation.

Some patients report memory fragments or dreams with satanic content and only after are exposed to hypnotic interviews aimed at confirming such abuse. However, since many multiple personality disorder patients are enmeshed in a social network where they hear about satanic abuse from other patients, therapists, and shared newsletters, and where they or their fellow patients attend workshops devoted to such abuse, "spontaneous" dreams and memories do not provide serious evidence of actual ritual abuse (Mulhern, 1991b).

Conclusion

The findings review above are consistent with the view that recall is reconstructive and guided by current motivations and expectations. In addition, these findings indicate that social factors can lead people to generate complex fantasy scenarios and to define such experiences as actual memories of real events. In many cases some elements in these fantasies are memories. For instance, past-life reporters frequently incorporate information from their own past, or events and plots recalled from books and movies into their past-life identities, and UFO reporters sometimes experience abduction dreams or complex sleep paralysis episodes. The memory of these experiences can then form the core of their abduction fantasies and help to legitimize these fantasies as memories. Some multiple personality disorder patients may use memories of actual abuse around which they add elaborate satanic elements. Despite the inclusion of real memory elements, however, past-life, UFO and satanic ritual abuse "memories" are primarily fantasy constructions. Typically they are organized around expectations derived from external sources, embedded in a belief system that is congruent with their classification as memories, and legitimized as memories by significant others. In short, whether experiences are counted as memories of actual happenings or as fantasies, may under some circumstances, have less to do with characteristics intrinsic to these experiences than to the internal context (i.e., supportive belief structures) in which they are embedded and the external context (i.e., social legitimation) in which they are validated (Johnson, 1988).

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(2) Requests for reprints should be addressed to Cheryl A. Burgess, Department of Psychology, 8550 Loeb Building, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 3B6, Canada.

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