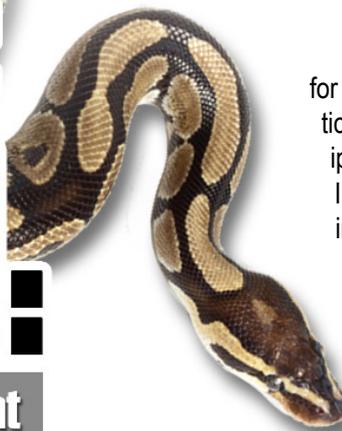


TAINTED, TOXIC & TABOO:

A Scientist's Assessment of Alien Abduction Research

by Tyler A. Kokjohn, Ph.D.



Disclosures

I am an educator and scientist working in the area of Alzheimer's disease biochemistry. I also have a longstanding interest in the UFO subject. Although I have performed laboratory studies for UFO investigators, I conduct no independent research of my own in this field. My opinions are those of a scientifically trained outsider with no connections—financial, professional or personal—to any individuals actively engaged in abduction research.

Carol Rainey's article reveals that the standards and practices used by some alien abduction investigators differ radically from those of scientists conducting biomedical research. Ms. Rainey's assessments hit core aspects of research conduct and are so devastating because she has inhabited two almost entirely parallel worlds. A firsthand witness to alien abduction investigations, she has also worked extensively with mainstream biomedical researchers. An exceptional combination of experiences gives her the specific knowledge as to what constitutes an investigation based on good and ethical research practices and the perspective to recognize when such standards are absent. If what she has exposed represents the norm for alien abduction research it carries important implications regarding the underlying scientific value of such investigations.

To safeguard the welfare and confidentiality of participants, scientists conduct research that involves human subjects under the direct, proactive and authoritative supervision of review boards. Here is how it works at my institution—written proposals must be submitted to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) for formal approval before any investigations begin. The obligatory documentation includes background, the explicit research hypotheses to be investigated and complete experimental protocols. In addition, methods to ensure all subjects recruited are fully informed of the risks and benefits involved with participation and plans to safeguard their health, safety and confidentiality must be provided. The IRB is responsible

for the evaluation of all proposals with particular attention to the adequacy of participant safeguards. Full compliance with all IRB directives is mandatory for every investigator.

Is it fair to apply the stringent norms of professional biomedical scientists to abduction researchers? After all, this is just storytelling, so what could possibly go wrong? Investigators operating outside academic and medical institutions without the benefit of IRB oversight or otherwise able to dodge meaningful peer evaluations run several risks. First and foremost, their subjects may face an increased threat for adverse events. Having several persons evaluate methods, informed consent documents and plans for emergencies in advance of the project start increases the likelihood of catching errors or omissions—before a catastrophe. While at first glance collecting oral histories seems benign, under some circumstances such activities pose sufficient risk that IRB oversight to ensure subject wellbeing is justified. Ms. Rainey's article reveals abduction subjects may experience extreme emotions and stress under hypnosis. What happens during a session if someone has a heart attack, a psychotic episode or acts out violently? Any emergency equipment like defibrillators on hand, personnel trained to perform CPR, calm agitated persons or plans regarding how to manage until help arrives? Precisely what could investigators conducting hypnosis sessions over the telephone do in the event of an emergency? Whether exempt from IRB oversight or not, no investigator is ever absolved of the responsibility to safeguard the welfare of all research study participants.

The other risk investigators evading oversight run is more insidious. Scrutiny and constructive criticism provide the vital reality checks essential to maintaining research quality. Scientists are subjected to frequent, anonymous peer reviews as they submit papers to professional journals, participate in research conferences and seek funding support. The central means of ensuring frank appraisals of merit and rooting out error, these reviews help minimize the dissemi-



nation of suspect data and propagation of unfounded conclusions. Science is justifiably lauded for its capacity to police itself and correct errors. Under conditions where investigators are free to shut out substantive criticism, self-correction becomes more difficult, perhaps impossible. Succumbing to the temptation to avoid tough criticism outright or seek only the counsel of sympathetic colleagues is inadvisable.

A need for caution is obvious. Much information regarding alien abductions has been acquired using hypnosis. However, that method may uncover as much inaccurate information as truth and might also be sensitive to investigator bias. Beyond significant issues surrounding basic methodology are concerns that what the public has been sold could represent a collaborative synthesis between an investigator looking for the next book contract and attention-seeking abductees. As a direct consequence of its nature, collection and management, much of the basic information regarding alien abductions seems tainted.

Having your research critiqued by colleagues can be emotionally upsetting, but it's a small price to pay for preventing the potentially deadly threat of self-deception. Probably many scientists can recall a cherished theory that withered under the harsh scrutiny of their peers. I believe most scientists might also confess they've produced an off-the-wall hypothesis or embarked on a wild goose chase. And a few might admit to having such reluctance to dispatch a favorite brain child they persisted too long trying to validate an untenable hypothesis. Lacking any personal (emotional) investment, peer reviewers can expose factual, logical and procedural shortcomings, hopefully with some degree of diplomacy. We all make errors and it is not only wise to be diligent against fooling ourselves, it is essential. In a very real sense, some of us have met The Trickster—and discovered sometimes he is us.

Here is how peer review works for me—when I submit a manuscript to a scientific journal, the editor consults a list of scientists knowledgeable in the subject and requests at least two read the manuscript to judge its suitability for publication. To ensure the critiques are as frank as possible, the reviews are provided to me on a strictly anonymous basis and the editor serves as the intermediary for all correspondence. In

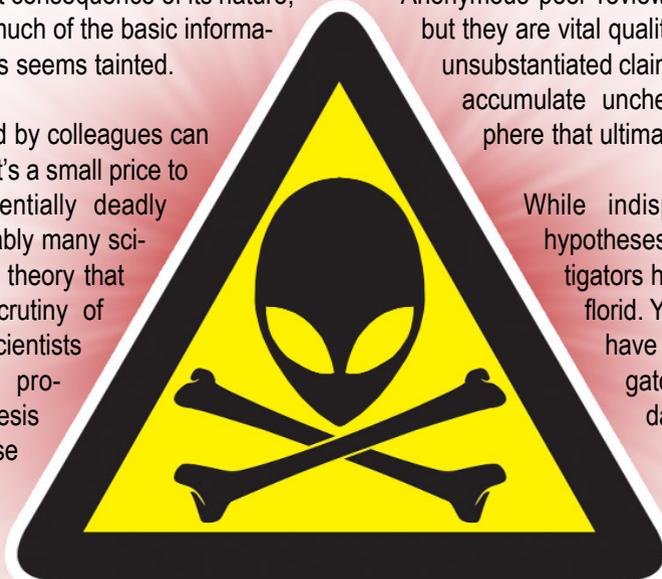
addition to the experimental results, manuscripts must include full descriptions of all experimental methods and analytical protocols or cite published sources where the reader may find that information. Questions, comments and concerns are the norm and authors are often allowed to address the reviewer criticisms with the editor, make necessary changes and proceed to publication. Almost every paper I have ever published in peer-reviewed journals has required some modifications. In some instances, anonymous peers have caught errors or misstatements and I have been grateful for their assistance. And sometimes the process has left me frustrated and angered. Judging from what my colleagues reveal, my impressions of the publication process are not unusual. The peer review process is considered so essential to scientific quality that my colleagues and I donate considerable uncompensated time to participating in it.

Anonymous peer reviews cannot prevent all mistakes, but they are vital quality assurance activities. Allowing unsubstantiated claims and erroneous information to accumulate unchecked creates a toxic atmosphere that ultimately stymies research.

While indisputable facts are few, the hypotheses of some alien abduction investigators have certainly grown remarkably florid. Years of hard-earned experience have sensitized me to signs investigators are extrapolating objective data beyond the reasonable limits. That experience has also trained me to formulate testable hypotheses and recognize productive investigatory approaches that will yield hard confirmatory data.

Free to pontificate and charged with the zeal to sell lurid and frightening tales of a nefarious alien agenda, some abduction researchers have created hypotheses that are actually subject to direct experimental confirmation. Perhaps this will represent a fatal error of sorts.

If, as some investigators stipulate, human-alien hybrids, transgenic or otherwise genetically adulterated quasi-human entities walk among us now, if some are exhibiting independent activity and if human females are incubating alien spawn, superb opportunities to collect key corroborating genetic evidence are at hand. The molecular analysis methods available today are very powerful and capable of resolving claims definitively. As Ms. Rainey pointed out aptly, we've literally had decades of overheated lecture circuit rhetoric and book



after book featuring terrifying testimonials; getting some hard data by applying genetic analysis methods is long overdue. Alien abduction research is at a crossroads because some investigators have painted themselves into a corner. Pressured to come forward with the corroborating evidence that must exist if their hypotheses are correct, they will be unable to retreat behind a 'you can't prove they don't exist' argument to conceal failure. They've got to produce the goods—or not.

While the alien abduction story has captured the public imagination, unless corroborating genetic evidence is forthcoming, no upsurge in professional scientific interest in this mystery seems imminent. Although I suspect the large majority of my scientist colleagues would vehemently deny having ever read any alien abduction literature, I bet most are familiar with many aspects of the phenomenon. I cannot say for sure how many of my coworkers are interested in such things because my experience parallels that of Ms. Rainey; the subject is discussed rarely in my academic circles. To mention that you were seriously considering delving deeply into the alien abduction phenomenon might lead to questions about your professional judgment or perhaps whispers regarding your state of mind. Decades of dubious investigations have not only yielded precious little understanding of the alien abduction mystery, they have also firmly established an unsavory image that discourages many scientists from exploring the field.

Start with a mysterious phenomenon often buried deep within the subconscious mind and far outside ordinary experience. Investigate it using controversial and perhaps entirely unreliable methods. Present the findings in ways virtually guaranteed to undermine credibility and foster conflicts of interest. Put them all together and you have one scientist's perspective of the alien abduction phenomenon—tainted, toxic and totally taboo.

Empower Yourself

In the alien abduction realm, the consumers of books, articles and videos play a unique and crucial role as the ultimate evaluators of quality. Your decisions will determine the evidentiary standards and research conduct that will prevail in this field.

The Belmont Report and other information regarding the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects are posted on the website: <http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/>

belmont.html. Guidelines concerning IRB oversight of oral history studies may be viewed at www.oralhistory.org/do-oral-history/oral-history-and-irb-review. A discussion of some issues regarding hypnosis and human memory with Dr. Scott Lilienfeld is available in the Paratopia archive; <http://hosted-with.cyberears.com/9284.mp3> (Episode 55) ©

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