

Rethinking of Scientific and Clinical Practice Involvement in the Era of UAP Investigations

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Abstract: *Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), also known as Flying Saucers, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, and now Unidentified Anomalous Phenomenon (UAP), have been witnessed for centuries. However, the belief in or study of UFOs, has long been stigmatized. Scientists are discouraged from studying the phenomenon and witnesses may feel discouraged to report what they have seen. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding these phenomena may cause challenges. We in the scientific community need to become more involved in the phenomena, or, at least, stop doing a disservice to the witnesses by discrediting them and dismissing them out of hand. The more unexplained phenomena are stigmatized, the fewer trained scientists and clinicians wish to work more in the area and thus it falls to either untrained or poorly trained lay people to investigate the sighting and counsel witnesses, not to mention, the possible contamination of helpful evidence.*

Keywords: Aliens, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena, Unidentified Flying Objects

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Introduction

Since my childhood, I have been interested in unusual and unexplained phenomena. From Unidentified Aerial Phenomena/Unidentified Flying Objects (UAP/UFOs) to ghosts to vampires and other folklore, if something in that vein was on television, I would sprawl on the floor riveted to the television set. I watched *Sightings* as well as *Encounters: The Hidden Truth* to learn about the paranormal, cryptozoology (Bigfoot), and folklore of all forms. As an adult with a few science degrees, I tend to keep my interest in unexplained phenomena reserved. This is due to the concern about what others might say if they learn I am interested in such unusual phenomena.

Regardless of my relative quietness, people who have experienced unusual phenomena seemed drawn to me. Over the past year, several strangers have told me about their experiences with ghosts, UAP/UFOs, and about the Black-Eyed Children Phenomena. Perhaps something in my face draws these people to me. People stop me in the street, at the grocery store, my students mention it in class, and an unexpected story about the “Black Eyed Children” phenomena was told during a job interview.

Never one to jump to a conclusion without asking questions, I would ask about their lives. Many had families, well-paying part time or full-time employment, no psychiatric history, and were pillars of the community. Their jobs included nurses, engineers, and more than a few police and first responders such as Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and paramedics, some of which I worked with during my own time as an EMT. Many were scared to discuss their sightings given the stigma and the threat of losing their jobs or their standing in the community. Some took their experiences in stride, while others became obsessed with finding an answer. Still others became traumatized by whatever it was they experienced. For many, I, a random stranger, was one of the only people who they told their story to.

In the past few years, I have become more involved in the UAP community. Some part of this is because I would love to know the answer for some of the unusual things I have witnessed, but also because I am interested in human nature. Whether alien spacecraft are real or not, the belief aliens that exist and the things people do because of that belief are interesting from not only a psychological perspective but also a sociological and anthropological perspective. Studying this phenomenon has led to harassment even of other scientists involved in researching, enough so that in NASA’s recent hearing on UAPs, it was mentioned that their committee members studying the phenomenon have been getting harassed due to their involvement (*Public Meeting on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (Official NASA Broadcast)*, 2023). Despite risks to my professional reputation, I delved into various groups to learn more.

I spent time with people who have seen things unable to be identified, spent time in training to investigate things other scientists would not touch, and spent time with those who are hobby investigators. In some

groups, I kept my science background hidden, while in other groups they were aware I was studying both the phenomena and the people themselves. In other groups, I listened while and in others I studied through participant-observation. I have concluded we in the scientific community need to become more involved in the phenomena, or, at least, stop doing a disservice to the witnesses by discrediting them and dismissing them out of hand. By discrediting and stigmatizing the witnesses, valuable information about the root cause of the phenomena they witnessed may be lost. Further, it may drive the witness to individuals and groups who may do more harm than good.

UAP/UFOs and the alien phenomena

What are UFOs? UFOs are often considered synonymous with the concept of intelligent alien life, often this is to such an extent any UFO is assumed to be powered by extraterrestrial intelligence alien (Zeller, 2021). Many people, both investigators and non-investigators forget that UFO stands for Unidentified Flying Object (Zeller, 2021). As soon as a UFO is identified, regardless of what they are identified as, by definition, they are not unidentified. Once identified, a UFO then becomes an IFO, an Identified Flying Object. In order to separate the concept of aliens from the craft, many researchers are now using the acronym UAP which stands for Unidentified Aerial Phenomena as well as the government preferred term Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (*Public Meeting on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (Official NASA Broadcast)*, 2023). UAPs are unidentified and can be studied scientifically, but do not include the specifically alien connotation. Regardless, interest in the UAP phenomena is still stigmatized (*Public Meeting on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (Official NASA Broadcast)*, 2023).

Should it be? Is there something inherent to UAPs which render it problematic to study once the “alien spacecraft” has been separated from the meaning? Scientific knowledge is advancing at an incredible rate. Even people with advanced science degrees don’t know everything about their specific subfield. However, scientists tend to have a better idea of how to go about finding the right answers without resorting to unexplained phenomena or mysterious forces. The majority of UAPs, for example, can be identified with a little work, even by non-scientists (*Public Meeting on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (Official NASA Broadcast)*, 2023). Airplanes can be identified through the FlightRadar24 database (Cockrell et al., 2022). Meteors can be identified through the American Meteor Society’s (AMS) Fireball log (Cooper, 2021). Satellites can be identified with the Heaven’s Above website (Broderick, 2012). There are several online astronomical databases (one is “In The Sky”) that will help with planet and star identification. That being said, once we identify and remove things such as airplanes, meteors, and the planet Venus, unidentified cases remain.

What are these other cases? I have investigated over 85 UAP cases from start to finish, from time of first report to identification, including interviewing the witnesses when they were willing to talk. Only one had me stumped despite my attempt to debunk it with the information I was provided. However, as puzzling as it was, I am not going to pretend I know the answer. Scientists, engineers, and aerospace experts with more experience than I have might be able to better identify it. However, as no experts would return my call, I accessed as many databases as possible for my investigation, including FlightRadar24, Heavens Above, AMS, In the Sky, as well Space-Track.org to look for possible space junk making a reentry. So far this remains my only UAV report and I have confidence that someone else might have more knowledge. Things that remain unidentified might be classified technology, space junk, or advanced technology which layperson might have trouble identifying. Of course, while two of the most popular explanations, aliens and time travelers, cannot be ruled out, those explanations are unlikely.

Having interviewed many witnesses, many reported that as soon as they saw something in the sky and told others, they were discredited as someone who witnessed an alien even if they did not believe they saw an alien. This stigma delayed people from obtaining answers or often from reporting the sighting to researchers in a timely manner. Of course, there are people who have reported seeing creatures, which they believe to be aliens, but they were a minority. For those, there are any number of possible explanations which a medical doctor or clinical psychologist might be best to rule out any possibilities as well as treat any underlying trauma which may be present from the experience (Montgomery, 2022). However, stigma may prevent these people as well from seeking professional help.

The Rise of the Unqualified Investigator

Given the stigma and concerns about discussing paranormal and unexplained phenomena, many people continue to keep their knowledge of their experiences hidden despite at least 10% of Americans are believed to have had a UAP sighting experience (Zeller, 2021). Often, the only ones who are most forthcoming about their experiences are those who might not always be the most reliable witnesses due to one reason or another. Some may be judged to have a fantasy prone personality without a full or complete interview (Montgomery, 2022). These, however, are likely a small minority although they are most likely to get the most press as a form of selection bias. This can reinforce the idea that those who see ghosts, UFOs, or whatever are “crazy,” which further reduces the chance more reliable witnesses may come forward. This is a vicious cycle and thus reduces the chance of us getting to the root cause of various unexplained or unnatural phenomena.

The more unexplained phenomena are stigmatized, the fewer trained scientists and clinicians wish to work more in the area and thus it falls to either untrained or poorly trained laypeople to investigate which could cause more harm than good, not to mention, the possible contamination of helpful evidence (*Public Meeting on Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (Official NASA Broadcast)*, 2023). While additional sets of eyes can be helpful, as it stands now, the quality of investigators, and thus investigations, can vary. The lack of scientific professionals leaves a vacuum to be filled, for better or for worse, by laypeople.

For lay people who are interested in studying such different phenomena, there is often no centralized or standardized training and most lay people have minimal training, if at all. If there is training, it is from other lay people who had been trained by other lay people, etc. With no standards, this can lead to distinct types of investigators with some attempting to follow the scientific method to the best of their ability, while others relying on psychics or what they learned on television (Zeller, 2021). While entertainment is a wonderful thing, it does not always make for appropriate science and thus is more likely to decrease the overall reputation of the field. The evidence from one group may be better than the evidence from another and even with the same evidence, two groups may come to different conclusions. Further, they may or may not be professional in disclosing the information they received from the witness which may have profound social consequences. I experienced this difference in training more in the paranormal community although it was also present to in the UAP community.

As far as groups which require training, the most known is in the UAP field is the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) field investigator training which I took in 2019. This certification requires the passing of an open book 100 question multiple choice test after purchase of the manual and your ability to pass a background check (MUFON, 2021). After onboarding, you are paired with another Field Investigator to learn how to do an investigation (MUFON, 2021). While the person I worked with was through, well organized, and was methodical, not everyone had the same opportunity to be paired with someone like this. Browsing through the full Case Management System (CMS) which is only available to certified investigators, it is clear investigators, and thus the investigation reports themselves, were variable. Data collection and/or documentation for conclusions often make the case worthless to scientific understanding. Quality evidence is hidden in the MUFON CMS database collected by the investigators, but may be buried at best and likely not high quality. The field investigators at MUFON are all volunteers, most of the ones I have met have little to no scientific training, and there is no incentive to encourage high quality scientific or investigative work. This was an on-going complaint from several former state directors of my chapter, of which I was one.

In some situations, sightings are clustered with multiple witnesses who did not talk to each other or share their experiences. It would seem something unusual might be the cause. Assuming something unusual is occurring this could be important scientifically, such as what is causing clusters of sightings, it is more likely to fall in the hands of someone who may be unqualified at best or destructive at worst. While there might be a place for lay investigators, minimum training standards should be implemented, training should be improved and standardized, and the training goal should be to produce scientific reports or at least be able to help eliminate what can be eliminated while a more experienced or relevant expert works on more challenging cases which shed more light on an unusual experience. Otherwise, what is the point of the investigations?

Stigma and the Rise of the Unqualified Mental Health Provider

Of course, in many situations, the quality of a sighting report, be it ghosts, UAP, or whatnot, relies on part on the witness. There can be little doubt witnesses who are reporting phenomena believe it is real, otherwise why report something in the first place? Of course, some witnesses can provide better quality reports than others for a variety of reasons including the time between the sighting and the report as well as their general memory. Some end up being traumatized by what they saw or experienced and seek help first.

Given the problems in general investigation of these phenomena, it should be unsurprising that due to few mental health professionals taking things seriously (Zeller, 2021). Thus, it is again often dependent on lay people. Just like during the investigations, these lay individuals may be of not only variable quality, but also have various ethics, and may, in fact, be unable to provide advice or service legally. Most laypeople are not equipped to provide services to someone who has undergone severe trauma or believes they have undergone severe trauma. Someone experiencing severe trauma should be transferred to a professional as soon as possible.

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However, from what I have seen and heard in the UAP community, this transfer of care is simply not done. Part of this is due to the stigma that even mental health professionals experience when treating individuals who have had claimed to be abducted (Zeller, 2021). Thus support groups are often without a licensed professional and there have been times where the lay person leading had a near cult-like hold over some of the witnesses. As part of my work within the community, I witnessed a time where witnesses were told if they went to a licensed professional that they would be “deemed schizophrenic” and committed due to the experience. As someone who has medical training and experience in psychology and who spoke to many of the witnesses in question, I could see no reason for the statement outside of the use of this as a form of control. If stigma is reduced, I would imagine the cult-like hold would be improved allowing people who need help to get the help they can. I reported such situations to the local authorities, but nothing seemed to come of it.

The most distressing cause for concern has involved those who work with witnesses who were convinced they were abducted by aliens. While I am sure most of those situations had a more realistic and likely more terrestrial explanation, I am concerned about those who might be praying on the witnesses and manipulating them. I am most concerned about the use of hypnosis by unlicensed professionals on witnesses who may be more fragile and susceptible.

My first experience with this was when I attended a large and well-known lay hypnosis convention which takes place in Las Vegas every year. One of the sessions I attended was an unlicensed provider who specialized in alien abductions. I listened as she told us how she recovered memories and how almost all of her clients had been abducted by aliens. For a moment, I was impressed and then I considered the odds of almost every client having abduction experiences? This would seem to be a perfect example of either intentional or unintentional false memories which is unethical at best and dangerous at worst (Montgomery, 2022).

However, that hypnotist was not the only one specializing in alien abductions. As I would come to learn, individual MUFON field investigators have also been referring witnesses (or in their vernacular “experiencers”) to unlicensed and uncertified hypnosis providers, in violation of MUFON’s own rules on the matter (Turner, 2015, pp. Step 6, page 6 of 6). When I asked why their own policies were violated, the reasoning included concern about stigma from licensed providers and, in other cases, an unwillingness to go through the bureaucratic nightmare of going to an approved hypnosis practitioner. No one wishes to waste time going through red tape, however the concerns about possible stigma and being discredited by the scientific and clinical community appears to prevent people from getting the help they may need and may be placed in danger if they go to unlicensed providers. Are clinicians not obliged to attempt to reduce possible damage which can result from seeing unlicensed and unqualified providers? This is something to consider.

Conclusion

While I am writing from a UAP perspective, given the similarities in how witnesses of other phenomena, such as ghosts, Bigfoot, and other similar phenomena, are treated in comparison to UAP witnesses, some of these calls for concerns are likely valid for those areas as well. This would suggest many people who may be dismissed because they witnessed something unknown in the sky. At the least, however, a reduction in

stigma may help get to the root cause of the phenomenon by improving the quality of investigators, hopefully to a more professional standard. Not to mention better treatment of the witnesses and allowing them to obtain the help they need and reducing the control and damage of unqualified providers. I beg my fellow scientists and clinicians, the next time they hear someone discuss seeing something unidentified, not to jump to sudden conclusions and to listen to what they have to say. Continuing to ignore the topic due to the possible stigma is doing neither the scientific community nor the mental health community any favours.

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Conflicts of Interest: Former member of the Mutal UFO Network and Scientific Coalition for UAP Studies. No other conflicts to declare.

Author's Bio-Note

Melvin S. Marsh has a B.S. degree in Anthropology and Human Biology from Emory University, an M.S. degree in Space Studies with a concentration in Human Factors and Space Life Sciences from University of North Dakota, and also another M.S. degree in Psychology from Georgia Southern University. His areas of research include human performance in extreme environments and Space Social Sciences.