II. WITNESS CREDIBILITY

Although UFO reports have been prevalent since the 1940's, it was only in more recent years that studies were made relating to factors that might affect the credibility of those who report the UFOs. In most sightings, there is no hard evidence of any kind, only the reports of eyewitnesses.

Sociologists and psychologists were asked to give their opinions on what type of person reports UFOs, when the evidence seems to be overwhelming that many more UFOs are seen than are reported, for fear of ridicule. J. Allen Hynek reports that when he asks his audiences how many have seen a UFO, more than 10 percent of the audience will raise a hand. When asked how many of them reported the event, few if any respond.

What then is the make-up of UFO reporters, and equally as important, how accurately can a person judge what he is seeing? The situation is probably a stressful one when all faculties are not at their best, and few reference points are available for accurate determination of distance to the object, its size and speed, if moving.

A. SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Apparently the first time public attention was focused on this aspect of UFOs was during the 1968 hearings by the House Committee on Science and Astronautics (see chapter 5). Dr. Robert Hall, head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois was called as a witness, and Dr. Roger N. Shepard, Department of Psychology, Stanford University and Dr. R. Leo Sprinkle, University

of Wyoming, submitted papers for the record. A year later the American Association for the Advancement of Science held a UFO Symposium in Boston which included four people from these fields.

Just as other investigators are widely split on the subject of UFOs in general, so are the sociologists and psychologists on the type of people who report UFOs. Drs. Lester Grinspoon and Alan Persky, for example, seem to consider not only the witnesses but those scientists who are vigorously involved in the study of UFOs to be victims of the classic Freudian breast/penis syndrome, thus accounting for the cigar- or saucer-shapes of UFOs. 12/ This author could find no other papers supporting this hypothesis.

Dr. Robert Hall, who was present both at the House hearings and the AAAS symposium, reports that people first try to explain UFOs in terms of familiar objects. Only after the event does not fit into any known category will the witness conclude it is a UFO. He explains that everyone has a set of belief systems that help determine their frames of reference in day-to-day life.

> What people believe is usually organized into elaborate systems of belief. That is, each person has a cognitive structure consisting of many items of information and belief which are interdependent, and people are organized into social systems in which each person lends support to belief of others in the system. A lonely belief is an unstable belief. . . .
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> . . . it appears that people tend in most circumstances to hold beliefs consistent with those of people around them. . . . When reasonable men report events which receive no social support from their friends and do not fit their own prior beliefs, we have to take these reports seriously. 13/

By his reasoning then, as long as the witness is of good standing in the community and meets other criteria set forth in section B of this chapter, his story should be believed.

12/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 233-246.

13/ Ibid., p. 215.

Walter Sullivan, Science Editor of the New York Times, however, points out that UFOs are part of most people's belief systems, put there by the media (it was the media, after all, that coined the term "flying saucer" after Kenneth Arnold's sighting).

> It is claimed that witnesses in many of the unexplained UFO cases did not believe in UFOs before their experience with them. My thesis is that we have all been conditioned by the press, radio, and TV--by the general tone of our society--to a hierarchy of beliefs that include for most of the population at least the image of UFOs. 14/

If one does accept that UFOs are a part of virtually everyone's vocabulary, then what other clues can be obtained for determining a witness's reliability? Hall remarks that our legal system has criteria for determining the credibility of witnesses appearing in court, taking into account the person's "reputation in his community, previous familiarity with the event and persons involved in the testimony, apparent motives for prevarication or distortion, and internal characteristics of the testimony such as consistency, recency, verifiable detail and so forth." 15/ Hynek calls this a "credibility index" and feels that "By what right can we summarily ignore [witnesses'] testimony and imply that they are deluded or just plain liars? Would we so treat these same people if they were testifying in court, under oath, on more mundane matters?" 16/

As a consultant for the Air Force for many years, Hynek has had some familiarity with witnesses and has observed that "Very rarely do members of the lunatic fringe make UFO reports. There are many reasons for this; primarily it is simply that they are incapable of composing an articulate, factual, and objective

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14/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 39.

15/ Ibid., p. 259.

16/ Ibid., p. 218.

report." 17/ This is an important statement, for it points out one aspect of UFO reports on which there seems to be general agreement, i.e., the more witnesses, the more believable the report. Hynek states:

> True, occasionally a lone witness of low credibility will make a highly imaginative report, generated by an obviously natural event. But such reports are a warning to beware of UFO reports from single witnesses. . . . 18/

Philip Morrison agrees. "I would say that no witness is credible who bears a sufficiently strange story. The only hope is for independent claims, several independent witnesses, and then the credibility certainly rises." 19/

There is a danger in this as well, however. There is a psychological condition called hysterical contagion in which a group of people can be led to believe that some event is occurring. It is defined as:

> . . . the dissemination of symptoms among a population in a situation where no manifest basis for the symptoms may be established [and where] a set of experiences or behaviors which are heavily laden with the emotion of fear of a mysterious force are disseminated through a collectivity. . . . 20/

The relationship that this condition may have to UFOs is unknown, but both the Condon Report and the AAAS symposium discussed it as a possibility. Two cases cited in both those studies will serve as examples of what the condition entails.

The first is the famous radio broadcast of H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds in 1938. To the listeners of that radio program who had not heard the introductory disclaimer explaining it was only a story and not an actual event, it

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17/ Hynek, J. Allen. [Testimony] In U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Science and Astronautics. Symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects, op. cit., p. 5.

18/ Hynek, J. Allen. The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry. Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1972. p. 20.

19/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 282.

20/ Kerckhoff, A. C. and K. W. Black. The June Bug: A Study of Hysterical Contagion. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968.

appeared that Earth was in fact being invaded by aliens from another planet. Their reaction was panic with some literally "heading for the hills" and in a few cases, committing suicide. The broadcast occurred at a time when anxiety was high over the threat of war, for Hitler had just occupied Austria and Japan was advancing in China. The populace was primed for news of war and destruction, and panic ensued.

A second case involves a "June Bug" epidemic in a southern factory. In 1962 workers from a section of a textile factory in the South reported a disease symptomized by nausea, skin rash and fainting spells, caused by a tiny insect. In fact, there was no insect. The symptoms had manifested themselves as an outgrowth of strain and frustration felt by the workers.

The Condon report concludes only that this be kept in mind while studying UFO cases, but did not cite it as a definite cause. Dr. Hall at the AAAS meeting decided to ignore it completely as an explanation.

> Some effort has been made to liken UFO reports to these cases of hysterical contagion. . . but there are many difficulties in trying to argue that the hard-core cases can be explained in this way. For one thing, the persons reporting UFOs frequently do not interpret them as serious personal threats. They often describe a UFO with puzzlement but not fear. For another, the continuation of UFO reports over at least decades and their spread over all parts of the world would both be unprecedented for a case of hysterical contagion. 21/

Where, then, does this leave the researcher attempting to determine the credibility of a witness? Dr. Roger Shepard, in his statement for the House Science and Astronautics Committee, concluded that:

> . . . a scientific study of UFO phenomena is not impossible--just more difficult. For, we are faced for the most part with a problem--not of making physical measurements--but of interpreting

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21/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 217.

> verbal reports. We are faced, in short, with a problem amenable more to the methods of the psychologist than to those of the physical scientists. 22/

The Condon Report concluded that it would be valuable to have sociologists and psychologists as part of the investigating team on UFO reports 23/ and there seems to be a good deal of evidence suggesting that persons from these disciplines could prove valuable to the effort. But even these professions are not in agreement, so it is doubtful that they will solve the controversy. Dr. Hall stated at the AAAS symposium that:

> . . . we find some scientists arguing something like this: 'I can cite hundreds of cases of people who were excited and reported an aircraft, or a star as a UFO and hundreds of humorous cases of unbalanced people with demonstrably false, stories; therefore it is plausible that the rest of the cases are similar.' I know from personal experience as a military flyer in wartime that flyers sometimes shoot at Venus or at an island, believing it to be an aircraft. It would be foolish for me to conclude from this that there were no aircraft in the sky. 24/

> Either there must be a distinctive physical phenomenon which these witnesses have observed, or there must be a powerful and poorly understood motivation rooted in projection, or contagion of belief, or a similar mechanism. Given these alternatives, I find it more plausible to believe that there is a distinctive physical stimulus than to believe that multiple witnesses misperceive in such a way as to make them firmly believe they saw something which jars their own beliefs and subjects them to ridicule of their associates. . . . 25/

And just as there are professionals such as Grinspoon and Persky who feel that all UFOs are psychological manifestations, there are those who agree with Dr. Shepard who is convinced, after studying numerous UFO reports, that most

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22/ Shepard, Roger N. [Testimony] In U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Science and Astronautics. Symposium on Unidentified Flying Objects, op. cit., p. 224.

23/ Rhine, Mark W. Psychological Aspects of UFO Reports. In Condon, Edward U. Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects. New York, Bantam Books, 1968. p. 597. (Note that this is frequently referred to as the Condon Report.)

24/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 221.

25/ Ibid., p. 219.

sightings are not psychological aberrations and that those who say they are "have neglected to study closely either into the literature on psychopathology, or into that on UFOs. . . ." 26/

B. OTHER LIMITATIONS ON WITNESSES

In addition to the above discussion there needs to be recognition of other factors playing upon a witness to a UFO event that have little if anything to do with their psychological make-up. Dr. Frank Drake reported to the AAAS symposium an experience he had when he was a visiting astronomer at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, West Virgnia. In 1962, a meteor shower occurred in that general area, and while out with colleagues collecting samples of the meteorites, Drake interviewed many witnesses to see what their perception of the shower had been. They found that ". . . a witness's memory of such exotic events faded very quickly. After one day, about half of the reports are clearly erroneous; after two days, about three-quarters are clearly erroneous; after four days, only ten percent are good; after five days, people report more imagination than truth." 27/ As a good example of trying not only to remember certain events but to explain them to an investigator, try to describe a close friend or relative to someone else so that they could pick that person out in a crowd. It is not very easy, even though you may have known that friend or relative for a number of years.

Another, more basic problem is trying to gauge the color, shape, speed and distance to the object. In Drake's example, the meteors were assigned virtually all the colors of the spectrum from red to blue. It is possible that the eye,

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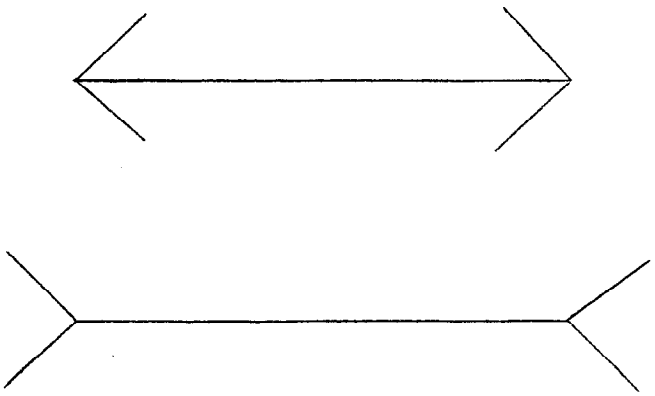
26/ Sagan and Page., op. cit., p. 254.

27/ Sagan and Page., op. cit., p. 254.

responding to a sudden burst of light in an otherwise dark environment, can register any color and therefore render witness reports useless. Similarly, some witnesses thought they knew their exact position relative to the meteor shower, so could give good estimates of distance and position. Upon recreating the event, however, they found they were not sure of their location. In one example, a hunter said he knew exactly where his car had been parked, but upon re-examination found (by the litter he had left from his midnight snack) that he had been 100 yards away from the spot he originally showed to investigators.

A good example where seeing is not believing can be shown below with the standard optical illusion shown below. Although the bottom line looks longer, measurement will prove that both lines are the same length.



In 1968, Sydney Walker III, M.D., suggested that a series of physical checks be made on every UFO reporter. Included in his proposed examination would be: a complete physical examination, including a medical history and selected laboratory studies; a neuro-ophthalmologic examination of the eyes to ensure that the cornea, lens, aqueous humor, vitreous humor, retina, the head of the

optic nerve and the pathways to the brain are in order; a detailed neurological examination to assure that a neurologic disease is not causing hallucinations, delusions, distortions or confabulations; and finally, a psychiatric evaluation. 28/

Mark W. Rhine, writing in the Condon Report, placed a great deal of emphasis on the last step.

> The testimony of any observer who shows no significant medical or psychological conditions which might distort perception or interpretation must gain in credibility. I would suggest . . . the use of psychological testing . . . when recommended by the psychiatrist. A psychiatric interview, if made a routine part of the evaluation of observers, should carry no social stigma. 29/

What neither Dr. Walker nor Mr. Rhine seem to take into account is that the potential reporters of UFOs may very well shy away from reporting if they know they will be subjected to such tests.

In his statement for the House Committee on Science and Astronautics, Dr. Shepard suggested that the witnesses be assisted in retelling their stories in a three-step procedure. First the witness would record what he saw in his own words with care taken that the interviewer does not give him cues that might bias him. Secondly, the witness would look at a standardized set of pictorial material and choose whatever object came closest to what he saw. The final step would allow him to reconstruct the picture with the help of a qualified artist to make it more nearly an exact replica of what he saw. These last two procedures would be similar to that used in police work to make a composite drawing of a criminal. Shepard points out that this has helped solve many cases, including the Richard Speck murders of eight student nurses in Chicago during the 1960s.

28/ Walker, Sydney III, M.D. Establishing Observer Credibility: A Proposed Method. Journal of the Astronautical Sciences, v. IV Mar.-Apr. 19;68: 92-96.

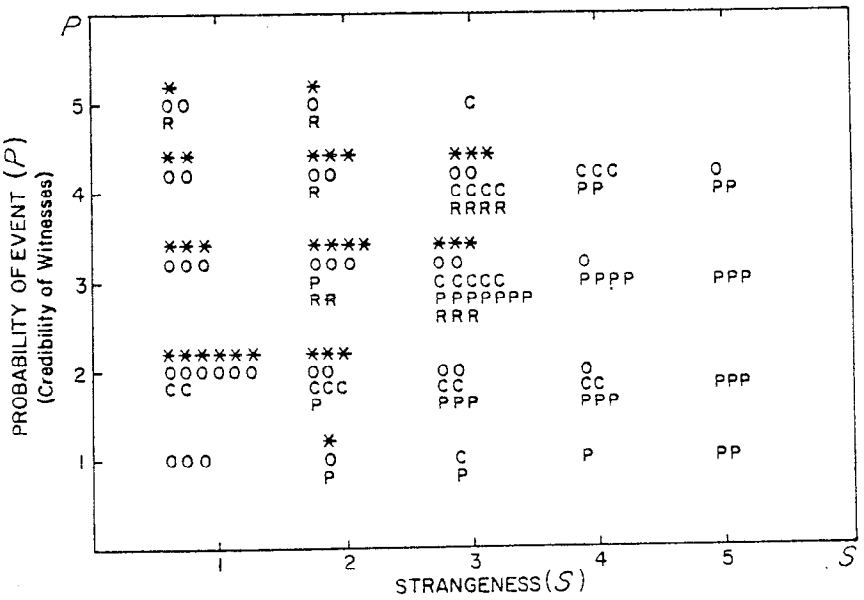
29/ Rhine, Mark W., op. cit., p. 596.

C. STRANGENESS-PROBABILITY CURVE

Faced with all these factors and the problem of how to assimilate them, J. Allen Hynek has devised a "Strangeness-Probability" Curve to determine which cases have the highest probablity of being hard-core cases. A complete discussion of the methods he uses can be found in his book The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry (Chicago, Henry Regenery Co., 1972: 22-31) but in essence he defines "strangeness" as how many individual items, or information bits contained in the report demand explanation, and how difficult it is to explain them on the assumption that the event actually took place. Credibility takes into account several factors: "If there are several witnesses, what is their collective objectivity? How well do they respond to tests of their ability to gauge angular rates of speed? How good is their eyesight? What is their general reputation in the community? What is their reputation for publicity-seeking, for veracity? What is their occupation and how much responsibility does it involve? 30/

Hynek then plots cases to determine which are the best, as shown below. Cases falling in the upper right hand corner would be the most potentially important, and as is seen, that region is scarcely populated. The chart does, however, provide a beginning for the search for "good" cases.

30/ Sagan and Page, op. cit., p. 41-42.



Strangeness/probability diagram of UFO sightings. To be considered important, such a sighting must have both a very high probability of having actually occurred and a very high strangeness. The upper right-hand corner of the diagram is not heavily populated. * = nocturnal lights; O = daylight disks; R = radar cases; C = close encounters with no interaction with the environment; P = close encounters with physical effects (landing marks, burnt rings, engine stoppages, etc.).

31/

31/ Ibid., p. 42.