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# UFO EXPERIENCERS IN WESTERN NEW YORK

BY PHILIP HASELEY, ISABEL BEEHLER, AND KATHRYN SHOREY

**A**fter 60 years, the investigation of the UFO mystery is desperately in need of new directions. Despite the collection of overwhelming numbers of case reports, flap investigations, and government inquiries both public and covert, we do not have a satisfactory model for understanding the complexities of this puzzling phenomenon. Effort certainly has not been lacking. Statistical studies of UFO reports from several national populations and government and military data have received analysis and critical scrutiny. Surveys of the public's UFO experiences by polling organizations and national media both here and abroad have been ongoing since 1947. For the past three decades, research on the psychosocial characteristics of alien abductees has held center stage in ufological research and discussion.

Most notable and controversial was the national survey of UFO and abduction-related phenomena conducted by the Roper organization with analysis by Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and Ron Westrum (1992). It was an important and pioneering step in quantifying and seeking patterns in what was previously a remarkably obscure and secretive aspect of human experience.

Nonetheless, much of what UFO investigators know remains in the category of common knowledge, poorly quantified and impossible to study comparatively. This is nowhere more true than in the study of local and regional populations, which have received virtually no attention from UFO researchers.

This is surprising because studies of local populations are a staple of disciplines as diverse as political science, human genetics, epidemiology, and evolutionary biology among many others. These studies often reveal enormous variation in the objects of interest, as well as key clues unlocking the nature of phenomena that are invisible in the averaging wash

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of a broader survey. Many problems of interest in ufology, such as UFO hot spots, relations to ecological variables, electromagnetic field effects, and tectonic forces can be profitably studied in no other way.

This report focuses on one such local population, the residents of Niagara County, New York. One major purpose of the research was to obtain a statistical portrait of the UFO experiences of the adult residents of Niagara County. Additionally, we sought patterns of association between the characteristics of UFO encounters and the demographic and familial factors of the witnesses themselves. Thirdly, we focused our attention on six factors that have been linked to the abduction experience and analyzed their relationship to variables in the UFO encounter itself and among the reporting witnesses. The data for this analysis came from the administration of a survey developed by the researchers and collected by student interviewers during 2008–2009.

Niagara County is located in the extreme northwestern corner of New York State. Bounded to the north by Lake Ontario and to the west by the Niagara River, it shares a common boundary with southern Ontario, Canada. Primarily a rural county, it has a steady tourist base visiting the largest of its three cities, Niagara Falls, to view its natural wonders. The 2000 census recorded a resident population of approximately 220,000 with an adult (18 and over) population of 165,000. It has a rich history of UFO events, going back to 1833. In that year, a group of awestruck visitors on both sides of the border watched a large, luminous square object hover over the falls (Trench, 1976, in Dennett).

As is true of Lake Erie to the southwest, Lake Ontario has been continuously associated with unusual lights and unidentified craft, hovering, diving, and emerging from its depths. The massive Niagara Power Project and the now defunct Bell Aerospace plant in Niagara Falls, an important cog in the Mercury and Gemini space programs, were of regular interest to UFO visitors in the 1960s and early 1970s. Niagara County has had its share of close encounters, rumors of crashed saucers and abduction episodes. Along

the lake shore, unidentified light phenomena continue to be so common as to strike many residents as hardly worthy of comment.

## METHODS

Our analysis is based upon four independent data samples collected in four consecutive semesters in 2008–2009 by student volunteer researchers. These volunteers were recruited from the primary author’s “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology” classes at Niagara County Community College. Each semester a new group of volunteers were trained in basic interview techniques, reading nonverbal cues, and administration and use of our prepared survey form. Students drew their interviewees heavily from their workplaces, school meeting places, local malls, and friends known through parents and other relatives. The survey focused both on demographic and UFO experiential factors.

Five of the questions were borrowed with minor modifications from the 1992 national survey. We thank the late Budd Hopkins for permission to use these questions. The survey questioned interviewees about vivid UFO dream experiences, paranormal light experiences, and paranormal sleep paralysis with “presence” experiences. Questions about extended missing-time episodes and puzzling wounds or scars of undetermined origin were also included. We chose to add a question about witness reports of “bodily transport through solid objects” as a sixth factor. All six are part and parcel of UFO abduction stories, though the transport factor is much rarer than the other factors. This factor seems entirely characteristic of abduction stories and lacks the ambiguity of reference and context surrounding the Hopkins survey questions about “flying through the air” and “out of body” experiences.

We also surveyed residents concerning kin members and their UFO experiences. A series of questions concerned with the physical circumstances of the witnesses’ UFO experience and the characteristics of the UFO were added in the last three semesters of data collection.

Lack of funds and access to experienced research personnel made the use of student interviewers the best alternative for data collection. Each semester’s sample, though independently collected by different volunteers, is what is disparagingly called a “convenience” sample with unknown deviations from random sampling. Inference from such samples to a larger population is statistically questionable. We therefore will base our claims upon the consistency of our results across multiple samples independently taken. We do offer the use of chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) testing as a measure of the extent of deviations from chance proportions.\* When

\* $\chi^2$  is a statistical test that measures the strength of an observed association between two categorical factors and their values. When you crosstabulate two factors, the  $\chi^2$  test measures the overall numerical difference between the observed number in each cell and what would be expected by chance alone. The larger the  $\chi^2$  value, the greater the deviation from chance expectations. The associated probability estimate (P value) measures the likelihood that a  $\chi^2$  value as large as or larger than the calculated  $\chi^2$  could be purely due to chance. So the lower the P value, the smaller the likelihood the observed

small sample or cell size precluded the use of  $\chi^2$  tests, we used Fisher’s Exact Test where possible.

We have also created a randomly drawn sample from our full data set which closely matches the proportions of the Niagara County population in sex, age, race, and education. We call this 1,000-case sample the Niasamp. Results consistent with those in our semester samples would further confirm our analyses in a sample that is not biased for any of the demographic variables pertaining to our study population.

*Note:* In reporting our results we will use the phrase “UFO experiencer” to mean a UFO witness or UFO observer, not an abductee.

## RESULTS

In our survey we found no notable relationship between UFO experience and any demographic factor except age. We found that individuals over age 45 were significantly more likely to report UFO encounters than younger individuals. This may be purely due to a longer life and greater opportunity, but it may be that younger interviewees were more reluctant to reveal their experiences to like age peers who interviewed them.

Some of the basic demographic features of the full sample are presented in Table 1. UFO witnesses constitute 16.7% of our full sample. This is higher than in earlier national surveys, which range from 7 to 14%. We believe this reflects a genuinely higher frequency of unidentified light phenomena observed over Lake Ontario and the Niagara River. However, we cannot overlook that Niagara County has a surprisingly high amount of air traffic despite its rural nature. A commercial airport and an Air Force base are located in Niagara Falls, and the county is in close proximity to Buffalo and Toronto International Airports. There are numerous smaller regional and private airports on both sides

**Table 1. Demographic Features of the Survey Samples (N = 2837)**

Sex		Age	
Male	49.8%	18–29	30.3%
Female	50.2%	30–44	25.4%
		45–59	22.3%
		60+	21.2%
		Not identified	0.7%
Education		Racial/Ethnic Identification	
Non-high school graduate	14.3%	European American	65.9%
		Hispanic American	6.8%
High school graduate	29.1%	African American	13.7%
Some college	30.0%	Asian American	3.5%
College graduate*	24.6%	Native American	6.1%
Not identified	2.1%	Other	0.9%
		Not identified	3.2%

deviation is due to chance. The accepted *significant* probability value is  $p = .05$  or less or 5 chances in 100. If that is so, an observed association between two factors is also unlikely to be due to chance at that probability or level of significance. We used the SPSS Version 15 Statistical Package and the Vassar College online statistical programs for calculation of the  $\chi^2$  test and related measures.

**Table 2. Percentage of Survey Participants Who Experienced Each of 6 Abduction-Related Factors by Number of UFO Experiences**

Interviewee with:	UFO dreams	Paranormal lights	Paranormal sleep	Missing time	Transport	Puzzling wounds/scars
No UFO experiences	12.3%	13.1%	13.3%	8.4%	1.1%	15.6%
1 or 2 UFO experiences	33.5%	32.8%	30.8%	20.0%	5.2%	30.3%
3 or more UFO experiences	53.7%	60.9%	43.0%	38.8%	9.0%	46.3%

1. UFO witnesses as a group are significantly more likely to experience each of the six abduction-related factors than nonwitnesses ( $p < .001$ ).
2. Witnesses with three or more sightings are significantly more likely to experience four (UFO dreams, paranormal lights, missing time, puzzling wounds/scars) of the six factors than UFO witnesses with one or two sightings ( $p = .002$  or less).

**Table 3. Percentage of Spouses and Biological Relatives with UFO Sightings among UFO Witnesses and Nonwitnesses**

	Spouse with UFO sighting	Biological relative with UFO sighting
UFO witnesses	15.4%	39.8%
Nonwitnesses*	3.0%	9.4%

\* Includes interviewees answering “don’t know” or giving no response.

1. UFO witnesses more likely to have a spouse with UFO experience significant at  $p < .000$ .
2. UFO witnesses more likely to have biological family members with UFO experience than non-witnesses significant at  $p < .000$ .

of the border. This offers opportunities for misidentification that are an unknowable percentage of the total.

A primary question is: How do UFO witnesses differ from nonwitnesses in their experience of the six factors discussed earlier? These six factors are reported in witnesses and nonwitnesses alike, but not with the same frequency. As Table 2 illustrates, the percentage of UFO witnesses experiencing these abduction-related factors are much higher than nonwitnesses. This is true whether the witnesses have had just one or two sightings or whether they have had three or more sightings. Taken as a group, UFO witnesses are significantly more likely to experience all six of these factors ( $p < .001$ ).

Moreover, UFO witnesses with three or more sightings were more likely than witnesses with just one or two encounters to experience four of these factors. These include UFO dreams, paranormal light encounters, missing time episodes, and puzzling wounds or scars. A fifth, paranormal sleep experiences, borders on statistical significance as well ( $p = .077$ ).

The difference between these two groups of UFO witnesses can be seen in another way. Witnesses with two or fewer UFO encounters who had at least one experience of a factor numerically exceeded chance expectations by 95.5%, averaged over all six factors. That same average for witnesses with three or more UFO encounters was 276% greater than chance expectation. These results were not affected by statistical control for any demographic factor, and they were significant in all four semester samples, in the Niasamp, and in our full data set.

## UFO EXPERIENCE AND FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS

Among our other findings were associations between kinship and marriage relations and the UFO experience. Our analysis indicates UFO witnesses were much more likely to have biological family members who have had UFO encounters than nonwitnesses (Table 3). This is indicated by the over 30% difference between UFO witnesses and nonwitnesses who have biological relatives with UFO sightings. All cat-

**Table 4. Percentage of Various Biological Relatives with UFO Sightings among UFO Witnesses and Nonwitnesses**

Witness category	Relatives with UFO Sightings			
	Grandparent or parent	Sibling	Children	Multiple relatives*
Nonwitnesses	4.3%	2.4%	2.3%	0.38%
1 or 2 sightings	12.1%	14.0%	7.4%	4.9%
3 or more sightings	13.4%	7.5%	14.9%	11.9%

\* Multiple relatives of differing biological relationship to the witness.

1. UFO witnesses with 1 or 2 sightings and UFO witnesses with 3 or more sightings significantly different from nonwitnesses at  $p = .000$  and  $p < .000$ , respectively.

egories of relatives contributed to these differences. Both categories of UFO witnesses are notably higher in percentage and statistically different from nonwitnesses over all categories of relatives (Table 4).

There are also appreciable and significant differences between the two UFO witness categories. There are considerably larger numbers of UFO witnesses with one or two sightings with a UFO witness sibling. The data, however, also reveal there are substantially greater numbers of UFO witnesses with three or more sightings with children or with multiple biological relatives with UFO experiences. These results were significant for three of the four semester samples, and the Niasamp as well.

We also found that UFO witnesses were much more likely to have a spouse who was a UFO witness than were nonwitnesses (Table 3). However, we did not find that witnesses with three or more encounters were significantly more likely to have UFO reporting spouses than were witnesses with one or two encounters ( $p = .262$ ). The overall difference between witnesses and nonwitnesses was significant for all four semester samples, the Niasamp, and the full data set. All of these results were unaffected by statistical control for demographic factors.

## UFO FACTORS AND OBSERVER DISTANCE

Accurate distance estimation even with recent observation is always a matter of doubt. After a passage of time, the matter often becomes an exercise in frustration. However, we did find some associations between UFO distance from the viewer and our six UFO related factors.

We previously reported that our UFO witnesses were far more likely to experience these factors than nonwitnesses. We also have found that witnesses whose closest encounter was 500 feet or less (the Hynek definition of a CE1 report) were significantly more likely to report missing time episodes and transport experiences than those whose

encounters were at distances greater than 500 feet ( $p = .05$  and  $.025$  respectively). There were also excesses of close encounter witnesses reporting paranormal light encounters and UFO dream experiences that did not reach statistical significance.

## DISTANCE AND VIEWING TIME

Relationships were also explored between distance and time of day of the observation. When distance was broken down into three categories (500 feet or less, 500 feet to one mile, greater than 1 mile), a significant association was found between distance and the time of the observation ( $p = .015$ ).

The result was primarily due to a 37% excess of witnesses with daytime encounters at 500 feet or less and a 51% excess of witnesses with dawn or dusk encounters with objects at 500 feet to 1 mile. The latter were in considerable excess in two of the three semester samples where data were collected and in the Niasamp and the full data set.

## INDIVIDUAL CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

One of the more interesting and puzzling results concerned the number of objects seen in an observer's closest encounter and its association with the six UFO-related factors. Experiencers who observed more than one unidentified in their closest encounter had a far higher likelihood of experiencing five of these six factors than those whose closest encounter involved a single object. The lone exception, puzzling wounds and scars, is still very near the accepted level of significance ( $p = .077$ ). To illustrate further, Table 5 compares one-object observers to multiple-object observers for all six factors in our three semester samples. In 16 of the 18 factor/sample combinations, there was an excess of multiple-object observers who had that experience. In 11 of 18, these are statistically significant excesses.

Similarly, in our Niasamp sample, three of six factors

**Table 5. Observed Excess/Deficiency of Witnesses Who Viewed Multiple UFOs in Their Closest Encounter Compared to One Object Witnesses**

Test Factor	Sample <sup>1</sup>				
	0809	0901	0909	Niasamp	Full data
UFO dreams	+*	+*	+*	+*	+*
Paranormal lights	+*	+*	+	+*	+*
Paranormal sleep	+*	+	+	+	+*
Missing time	+*	+*	+*	+*	+*
Transport	-	+*	+	+	+*
Puzzling wounds	+*	+	-	+	+

\* Excess is significant at  $p = .05$  or less.

+ Witnesses with multiple UFO closest encounter exceed chance expectations.

- Witnesses with multiple UFO closest encounter equal to or less than chance expectations.

<sup>1</sup> Data on object number not collected for 0801 sample.

**Table 6. Percentage of UFO Witnesses with Entity Encounters vs. UFO Witnesses without Entity Encounters for Abduction-Related Factors and Object Numbers**

	Witnesses with entity encounters	Witnesses without entity encounters	P value for difference
Paranormal sleep episodes	63.6%	29.5%	.022
Missing time episodes	72.7%	21.0%	<.001
Puzzling wounds or scars	63.6%	34.0%	.055
Closest encounters / two or more objects	72.7%	32.5%	.009

show significant excess of multiple-object observers and all factors do show some excess of those observers who have had the factor experience.

Hopkins, Jacobs, and Westrum used five of these factors as markers for the abduction experience. It may be that a multiple object encounter may also be an alert signal for possible abduction experiences. Its usefulness will need to be tested against a variety of abduction witnesses and their stories. However, it is interesting to note the multiple object observation seems more closely associated with these six marker factors than other possible precursors to abduction that we have examined. We note that having a sighting at less than 500 feet and seeing a structured craft, both of which are experiences we might expect to be frequently reported by abductees, have a significant relationship with two and one of the factors, respectively. Multiple object encounters are significantly associated with 5 of 6 of the factors.

## ENTITY ENCOUNTERS

Our interviewees reported only a few entity encounters. These included 11 definite encounters and 35 individuals who were “unsure” whether they had ever had such an encounter. After considerable debate, we decided to treat the unshures as witnesses without an entity encounter. These points certainly make a degree of caution advisable when assessing this analysis. (*Editor’s note:* The proportion of entity encounters is consistent with past studies of the distributions

of various types of cases. Entity encounters are very rare, even more so today).

Nevertheless, an interesting pattern emerges when we compare UFO witnesses with and without entity encounters (Table 6). The percentages of witnesses with an entity encounter who have had paranormal sleep episodes, missing time periods, and puzzling wounds/scars greatly exceeds the comparable percentages for witnesses without an entity encounter. These differences are statistically significant. Those witnesses with paranormal light experiences also show an excess of entity encounters that bordered on levels of significance ( $p = 071$ ). Although not testable due to small numbers, witnesses with both a transport experience and an entity encounter were 312% in excess of random expectations.

We also discovered a link between entity encounters and the number of objects that were witnessed. In their closest encounter, witnesses with entity encounters were significantly more likely to have seen two or more objects than a witness without an entity encounter (72.7% to 32.5%).

A difficulty with the Roper Poll analysis we hoped to overcome was a lack of data and analysis concerning time concurrence between possible abduction related factors and UFO experiences. In our view it definitely matters if these paranormal episodes occur in the same time frame as a UFO sighting, if they are in fact related to abduction. To remedy this, we asked UFO witnesses if they remembered a paranormal sleep episode, a missing time period, or a transport experience within 12 hours of a UFO sighting. For

**Table 7. Percentage of Entity Encounter Witnesses vs. UFO Witnesses without Entity Encounters\* for Time-Concurrent Abduction-Related Factors**

	Witnesses with entity encounters	Witnesses without entity encounters*	P value for difference
Time-concurrent parasleep episodes	27.3%	6.1%	.031
Time-concurrent missing time episodes	36.4%	7.6%	.009
Time-concurrent puzzling wounds or scars	27.3%	7.3%	.048

\* Includes interviewees who responded with “not sure.”

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the puzzling wound/scar factor, a three-day interval during which the blemish was discovered was the point of reference.

We found that the percentages of witnesses with entity encounters was much higher than for witnesses without entity encounters for three time-concurrent factors (Table 7). Our data indicate a significant association between entity encounters and paranormal sleep episodes, missing time experiences, and puzzling wounds and scars. This appears to indicate these factors are more likely to occur at or near the time of an entity encounter than expected by chance alone.

We believe that witnesses with these four factors—paranormal sleep episodes, missing time, transport experiences, and puzzling wounds/scars—time-concurrent with UFO sightings would be the most likely candidates to have experienced abduction. The frequency of such individuals in our survey data was 0.176% (5 individuals). This would be the most conservative estimate of abduction taken from our sample data. This is comparatively a much smaller figure than the 2% possible abductees calculated from the Roper Poll data. (*Editor's note:* This smaller percentage would still yield an abductee population of about 350,000 among U.S. adults.)

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have found that these six test factors have a highly significant link to the UFO experience in our Niagara County samples. UFO witnesses were significantly more likely to experience all six of these UFO-related factors than nonwitnesses. Those witnesses who had three or more encounters had significantly greater likelihood of having UFO dreams, paranormal light encounters, missing time episodes, and puzzling wounds and scars than witnesses with one or two encounters. We found UFO experiencers were significantly more likely to have biological relatives and spouses who were experiencers. UFO witnesses with 3 or more sightings were much more likely to have children and multiple biological relatives with their own sightings. UFO witnesses with two or fewer sightings had a higher percentage of siblings with sightings than witnesses with three or more experiences.

We also found that close encounter witnesses (500 feet or less) were significantly more likely to experience missing time episodes and transport experiences than witnesses of a UFO at a greater distance. Also, daytime encounters of 500 feet or less and dawn or dusk encounters at distances between 500 feet and one mile were in considerable excess over chance proportions.

Additionally, we found that witnesses whose closest encounter featured multiple objects were statistically much more likely to experience five of the six UFO related factors than single object witnesses. The abduction-related markers are much more closely associated with multiple object observations than measures such as distance 500 feet or less or viewing of a structured craft. Again, these findings are consistent over our various samples tested and in our full data set.

Although entity encounters were rare, they did yield

interesting information. Witnesses with entity encounters had a higher likelihood of paranormal sleep episodes, missing time periods, and puzzling wounds or scars than UFO witnesses without a remembered entity encounter. This remained true even among witnesses with time concurrence between their sighting and these three test factors. Entity encounter witnesses were also more likely to have a closest encounter that involved two or more objects than other witnesses. Additionally, a conservative estimate of abduction frequency for our sample (0.176%) was calculated based upon our four time concurrent factors.

This study illustrates again the separate status of the repeater UFO witness, in this case those with three or more encounters. Our personal experiences as UFO investigators have linked these witnesses with a host of paranormal phenomena. The strong association found between paranormal light encounters and sleep paralysis/presence episodes in these multiple-encounter witnesses reinforces this connection. These are phenomena that are linked to other paranormal experiences, notably apparitional and Old Hag encounters. We would suggest that UFO experiences are part of a greater “paranormal complex” whose boundaries are not confined to abductees or even UFO witnesses collectively. The American research community has to date pursued the investigation of UFO links to the paranormal with the greatest of reluctance. This is understandable since fears that ufology might be carried yet further to the margins of scientific respectability are not without foundation. We speculate that uneasiness about the continued viability of the much treasured extraterrestrial hypothesis may also be at work here. Nonetheless, it is necessary to pursue the data wherever it takes us if progress is to be made. Greater interaction with the researchers and findings in other areas of paranormal research would be most fruitful, we believe.

We are certainly aware of some of the deficiencies of this study. The use of inexperienced student interviewers to collect data and sampling that isn't random is far from ideal. Nonetheless, the samples were independently collected, large in size, and for our most important findings, consistent in what they indicate. We trust that others will take the study of local populations further and improve on our work. We can, with forethought, carry out an informative and systematic set of local studies directed toward answering all kinds of UFO research questions. Ufology can go forward, adding with each new study collective weight and coherence to the case for UFO reality.

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UFOs can contribute to the greater understanding of the inner workings of the human mind as it comes to grips with the wider world, and perhaps the wider universe, outside itself.—*Bill Murphy*.

## NOTES

1. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). *Star Trek*, however, trumps UFOs, to the tune of 3,643 mentions.
2. It might be worth considering how far this extends to UFO communities outside the United States.
3. Renard, 1984, pp. 64+. Renard notes (p. 68) that from antiquity onward the notion of the “plurality of inhabited worlds” existed, really coming into its own with a larger public with the birth of modern science in the 17th century. Renard also has interesting things to say about the double image of the Extraterrestrial as a positive being knowing fabulous scientific truths, perhaps even of human origins or humankind’s ultimate end (p. 77), and as a “degenerate . . . who has neither moral conscience nor feelings” (p. 75). Expressions of these ET opposites are easy to find in popular modern literature and cinema, and get bound up in the ambiguous human response to technology.
4. See Dewan, 2006, p. 185: “As Linda Degh has argued, it is not necessary or even prudent for the folklorist or anthropologist to determine whether such phenomena as UFOs belong to the natural or supernatural world. Of particular relevance to these scholars are the beliefs that arise out of such encounters.”
5. Particularly valuable is the section on “Interpreting Reality,” pp. 678–682, in Tumminia, 2002.

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