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DEBATE

Repressed Memory and Dissociative Amnesia: The Unidentified Anomalous Phenomenon of Memory Loss

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Renewed interest in UFOs, now called Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAP), gained traction in 2017 when The New York Times published three videos captured by pilots purportedly demonstrating UAPs showing manoeuvres exceeding human technology.[1] The Pentagon investigated these UAPs and, recently, reports and hearings have begun to unravel the origin of these strange sightings. These investigations have shown that only a small percentage of these UAPS does not "resolve into readily explainable sources" such as weather balloons or planes.[2] Moreover, these investigations have not revealed any convincing proof for an extraterrestrial origin. In this commentary, we will show that this story bears a striking resemblance with the controversial discourse of repressed memory and dissociative amnesia.

An important first task that the Pentagon undertook was to decipher whether UAPs could be explained by plausible alternative accounts. In the same vein, in the field of (alleged) memory loss, before a convincing case can be made that memory loss has a traumatic cause, other science-based explanations should be sought first (Otgaar et al., 2019). For example, research has revealed that reported memory loss of autobiographical experiences can be produced by organic causes (e.g., head injury, Jelicic, 2023)

[1]https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/pentagon-program-ufo-harry-reid.html
[2]https://www.space.com/pentagon-aaro-ufo-hearing-april-2023

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or malingering (Zago et al., 2023). This issue is important as Markowitsch and Staniloiu (2025, p. 6) provided examples of triggers leading to dissociative amnesia such as "a head concussion" and "banged with his head against a metal door." These are perfect examples that the memory loss might not be dissociative in nature but has a plausible cause: an organic one.

The examples described in Markowitsch and Staniloiu (2025) are reminiscent of a recent review by Mangiulli et al. (2022). In this review, the authors critically examined 128 case studies of dissociative amnesia. An important finding was that in about a third of case studies, an organic antecedent was present thereby leading to the possibility that the reported memory loss might have nothing to with a dissociative origin. Therefore, the authors proposed that because it is oftentimes challenging to rule out other mechanisms (e.g., organic causes, malingering), a neutral label would be the best route to describe the memory loss such as *amnesia of uncertain aetiology*.

To conclude, we argue that just like UAPs, repressed memory and dissociative amnesia should be first tested against plausible explanations such as organic amnesia or malingering memory loss. Moreover, even when these explanations cannot account for traumatic memory loss, concepts such as repressed memory and dissociative amnesia are, by default, difficult to reconcile with philosophical and evolutionary points of view (De Brigard, 2023; Patihis, 2023). Of course, we remain open to new data to document whether dissociative amnesia or repressed memory might have a more "alien" origin.

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