

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 26, 1967

TO: Stuart Cook
FROM: Robert J. Low
SUBJECT: Reports vs Sightings

Stuart:

It is an oversimplification to say that the role of the psychologist in the UFO study is to shed as much light as possible on the question of how closely reports of sightings correspond with physical reality in the case both of individual reports and of reports generally. I believe there is only one physical feature, the atmosphere intervening between the observer and the object observed, that needs to be considered in thinking about this problem. All the rest is physiology and psychology. What the atmosphere does to degrade the observing conditions is the least important element, it seems to me, in the picture, and the effects are most readily understood. Hence, this does perhaps describe accurately the domain of the psychologist in the UFO study.

You have said that there is no way that one can really unambiguously do what Allen Hynek wants to do, which is to have psychologists establish the credibility of individual observers. You pointed out, first of all, that credibility has at least three different meanings, that the honesty aspect of credibility cannot be generalized, that psychologists don't know whether the distortion-of-reality aspect can or cannot be generalized, and that the experience aspect undoubtedly has some validity, but it can't be quantified. Hence, we can't tell whether, in any given case, the report is an accurate reflection of reality or not. I am bothered by my own attempts to deal with this problem by saying that it is pushing things to far to say that, since there are so many reports, all could be inaccurate. Therefore, some must be accurate, and we'll drop it at that.

AT lunch the other day Mike said some interesting things that made me feel uneasy about my disposing of the problem in this way. We have asked ourselves before whether the set of persons who report UFO sightings has any different characteristics than the set of those who do not and more particularly, whether the set of contactees is different from the population in general. The thing that is interesting, I thought, was that Mike suggested that with only something like as small as 20 cases one could say something about the latter. That is, one would study carefully 20 persons who had reported contact and 20 persons chosen from the general population, and this, he said, might be enough of a sample to tell us something about whether the sets are different or not. He said that the same thing might be done for reporters versus non-reporters if we took only something like 40 cases. That is a much more manageable problem than I would have guessed, and therefore it seems to be something we might be able to manage within the scope of our contract. The problem, of course, will be to find the right person to do it. Mike said that Vic Raimy would be the ideal individual, but he is much too tied up to consider it.

The point is, I guess, that while we would agree that it is impossible to say anything definite about individual cases, we might be able to say something about the problem in large. There is a serious

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question of whether it is worth the time and expense to do this, because clearly one can, at best, put only approximate numbers on such things, and it is predictable - or is it? - that the result of a study of the problem in the large will be that, of course, it is still possible for some reports to be accurate reports, and therefore we are right back where we were. We still have a problem.

I simply want to put this problem before you to see, first, whether you think it is an accurate statement of the problem, and second, to obtain your judgment as to the proper response to the problem, once we've got it correctly stated.

Many thanks.

End of Memo

cc: EUCondon ✓