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The Pentagon's Secret UFO Program, the Hitchhiker Effect, and Models of Contagion

In September 2008 the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) initiated a \$22 million, two-year contract with Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Studies (BAASS) to scientifically study UFOs and their effects on humans. And so began one of the most controversial programs in the history of the United States Government. The program was named Advanced Aerospace Weapon System Applications Program (AAWSAP) and was kept secret from the public until *The New York Times* broke the story in December 2017 (Cooper, Blumenthal & Kean, 2017). DIA senior analyst James T. Lacatski was the primary creator of AAWSAP.

Within five months of the AAWSAP start date in 2008 a team of 50 PhD and Masters level scientists, technicians, engineers, analysts, military intelligence professionals, program managers, and security officers had been recruited, hired, and were being assigned security clearances. During the program's 24 months duration plus a three month no-cost extension, BAASS delivered over one hundred technical reports on different aspects of UFO performance, as well as reports describing medical, psychological, and physiological effects of UFOs and associated phenomena.

Skinwalker Ranch

One area of investigation initiated by AAWSAP involved the (in)famous Skinwalker Ranch where multiple UFO sightings had taken place over decades as well as a plethora of anomalies that included cattle mutilations, sightings of orbs of different colors, discarnate entities, and poltergeist activity (Kelleher and Knapp, 2005). Shortly after the AAWSAP investigations began, the DIA deployed several military personnel on site visits to Skinwalker Ranch to corroborate and evaluate earlier reports of anomalous phenomena. Lacatski himself had experienced a profound anomaly on the ranch in 2007; this experience, in fact, was a significant instigation for the formation of the AAWSAP/BAASS program.

All five DIA personnel deployed to the ranch experienced profound anomalies while on the property, and more importantly, all five "brought something home" with them. The leader of these five military personnel was a Naval Intelligence officer whom we gave the pseudonym Jonathan Axelrod in our book (Lacatski, Kelleher & Knapp, 2021). Axelrod was an accomplished engineer who would eventually be promoted to the rank of two-star admiral within Naval Intelligence and who possessed Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information (TS SCI) clearances at the time of his ranch visit in July 2009.

Axelrod, accompanied by Jim Costigan and David Wilson, encountered an anomaly on the ranch that caused a lot of fear in all three men. But little did he know that this incident was only the beginning of his troubles. Within a month of arriving back home in Virginia, a plethora of paranormal phenomena suddenly erupted in Axelrod's home.

For several years following his July 2009 and subsequent trips to the Ranch, Axelrod's wife and teenage children were subjected to nightmarish "dogmen" appearing in their backyard; to blue, red, yellow, and white orbs routinely floating through the home and in the yard; to black shadow people standing over their beds when they awoke; and to a relentless barrage of loud, unexplained footsteps walking up and down the stairs of their house.

The Axelrod teenagers endured some very scary episodes in their bedrooms; Paul, the younger teenager, claims to have been attacked by blue and red orbs in his bedroom on the night of February 7, 2011. But they kept quiet about their strange experiences. So imagine Paul's shock when he was approached by one of his high school friends in 2011 who told him that on the previous night, he had looked out his bedroom window and had witnessed a large wolf-like creature standing outside his bedroom looking in at him. A few weeks later another friend told Paul of seeing strange blue lights flying around his backyard. These revelations by the two friends came without prompting from Paul. In other words, they cannot be dismissed as "me too" phenomena. The experiences by Paul's school friends suggests that the perception of bizarre creatures and blue orbs was *transferable* beyond the Axelrod family home and out into the neighborhood. It's unlikely that these events could be explained as a series of improbable coincidences. Likewise, since the Axelrod children were very reticent in discussing these experiences outside their immediate family, the incidents with their school friends cannot be dismissed as peer mimicry.

The Axelrod family also suffered health effects with the wife suffering flare-ups of Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (Lupus) and Raynaud's Disease. Both Axelrod teenagers also endured intense flu-like symptoms at different times following anomalies in their home, with the most serious medical symptoms occurring in the younger teenager.

What was once a normal middle-class home in suburban Virginia became an inferno of unexplained phenomena. And Axelrod and his family were certain that the trigger for this transformation was his first trip to Skinwalker Ranch. Axelrod and his family can be considered the "poster children" for the eruption of anomalies in the home following trips to Skinwalker Ranch.

Health Effects

The Axelrods were far from alone. During the AAWSAP/BAASS program, the phenomenon of ranch visitors bringing something home with them became the rule rather than the exception. Even ranch owner and BAASS founder Robert Bigelow reported numerous anomalies and unusual activity in his home in the months and years after visiting Skinwalker Ranch. Journalist George Knapp made several visits to Skinwalker Ranch before and after the AAWSAP/BAASS investigations on Skinwalker Ranch, some lasting overnight. Subsequent to the trips, Knapp reported that his wife experienced multiple apparitions in their home, including sightings of blue orbs outside the window of their place in Las Vegas.

Jim Costigan, a Marine who had accompanied Axelrod on that first visit to the ranch, and his wife experienced a very close encounter with a blue orb in their quiet Maryland neighborhood in September 2009. Her upper arm was briefly grazed by a low flying blue orb as it flew past her and disappeared into the neighborhood. Almost immediately she became ill and experienced a constellation of unusual symptoms before being eventually diagnosed with Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks the thyroid gland.

A number of other people who became "infected" at Skinwalker Ranch also began to experience autoimmune disease in one or more family or household members. These autoimmune diseases included Graves' Disease (thyroid), Sjogren's syndrome (salivary and tear glands), Hashimoto Thyroiditis (thyroid), Rheumatoid Arthritis (joints), and Lupus (heart, lung, muscle). Blood dyscrasias, connective tissue and dermatological abnormalities, including those of Systemic Sclerosis, were also diagnosed in this group of experiencers. It is important to note that all of the medical diagnoses were made by at least three MDs and all brain scans and other clinical findings were reviewed independently by more than one board-certified specialist physician.

George Knapp and I have separately interviewed more than 10 security officers who had spent two-week tours of duty on the ranch as a part of the AAWSAP/BAASS program, and each security officer confirmed that they had brought a paranormal infection from Skinwalker Ranch with them. The officers confirmed that they or their partners had experienced poltergeist and other paranormal activity in their homes following their tours on the ranch.

Lacatski himself and his wife experienced a few, but not many, anomalies in their home in the years following his Skinwalker Ranch experience. But DIA official Susanna Ash, who was hired at the Defense Warning Office in January 2011 and sat in the office cubicle at DIA next to Jim Lacatski between February and June 2011, reported that on the night of February 6, 2011, Eddie Ash, Susanna's brother who previously had no experience whatsoever with anomalies, had an escalating series of close encounters with UAPs in rural Mocksville, North Carolina, that continued for months afterwards. Eddie's quiet country home suddenly had large orange UAPs hovering outside at night. Aerial photos of his house were sent to his mobile phone from unknown numbers. And his pet dog once disappeared (through multiple locked doors) while Eddie slept, only to be found in the morning whimpering outside.

After Robert Bigelow sold the Skinwalker Ranch to Utah real estate mogul Brandon Fugal in April 2016, Fugal installed a multidisciplinary team of scientific talent and instrumentation on the property to continue the scientific investigations of the ranch anomalies. Brandon Fugal's team corroborated many of the anomalies experienced by AAWSAP and by National Institute for Discovery Science (NIDS) personnel. In 2020 the History Channel began airing TV documentary episodes entitled "The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch." Many anecdotal reports began emerging regarding individuals on Skinwalker Ranch "bringing something home" with them in the past few years.

The Hitchhiker Effect

This feeling of "bringing something home" and the subsequent person to person transmissibility of paranormal phenomena, some of which can last for years, has been named the Hitchhiker Effect. In an April 2022 interview, Skinwalker Ranch research team member Dr. Jim Segala addressed the Hitchhiker phenomenon: "Over the past five years, it has been our experience that when people interact with the phenomena and do not treat the phenomena with respect, that's when we see a higher rate of the Hitchhiker Syndrome. Symptoms experienced by people range from acute neurological injuries to chronic blood disease. Those who have told us that they have brought home a souvenir often have some type of illness as well as family members. The data again comes from years of tracking and collecting data from those who have come forward."

The deceptively tranquil appearance of Skinwalker Ranch (2008–2010). G. Knapp



(Sinclair, 2022) Segala's description mirrors many of the Hitchhiker symptoms experienced by victims and documented during the AAWSAP program and provides additional details on the medical sequelae of the Hitchhiker Effect.

But the Hitchhiker Effect is not unique to Skinwalker Ranch. The AAWSAP research team found that even close encounters with UFOs in locations unrelated to Skinwalker Ranch produced a version of the Hitchhiker Effect. This was not always the case but did occur especially when the experiencers were followed and regularly interviewed by the AAWSAP team over long periods of time.

For example, biotechnologist Ron Becker and his daughter were travelling outside Bend Oregon in May 2005 when his daughter noticed three blue-colored objects moving randomly in a field close to the highway. The objects quickly flew towards the vehicle, one went in front, one went through the car and flew across the dashboard, and the third entered Ron Becker's shoulder, maneuvered through his thoracic area and exited his shoulder as his horrified daughter watched. Ron Becker subsequently came down with a constellation of medical symptoms.

Becker's daughter, although shocked and disturbed by the incident, was not medically injured. When she returned to the home in Connecticut that she shared with her three college roommates, a paranormal frenzy seemed to erupt in the home with her friends waking up to find dark shadowy humanoid figures crouching over their beds and extensive poltergeist activity in the home, especially heavy footsteps traipsing up and down the stairs at night. Becker or her college friends had never experienced any activity in that home prior to her close encounter with the blue orbs.

Poltergeists and Contagion

Darren W. Ritson's recent thought-provoking book on poltergeists and contagion (Ritson, 2021) depicts evidence for a transmissibility phenomenon that occurred with the infamous South Shields, UK poltergeist case of 2006 and aftermath. The book described in great detail the disturbing effects of a poltergeist that "infested" a home in South Shields, a small village in northeast England during 2006 and 2007. Ritson and his colleague/co-investigator Michael Hallowell recounted many anomalous events, the majority of which overlapped with phenomena that had been reported on Skinwalker Ranch, including "windows opening and shutting repeatedly, appearances of anomalous black shapes, sounds of footsteps in the loft, banging and thumping noises in the bedrooms, people being pushed violently from behind, discarnate voices, objects being moved around."

Ritson goes on to describe "a process whereby the bizarre antics of the poltergeist spread outwards from the home of the principal witnesses and start to affect others around them; extended family members, friends, colleagues and investigators who choose, or accidentally wander into, the arena of metaphysical conflict. Like a communicable disease, the poltergeist phenomenon can attach itself to others." Ritson's words echo the experiences of the AAWSAP investigators on the Skinwalker Ranch in detail. Through delineating multiple

additional cases, Darren Ritson provides further evidence that poltergeist contagion is possibly quite common and underreported.

Previous Evidence of Transmissibility

In 1973, when noted illusionist and psychokinetic practitioner Uri Geller was undergoing a series of tests of his psychic abilities at the prestigious Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), a series of bizarre events began to unfold both in the lab itself and at the homes of the scientists who were conducting the studies. As with Skinwalker Ranch visitors, many of the researchers involved had the highest level of security clearances, including Special Access Program (SAP) clearances that necessitated polygraph testing as well as frequent personality evaluations.

Author Jim Schnabel, in his engaging history of American psychic spies (Schnabel, 1997), recounts the bizarre series of events that unfolded at the lab when scientists began to "measure" Uri Geller's alleged psychic abilities. Writes Schnabel: "Peter Crane and some of the others in the Livermore group quickly found themselves involved in more strangeness than they could handle. In the days and weeks that followed, they began to feel that they were collectively possessed by some kind of tormenting, teasing, hallucination-inducing spirit. They all would be in a laboratory together, setting up some experiment, or one of the fellows and his wife and children would be at home, just sitting around, when suddenly there in the middle of the room would be a weird, hovering, almost comically stereotypical image of a flying saucer... On the other hand, the flying saucer wasn't the only form the Livermore visions took. There were sometimes animals—fantastic animals from the ecstatic lore of shamans—such as the large raven-like birds that were seen traipsing through the yards of several members of the group. One of them appeared briefly to a physicist named Mike Russo and his terrified wife. The two were lying around one morning when suddenly there was this giant bird staring at them from the foot of their bed. After a few weeks of this, Russo and some of the others began seriously to wonder if they were losing their sanity." Other scientists and their families saw orbs and black shadowy forms in their homes.

There are some interesting overlaps between the events at Lawrence Livermore in 1973 and those that occurred at the Axelrod's residence and at the homes of other Skinwalker Ranch visitors some 37 years later. In both, the central "victims" were individuals with highest level clearances and are/were working in senior position levels in several government agencies. In both, an initial "psychic" trigger (Uri Geller to Livermore and Axelrod's or Costigan's visit to the ranch) plunged multiple people, and their families, into a netherworld where high strangeness events unfolded. In both, balls of light presented unexpectedly to family members. In both, bizarre, archetypal, mythological animals and birds manifested. In both, multiple poltergeist-like phenomena affected families. In both, the experiences appeared to be centered near bedrooms, hallways, and backyards of homes involved. In both, black rectangles (Axelrod, Witt) or black cubes (Livermore scientists)

were involved. Intriguingly, physicist Hal Puthoff was a central player in both the Lawrence Livermore and, as an AAWSAP BAASS consultant and contractor, in the Axelrod and other post Skinwalker Ranch incidents.

Infectious Agent Model

During 2020 and 2021 everyone in the world became familiar with the jargon of coronavirus infectious disease modelling. After thousands of newspaper, TV, and digital media reports detailed the first COVID-19 index cases in Washington state, Wuhan, California, and New York, the concept of an index case for an infectious disease became familiar to everyone. Just as the Wuhan Institute of Virology or the wet markets in China may have been the source of the COVID-19 outbreak, could Skinwalker Ranch be the source of an infectious agent of some kind?

The experiences of Axelrod and others have led me to consider an infectious disease model to try to shed some light on the phenomena, as they bore a striking resemblance to the transmission of an infectious agent between individuals. The “symptoms” of the “infection” comprised the eruption of poltergeist and other paranormal events in the immediate environment of the newly infected individual.

Utilizing this terminology, Axelrod was the index case who was first “infected” on Skinwalker Ranch and carried the infectious agent 2,000 miles home to Virginia with him. Within a few days or weeks, the agent had spread from Axelrod to his wife and both his teenage sons, and all three began experiencing a bewildering diversity of anomalies in their home. Within a few more weeks the infectious agent had spread to the neighborhood and infected two teenage friends, probably at school, who lived within a couple of miles of the Axelrod home. It should be noted that the symptoms of infection from Skinwalker Ranch are not respiratory distress or death, as with COVID-19, but rather profoundly altered perceptual environments.

In standard infectious disease parlance, the basic reproduction number (denoted by R_0) is a measure of how transmissible a disease is. It is the average number of people that a single infectious person will infect over the course of their infection. In the “Axelrod outbreak,” the basic reproduction number R_0 could be denoted as 3. Therefore, any study of the putative transmission of the Skinwalker Ranch infectious entity would be very amenable to standard infectious disease modeling. The tools of infectious disease modelling are well established.

It goes without saying that the number of people involved in these observations are too few to draw any firm conclusions, but the metaphor of an infectious disease could be a useful one for future research on the Hitchhiker Effect.

Obviously, in order to drill down into this infectious disease possibility, a much larger epidemiological modeling effort would have to be initiated, one in which every individual and their family members who spent time on Skinwalker Ranch could be followed closely and interviewed every few months over a several year period.

Social Contagion Model

An interesting paper by Ben Green, Thibaut Horel, and Andrew V. Papachristos published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 2017 showed that gunshot violence follows an epidemic-like process of social contagion that is transmitted through networks of people by social interactions. The objective of the study was to evaluate the extent to which the people who will become subjects of gun violence in Chicago can be predicted by modeling gun violence as an epidemic that is transmitted between individuals through social interactions. According to the results, “social contagion” accounted for 63.1% of the 11,123 gunshot violence episodes in Chicago; subjects of gun violence were shot on average 125 days after contact with their “infecter,” the person most responsible for exposing the subject to gunshot violence. Some subjects of gun violence were shot more than once.

The authors write: “Our findings suggest that the diffusion of violence follows an epidemic-like process of social contagion that is transmitted through networks by social interactions.” In other words, the transmission of violence, although not an infectious entity, follows a predictable social contagion model that is amenable to analysis and, subsequently, to intervention.

Regardless of the epidemiological model utilized (infectious agent or social contagion), the central point is that the AAWSAP program on Skinwalker Ranch was the first to unmask a transmission-like phenomenon that was occurring in individuals who visited the ranch, and that this transmission is probably amenable to analysis utilizing standard infectious disease or social contagion modelling. Further, in some cases, the transmission into some households was correlated with the emergence of autoimmune disease in family members. Hence in these post-Skinwalker Ranch contagions, if social contagion is the appropriate modelling template, then social contagion in these cases has biological consequences.

Other Models of Social Contagion

A number of authors have sought to develop or challenge the simple network model of social contagion. Those seeking to develop this model have suggested that a more satisfying model of contagious social behavior requires a more layered account of the nature of social contact (Thompson, T., Personal Communication). Harvard University’s Damon Centola and Cornell University’s Michael Macy (2007) distinguished between “simple” and “complex” social contagions, arguing that the latter requires contact with more than one infected carrier.

British mathematician Iacopo Iacopini and colleagues developed a model that combines stochastic processes of simple contagion and of complex contagion occurring through group interactions in which an individual is simultaneously exposed to multiple sources of contagion (Iacopini et al., 2019). These authors created simulations from contact data from four separate real-world situations: a workplace, a conference, a hospital, and a high school. These higher order interactions of social contagion might eventually be applied to model data from hitchhiker attachments.

Future Research

Following the June 25, 2021, announcement by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) that UFOs are real and may constitute an air safety threat and even a national security problem, much public interest has been focused on what a future program investigating both UFO performance and UFO effects on human beings might look like. During such a study, if additional examples of a Hitchhiker Effect were discovered, several paths for future research could be explored.

An epidemiological infectious agent model could be adopted. Provided the number of cases was sufficiently large in a new study, formally measuring the basic reproduction number (R_0) of the hitchhiker “infections” would be feasible. Such a study could utilize some of the most useful epidemiological parameters defined for COVID (Gallo et al 2020). For example, measurement of time between infection and onset of symptoms (aka incubation period) will be possible. The definition of the contagion’s transmissibility period, the time during which an infected person transmits the infectious entity to other people, would also be achievable. Definition of any illnesses in families, school friends, or neighbors associated with hitchhiker transference would add to the research picture of the transmissibility phenomenon.

The links between biological and social contagion could be explored. Social contagion is similar to biological contagion—both spread through a replication process that is heedless of the consequences for the individual, and if each person transmits to more than one person, the rapid pace of exponential growth creates an epidemic (Bauch and Galvani, 2013). In the Skinwalker Ranch cases cited above, the development of autoimmune disease in several of the families suffering the Hitchhiker Effect was observed by AAWSAP researchers. Whether autoimmune disease development in these families was caused by “hitchhikers” is unknown, although links between stress-related disorders and autoimmune disease are well known (Song et al. 2018).

Future research could also allow us to test various hypotheses on the mechanism involved in the Hitchhiker Effect. The common denominator with people who experience the effects of bringing something home is not respiratory distress, hemorrhagic fever, or other symptoms of viral infection. Alterations in a person’s perceptual environment appears to be the most common manifestation. Symptoms include waking up with black shadow humanoids standing over their beds; various types of poltergeist activity; colored orbs flying through people’s bedrooms and homes at night; apparitions of dead children or adults; unexplained loud noises around the house; and much more.

The Role of Consciousness

Alterations in human perception as a result of being “infected” suggest that some of the new models of human consciousness proposed by luminaries such as philosopher-computer scientist Bernardo Kastrup (Kastrup 2019), University of California Irvine professor Donald Hoffman (Hoffman, 2020), Rice

University professor Jeffrey Kripal (Kripal, 2019), microchip inventor Federico Faggin (Faggin, 2021), University of Virginia professor Edward Kelly (Kelly et al 2015), and stem cell biologist Robert Lanza (Lanza et al. 2020) may be relevant. The proposal that consciousness is “prime” and actually undergirds physical reality and is not emergent from neurochemical trafficking in the brain is fundamental to this new viewpoint.

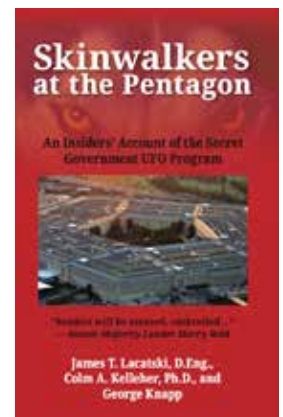
One implication of the new perspective on human consciousness is that the brain may act as a “filter” of consciousness, as proposed by Aldous Huxley (Huxley, 1954). Bernardo Kastrup emphasizes that psychedelics decrease brain activity while the individual paradoxically undergoes extremely intense perceptual activity (Kastrup, 2021). He writes: “...in all cases, the physiological effect of the psychedelic is to reduce brain activity, particularly in the so-called ‘default mode network,’ which is correlated with our ego or sense of individual identity. The phenomenological effect, on the other hand, is one of the richest and most intense experiences a human being can possibly have. If one’s brain is effectively going to sleep during those experiences, where are the experiences then coming from?” Kastrup’s question is a good one, and measurable brain alterations, including quiescence, may be one investigative readout for looking at Hitchhiker Effects on the human brain as a part of a future UFO program.

Once the hitchhiker “attaches” to or infects a new victim, can it play a role in manipulating or inhibiting the normal mode of the brain in filtering out reality in much the same way as psychedelics allegedly reduce the brain’s screening capability? (Luke, 2022; Swanson, 2018)

In a future research program, assuming a sufficiently large number of cases with adequate statistical power, researchers could test and measure the effects of a hitchhiker infection on victims. The brain imaging studies on experiencers and family members conducted as a part of the AAWSAP 2008-2010 program could be significantly expanded to specifically test whether experiencers and family members showed unusual brain activity or structure when compared to controls. Issues of looking at brain biomarkers have been ongoing, and a number of papers have already been submitted for peer reviewed publication (Green, C.C., Personal communication).

The Pentagon’s secret AAWSAP program pioneered a dual track approach of investigating UFO performance and technical characteristics while simultaneously researching effects of UFOs on humans and thus successfully created a new innovative template for future US Government UFO programs. Whether this template is capable of being utilized again remains to be seen.

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