

Prior Exposure and Narrative Framing: Familiarity, Expectation, and Report Construction in Anomalous Encounter Accounts

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Abstract

Anomalous encounter reports are not generated in informational isolation. Observers approach unfamiliar stimuli with varying degrees of prior exposure to cultural narratives, terminology, and interpretive frameworks. This paper examines how familiarity with Bigfoot-related media, concepts, and community discourse shapes the perception, interpretation, and subsequent reporting of anomalous experiences. Drawing on cognitive psychology, memory research, and narrative studies, the analysis distinguishes prior exposure from belief and frames narrative contamination as a structural feature of report construction rather than a defect of honesty. By treating terminology adoption, motif convergence, and retelling effects as measurable variables, the paper establishes

constraints on what encounter reports can support inferentially and proposes methodological practices for documenting exposure without adjudicating credibility.

1. Introduction: Reports Are Not Created in a Vacuum

Encounter reports are often treated as direct reflections of events in the environment, filtered only by sensory limitations and memory. This treatment implicitly assumes that observers approach anomalous experiences without prior interpretive scaffolding. In practice, this assumption is rarely justified. Individuals living in cultures where Bigfoot narratives are widespread encounter unfamiliar stimuli with varying degrees of familiarity with existing explanations, vocabulary, and expectations.

The Holstonia framework treats encounter reports not as transparent windows onto external phenomena, but as constructed narratives emerging from interactions among perception, cognition, memory, and cultural context. Within this framework, *prior exposure* refers to an observer's familiarity with Bigfoot-related narratives, imagery, terminology, and interpretive models before an encounter. *Narrative contamination* refers to the incorporation—conscious or unconscious—of those elements into report construction.

Crucially, neither concept implies fabrication or deception. Instead, they describe well-documented cognitive processes by which humans interpret ambiguous stimuli and organize experiences into communicable form.

Together with analyses of non-encounter events and interpretive escalation, this paper situates encounter reports within a broader framework that accounts for both what is perceived and how those perceptions are later structured.

2. Prior Exposure Is Not Belief

A common analytical error in anomalous research is conflating familiarity with belief. Prior exposure does not require endorsement, conviction, or even interest. Individuals may be aware of Bigfoot narratives through popular culture, regional lore, or incidental media exposure without accepting their validity.

Psychological research distinguishes between *schema availability* and *schema endorsement* (Bartlett, 1932). Schemas provide interpretive templates that shape perception and recall even when individuals explicitly reject them. Thus, an observer who

does not “believe in Bigfoot” may nevertheless possess a well-developed conceptual framework for interpreting ambiguous forest experiences.

Within Holstonia, prior exposure is treated as a **contextual variable**, not a credibility judgment.

3. Sources and Degrees of Prior Exposure

Prior exposure varies in both source and intensity. Relevant categories include:

3.1 Cultural and Regional Lore

Folklore, local stories, and regional identity can introduce Bigfoot-related concepts long before formal interest develops.

3.2 Mass Media

Television programs, documentaries, podcasts, films, and online videos provide recurring motifs, language, and visual expectations.

3.3 Community and Social Networks

Participation in online forums, social media groups, or informal discussion networks increases exposure to shared narratives and interpretive norms.

3.4 Technical or Pseudo-Technical Literature

Exposure to field guides, research claims, or analytical content introduces terminology and causal models that shape later descriptions.

These sources contribute cumulatively to an observer’s interpretive repertoire.

4. Narrative Construction and Memory Reconstruction

Memory is not a passive recording device. Decades of research demonstrate that recall is reconstructive, influenced by schemas, expectations, and post-event information (Loftus, 2005). When individuals recall anomalous experiences, especially those that were ambiguous or emotionally charged, narrative elements are often filled in or stabilized using familiar templates.

Bartlett's early work on memory demonstrated that unfamiliar stimuli are systematically reshaped to fit existing cultural expectations (Bartlett, 1932). In anomalous encounters, this process can result in convergence toward recognizable motifs: upright posture, avoidance behavior, vocalizations, or perceived intelligence.

This convergence does not imply coordination or deception; it reflects shared cognitive constraints.

5. Terminology as a Measurement Artifact

Language is not neutral. The words used to describe an experience shape both perception and interpretation. Terms such as “whoop,” “aggressive,” “charged,” “communicated,” or “shadow figure” are not simple descriptors; they embed assumptions about agency, intent, and causality.

As reports circulate within communities, terminology standardizes. Later reports often adopt earlier vocabulary, creating the appearance of consistency. From an analytical standpoint, such consistency may reflect linguistic convergence rather than independent corroboration.

Within Holstonia, terminology is treated as a **measurement artifact**—useful for categorization, but requiring caution when used as evidence of similarity.

6. Motif Convergence and Pattern Illusion

Repeated motifs across reports are often cited as evidence of an underlying phenomenon. However, psychological research on pattern perception demonstrates that humans are highly sensitive to repeated structures, even when generated by heterogeneous processes (Shermer, 2011).

Motif convergence can arise from:

- shared exposure to narrative templates,
- selective reporting of salient features,
- omission of idiosyncratic details,
- post-event discussion and feedback.

Absent controls for prior exposure, motif similarity cannot be assumed to reflect independent observation.

7. Retelling, Feedback, and Escalation

Reports rarely remain static. Retelling introduces opportunities for elaboration, clarification, and emphasis. Audience reaction—whether validation, skepticism, or curiosity—shapes subsequent versions.

Social psychology demonstrates that repeated retelling increases confidence and coherence while reducing uncertainty, even when accuracy does not improve (Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Over time, ambiguous experiences may become more structured, intentional, and narratively complete.

This process, termed *narrative escalation*, is a normal feature of human communication. Holstonia treats escalation as a variable to be documented, not a flaw to be exposed.

8. Group Dynamics and Shared Interpretation

Group encounters and post-encounter discussion introduce additional layers of narrative convergence. Individuals may align descriptions to maintain social cohesion or resolve uncertainty. Research on group memory shows that collective recall often produces more coherent but less diverse accounts (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

In anomalous research, this can result in:

- harmonized timelines,
- shared interpretation of ambiguous stimuli,
- suppression of dissenting perceptions.

Such effects do not invalidate group reports, but they complicate claims of independence.

9. What Prior Exposure and Narrative Contamination Cannot Tell Us

As with non-encounters, constraints must be explicit.

Prior exposure and narrative contamination cannot:

- determine whether an external phenomenon exists,
- establish deception or sincerity,
- invalidate experiences on their own.

They bound inference by identifying where interpretation may be shaped by non-environmental factors. Treating them as decisive would reproduce the same asymmetry Holstonia seeks to correct.

10. Implications for Documentation and Analysis

Incorporating prior exposure into analysis does not require intrusive questioning or credibility adjudication. Minimal documentation can include:

- general familiarity with Bigfoot-related media,
- prior participation in discussion communities,
- terminology sources when known.

Such information allows analysts to contextualize reports without privileging or dismissing them.

11. Integration with the Encounter Corpus

When combined with non-encounter data, prior exposure variables stabilize interpretation from both directions. Silence constrains over-interpretation of absence; exposure constrains over-interpretation of presence. Together, they transform anecdotal collections into analyzable corpora.

12. Conclusion: Familiarity as Structure

Anomalous encounter reports are shaped not only by what is perceived, but by what is already known, expected, and narratively available. Recognizing prior exposure and narrative contamination as structural features of report construction allows inquiry to proceed without naïveté or cynicism. Constraint, rather than dismissal, is the path to durable analysis.

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