

Common Variables Associated with the Development of Stockholm Syndrome: Some Case Examples

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Abstract: Stockholm Syndrome is a paradoxical psychological experience which both intrigues and often frustrates law enforcement and mental health professionals alike. Much attention has been directed toward understanding and defining the contextual variables associated with the development of Stockholm Syndrome. Since it appears that the formation of Stockholm Syndrome may increase the likelihood of hostage survival, discerning the factors that may encourage its occurrence is a priority for crisis negotiators. The purpose of this paper is to (1) analyze crisis situations using actual case examples in which evidence of Stockholm Syndrome has been reported and (2) examine the variables associated with the development of this phenomenon. Case information was obtained from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS) of the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit. Results of this analysis conclude that some, but not all, factors previously hypothesized as requisite to the development of Stockholm Syndrome find additional support from this case analysis.

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Stockholm Syndrome is a difficult phenomenon for experts to define and explain. Most individuals working in the field of crisis negotiation concur that Stockholm Syndrome is an automatic, often unconscious, emotional response to the trauma of victimization. Although some victims may “think it through,” Stockholm Syndrome is not a rational choice by a victim who consciously decides that the most advantageous behavior in this predicament is to befriend their captor (Strentz, 2004).

Other researchers liken Stockholm Syndrome to the process of “identification with the aggressor.” This concept was originally described in 1936 by Anna Freud as a type of identification summoned by the ego to protect itself against authority figures who have generated anxiety. The purpose of this form of identification is to enable the ego to avoid the wrath and potential punishment of the enemy (Hall, 1954).

Identification with the aggressor is a concept often used to evaluate cases involving domestic violence, or when there is a preexisting relationship between the aggressor and the victim. Hostage-taking is defined as the holding of one or more persons against their will with the actual or implied use of force (Lanceley, 1999), and does not delineate whether the subject and victim are, or were, previously known to each other. However, law enforcement personnel working in the area of crisis negotiation restrict the definition of a hostage experiencing Stockholm Syndrome to include the essential element of no prior relationship between the hostage and the hostage-taker prior to the incident taking place (see discussion by de Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & Van Hasselt, *in press*).

Although there is considerable extant literature on the topic, much controversy remains concerning the factors accounting for this phenomenon. Previous research supported the notion that at least three factors must be present for the syndrome to potentially develop. First, the individual must be held hostage for a significant period of time. Second, the hostage(s) and the hostage-takers must maintain ongoing personal contact (i.e., the hostages are not hooded or isolated in a separate room). And third, the hostage-takers must treat the hostages kindly, or at least not physically abuse or verbally threaten them (de Fabrique *et al.*, *in press*). As the case examples below will demonstrate, these three factors are, in fact, not always necessary for Stockholm Syndrome to develop.

More recently, experts working in the field of crisis negotiations have determined three components that may occur separately or in combination with one another to more clearly define Stockholm Syndrome. These are (1) negative feelings on the part of the hostage toward authorities, (2) positive feelings on the part of the hostage toward the hostage-taker, and (3) positive feelings reciprocated by the hostage-taker toward the hostage (Fuselier, 1999). The case examples provided below attempt to distinguish factors that

may be associated with, and facilitate development of, the phenomenon. Such understanding may have important implications for the peaceful resolution of crisis situations in critical incidents where Stockholm Syndrome is apparent.

METHOD

Procedure

Case study material was obtained from the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS), a post-incident data collection tool which stores historical data from participating law enforcement agencies across the nation on hostage/barricade, suicide, and attempted suicide incidents (Flood, 2003). HOBAS is available to law enforcement personnel and is part of the Law Enforcement Negotiation Support (LENS) system. The FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit of the Critical Incident Response Group is credited with developing and maintaining the HOBAS database.

The accounts presented below are illustrative of the variety and scope of Stockholm Syndrome cases compiled by HOBAS, in which some or all of the Stockholm Syndrome components were present at the time of a resolution. In addition, these accounts include (1) background information (where available) concerning the perpetrator and victim(s) in each event, (2) whether or not physical or verbal harm was inflicted by the hostage-taker(s), (3) the duration of the event, and (4) the manner in which the incident was eventually resolved. These cases are representative of critical incidents requiring a law enforcement response.

Case Examples

Case 1

In the early morning hours of August 30, 2000, two masked gunmen forced their way into a family's home in Gladstone, Missouri, searching for money, valuables, and drugs. Both the 40-year-old and 50-year-old perpetrators had prior histories of violent crime and were using methamphetamines at the time of the incident. One of the family members called 911 from a cell phone, alerting authorities. Police arrived and set up a perimeter around the residence when it became evident that a hostage situation was taking place. When negotiators and tactical teams arrived, the two suspects drove the family's car through the garage door in order to make their escape with a 50-year-old female hostage.

An ensuing car chase traversed two states. During the chase, the suspects shot at the responding officers and attempted to ram police vehicles. The suspects used spray paint on the interior of the car windows to prevent the officers from seeing into the vehicle. The police deployed stop strips which

flattened the tires of the getaway car. The suspects continued to drive the vehicle on its rims until it exited the road, struck a wall, and was completely disabled.

The suspects then held a gun to the woman's head and offered her release in exchange for water, cigarettes, and another getaway car. One of the suspects surrendered to authorities and allowed the release of the female hostage. The other subject refused to give up until eventually heat and exhaustion caused him to surrender approximately seven hours after the incident began.

During the ordeal, the female hostage had been restrained and verbally and physically abused. She was taken from her home and family during the middle of the night, and was terrorized by the events that followed. However, in a post-incident interview with police, she indicated that she did not have ill will toward the perpetrators. In fact, when asked about her feelings regarding them, the woman stated that she, in fact, felt positively toward the hostage-takers, and did not hold negative feelings toward either of them.

Case 2

On February 13, 1997, communication was initiated with law enforcement by a bank security guard in Oakdale, California, who reported that a subject was holding five bank employees hostage. The hostage-taker, a 22-year-old male, was holding the hostages at gunpoint, but stated that he was not robbing the bank, and no one was going to get hurt. Negotiators arrived on the scene and contacted the hostage-taker via telephone. The hostage-taker advised police that the four female hostages and one male hostage were unharmed.

After approximately 40 minutes, the hostage-taker released two of the female hostages in order to deliver a letter that he had written, addressed to the president of the United States. After several telephone contacts with negotiators, the subject agreed to release the remaining three hostages. After their release, the hostage-taker peacefully surrendered without incident.

All of the hostages reported they were not injured in any way, were never mistreated during the incident, were allowed unrestricted movement, and talked freely with the subject. Three of the female hostages reported negative feelings toward the subject. However, the remaining female hostage and the one male hostage indicated in police reports that they were "positively influenced" by the hostage-taker. Similarly, when interviewed, the hostage-taker reported having returned positive feelings toward his hostages.

Case 3

On November 13, 1996, in Columbus, Ohio, a 36-year-old male armed with a handgun, shoulder weapon, and a can of gasoline took three male adults hostage while his adolescent son was present. Negotiators and tactical operators

were contacted to respond to this situation where the hostage-taker had barricaded himself and four others on the 12th floor of a government building. The subject claimed that he was upset over a workers' compensation claim he made, and the way in which the claim was being handled.

Less than an hour after negotiators responded, the subject released his son, who was taken into custody and questioned. It was confirmed that the subject, as well as all three hostages, were unharmed. Negotiators and SWAT team members positioned themselves down the hall on the 12th floor. Negotiations were continuous and two of the hostages were released in exchange for money and a phone call; one hostage remained.

A SWAT officer positioned himself around the corner to establish eye contact with the remaining hostage. Through nonverbal communication, a plan to subdue the hostage-taker was implemented by the SWAT officer and the final hostage. When the signal was given, the hostage seized the firearm while SWAT team members rushed into the room. The hostage-taker was successfully apprehended and there were no injuries to the subject, members of the SWAT team, or the hostage.

Even after the nearly seven-hour standoff, none of the hostages reported physical or verbal harm. Two of the three hostages interviewed by police reported no negative feelings toward the hostage-taker. Rather, the hostages indicated that they experienced positive feelings toward the subject, and the subject returned the sentiment.

Case 4

On July 15, 2000, two male subjects armed with handguns attempted to rob a jewelry store in Monterey Park, California. An employee of the store contacted police after being trapped inside, and indicated that three females and three males had been taken hostage.

It was determined that there was one primary suspect and an accomplice. After about six hours of negotiations, the primary suspect in the robbery agreed to release all hostages and surrender to authorities in exchange for personal assurances made by law enforcement. However, when the primary suspect was about to exit after releasing the hostages, the secondary suspect realized that he would have no hostage to use as a bargaining tool. Consequently, this subject "turned the tables" and took the primary subject as his own hostage. After further negotiations, both suspects surrendered together.

All of the original hostages reported that they were not abused in any way, and were allowed free movement and communication during the incident. Interestingly, when questioned by police about their experience following the incident, five out of six hostages reported negative feelings toward authorities; four out of those five also reported experiencing positive feelings toward the hostage-takers, and described being positively influenced by the suspects in some way.

Case 5

On December 14, 1994, a 26-year-old male (with a history of violent crime, mental illness, and substance abuse) stormed into a Loudonville, New York, school with a rifle and knife, barricading himself, a teacher, and 86 students. Police responded to the scene and the subject immediately released the teacher and two female students who were said to be crying.

Three negotiators were on site and attempted communication through the school's intercom system within the building. In less than five minutes of attempted communication, the hostage-taker fired his rifle as a signal to negotiators. However, communication continued and progress was being made through negotiations while television and pizza was provided for the hostages. Negotiations appeared to be near completion when several students rushed the hostage-taker and overpowered him. During the struggle, one student was shot in the groin/leg area. The hostage-taker suffered a severe laceration to his hand as police entered the building. It was apparent that the hostage-taker was psychologically impaired, as during his arrest he complained that he had a "computer chip implanted in my brain and penis by the government."

Of the 87 students taken hostage, 84 reported symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome. All 84 related that they experienced negative feelings toward law enforcement and positive feelings toward the hostage-taker. When further questioned by police after the incident, the hostage-taker indicated that he also experienced positive feelings toward his hostages. Interestingly, the one hostage who was shot did not report feelings of anger toward the perpetrator; rather, he appeared to align with the hostage-taker.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The above cases illustrate the complexity and mystery that negotiators and mental health professionals encounter when attempting to define and explain the conditions necessary for Stockholm Syndrome. While there appear to be several similarities in some of the cases presented, it is unclear whether one can conclude that the factors previously identified as requisite to the development of Stockholm Syndrome are applicable in the scenarios presented in this analysis.

For example, a factor widely thought to influence the development of Stockholm Syndrome is that the event last a significant length of time (Fuselier, 1999). The primary difficulty with this variable is determining how a "significant length of time" is defined. In the cases in which Stockholm Syndrome occurred, the event's duration did not exceed seven hours. Although this interval must feel excruciatingly long for those individuals held hostage, one must consider other scenarios in which the incident may last days (or weeks) and Stockholm Syndrome does not occur.

The assumption that the hostage-takers must treat the hostages kindly, or at least not physically or verbally abuse them, is also contradicted in this

Table 1: Analysis of case examples

NFTL	PFTS	PFTH	Harm Duration
Case 1	X	X	7 hrs
Case 2	X*	X	40 min
Case 3	X*	X	7 hrs
Case 4	X*	X*	6 hrs
Case 5	X*	X*	NR

NFTL: Negative Feelings Toward Law Enforcement.

PFTS: Positive Feelings Toward Subject.

PFTH: Positive Feelings Toward Hostage-Taker.

Harm: Verbal or Physical Abuse.

Duration: Hours (hrs) or Minutes (min).

NR: Not Reported.

*Reported by only a portion of the hostages.

case examination. In Case 1, the female hostage was not only taken from her home and family during the night by the two hostage-takers, she also reported that they both physically and verbally abused her during the car chase and ensuing standoff with law enforcement. Once again, the notion that the woman was physically abused must be understood. It is unclear if the woman's perception of being physically or verbally abused differs from what police and mental health professionals, who have studied this phenomenon, may have defined as abuse or maltreatment.

One assumption that has been supported in the present cases is that the hostages and the hostage-takers must maintain a reasonable level of interpersonal contact. In all cases, the hostages were free to communicate, and were in close physical proximity to the hostage-takers. Confirmation of this specific factor raises an interesting question as to the influence of the development of a relationship that occurs between the hostage and hostage-taker, from the mere fact that both parties are physically involved in an emotionally charged situation. Perhaps the perception of "us against them" is a state of mind that is more strongly influenced by sustained close physical proximity, rather than the other factors previously thought vital to development of Stockholm Syndrome.

Further, in all cases in which multiple hostages were taken (Cases 2, 3, 4, and 5), Stockholm Syndrome did not develop in all hostages. While the majority of victims did, in fact, report signs of the phenomenon, several denied experiencing feelings and emotions associated with Stockholm Syndrome. In fact, hostages who resisted Stockholm Syndrome were not necessarily the same as those who reported being abused or injured by the hostage-taker. Since it appears in these particular examples that development of Stockholm Syndrome occurred in the majority of hostages, perhaps a better understanding of variables associated with resistance to Stockholm Syndrome would be a worthy direction for future investigation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In several of the cases where numerous hostages were taken, indications of Stockholm Syndrome were not apparent in all of them. An assessment of personality characteristics of hostages involved in the same incidents where different outcomes occurred would be a useful undertaking in this area. Wong (2005) noted that individuals with any combination of the following characteristics are most vulnerable to Stockholm Syndrome: lacking a clear set of core values that define one's identity; lacking a clear sense of personal meaning and purpose for one's life; lacking a track record for overcoming difficulties; lacking a strong personal faith; feeling that one's life is controlled by powerful others; feeling unhappy with one's life circumstances; having a strong need for approval by authority figures; and wishing to be someone else. Such personal characteristics of hostages reporting Stockholm Syndrome, as well as the characteristics of those who have apparently resisted it, should be more closely examined, particularly if professionals working in this area are interested in fostering Stockholm Syndrome as a survival strategy.

Finally, a clarification of terms used when discussing Stockholm Syndrome is needed. The notion that a "significant length of time" and physical or verbal abuse are the same for all individuals makes it difficult to clearly understand the variables generally viewed as necessary for Stockholm Syndrome. Inconsistency in usage of these terms not only effects the manner in which hostages give their accounts of the incident, but also the way in which law enforcement and mental health experts report their findings.

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