

Understanding Stockholm Syndrome

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Men, when they receive good from whence they expect evil, feel the more indebted to their benefactor.

—Niccolo Machiavelli

The world watched as Elizabeth Smart's family, both panicked and heartbroken, desperately cried out to news cameras and begged for their teenager's safe return. Viewers saw haunting images from a home movie that featured a beautiful young girl playing the harp like an angel. The terror of this 14-year-old snatched from her bed captivated the hearts and minds of millions.

So, when authorities rescued and safely returned her home, people questioned how, in 9 months, she could not escape or ask someone—anyone—for help. But, her abductors did not hold her captive, as initially believed. In fact, she walked in public, attended parties, and even refused to reveal her true identity when first approached by police. Perhaps, even more puzzling than her initial reluctance to escape was her



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apparent concern upon rescue about the fate of her captors. “What’s going to happen to them? Are they in trouble?” she asked. When informed by officers that they likely would face punishment, she started to cry and sobbed the whole way to the station.¹

This high-profile kidnapping generated a lot of scrutiny. In attempting to explain her reluctance to be rescued and her compassion toward the perpetrators, some mistakenly have suggested that Elizabeth Smart serves as yet another example of Stockholm syndrome and that her captors must have “brain-washed” her.² However, compassion alone does not define the condition, and this situation did not feature all elements necessary for development to truly

occur. Instead, the case demonstrates the difficulty of gaining a true understanding of the phenomenon. Although scenarios resulting in the condition are rare, crisis negotiators must have a clear understanding of the psychological processes related to Stockholm syndrome to recognize and successfully address hostage and barricade-with-victim situations where it manifests.

STOCKHOLM SYNDROME DEFINED

Background

The term *Stockholm syndrome* was coined after the 1973 robbery of Kreditbanken in Stockholm, Sweden, in which two robbers held four bank employees hostage from August

23 to 28. During this time, the victims shared a vault and became very familiar with their captors—in fact, they wound up emotionally attached and even defended them after the ordeal. Today, people view Stockholm syndrome as a psychological response of a hostage or an individual in a similar situation in which the more dominant person has the power to put the victim’s life in danger. Perpetrators occasionally use this advantage to get victims to comply with their demands.³

Disagreement exists over the identification of which factors characterize incidents that contribute to the development of Stockholm syndrome. Research has suggested that hostages may exhibit the condition in situations that feature captors

who do not abuse the victim, a long duration before resolution, continued contact between the perpetrator and hostage, and a high level of emotion. In fact, experts have concluded that the intensity, not the length of the incident, combined with a lack of physical abuse more likely will create favorable conditions for the development of Stockholm syndrome. Apparently, a strong emotional bond develops between persons who share these life-threatening experiences.

The 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 showcases these factors and demonstrates the variability among the hostages' responses. Shortly after takeoff from Athens, Greece, two terrorists armed with guns stormed the cockpit and demanded the diversion of the flight to Beirut, Lebanon. After capturing the plane, the perpetrators released the women and children. Two sailors and a group of wealthy American businessmen remained on the aircraft, and the captors held them for 10 days. During the incident, the terrorists threatened the hostages with guns to their heads and in their mouths. They also beat one of the victims to death and dumped his body out of the tail section of the plane.

After the eventual rescue, reporters interviewed the captives as they disembarked. When asked to describe the

captors, one hostage stated, "They weren't bad people; they let me eat, they let me sleep, they gave me my life."⁴ However, while one victim did display feelings of compassion for the perpetrators, most of the hostages showed no evidence of Stockholm syndrome. On the contrary, because of the violent manner in which the terrorists treated nearly all of the victims, most of the captives expressed fear that their captors would kill them and understood that their greatest chance for survival lay in the authorities' hands.

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Characteristics

Stockholm syndrome is a paradoxical psychological phenomenon wherein a positive bond between hostage and captor occurs that appears irrational in light of the frightening ordeal endured by the victims. In essence, eventually, the hostage views the perpetrator as giving life by simply not

taking it. Individuals involved in situations resulting in Stockholm syndrome display three characteristics, although these do not always exist together. Law enforcement officers must encourage and tolerate the first two components to, hopefully, induce the third, which preserves life.

- 1) Hostages have positive feelings for their captors.
- 2) Victims show fear, distrust, and anger toward the authorities.
- 3) Perpetrators display positive feelings toward captives as they begin to see them as human beings.

FREQUENCY OF THE PHENOMENON

According to the FBI's Hostage Barricade Database System, which contains data pertaining to over 4,700 reported federal, state, and local hostage/barricade incidents, 73 percent of captives show no evidence of Stockholm syndrome. And, while victims can display negative feelings toward law enforcement (usually out of frustration with the pace of negotiations), most do not develop the condition.⁵

One of the authors, a retired FBI expert, stated that in a career of over 30 years in law enforcement, he rarely witnessed behavior indicative of the development of

Stockholm syndrome.⁶ “I’ve seen the reluctance on the part of some hostages who refuse to come out without the hostage taker less than a handful of times.” His explanation rests on the approximation that nearly 96 percent of hostage and barricade situations in the United States are domestic in nature; involve suicide, attempted suicide, and domestic violence; and include subjects with an existing relationship. He reports that for Stockholm syndrome to occur, the incident must take place between strangers, and the hostage must come to fear and resent law enforcement as much as or more than the perpetrators.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS

Fully comprehending Stockholm syndrome requires an understanding of the process that leads to its development. Most important, this condition does not result from a conscious decision or a rational choice to befriend a captor. From a psychological perspective, the ego, described by Sigmund Freud as the “personality core,” is responsible for providing people with defense mechanisms—ways for them to guard or distance themselves from and remain consciously unaware of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and desires—and also helps individuals avoid hurt and disorganization.⁷



In hostage situations, the healthy ego seeks a means to achieve survival. In cases where Stockholm syndrome has occurred, the captive is in a situation where the captor has stripped nearly all forms of independence and gained control of the victim’s life, as well as basic needs for survival. Some experts say that the hostage regresses to, perhaps, a state of infancy; the captive must cry for food, remain silent, and exist in an extreme state of dependence. In contrast, the perpetrator serves as a mother figure protecting her child from a threatening outside world, including law enforcement’s deadly weapons. The victim then begins a struggle for survival, both relying on and identifying with the captor. Possibly, hostages’ motivation to live outweighs their impulse to hate the person who created their dilemma.⁸

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING

Crisis negotiators no longer consider the bonding that occurs between captive and captor in cases of Stockholm syndrome detrimental. They encourage its development because it improves the chances of hostage survival, despite the fact that it sometimes means authorities no longer can count on the cooperation of victims in working for their release or later prosecuting the perpetrators.⁹ As such, individuals working as crisis negotiators must understand how the phenomenon unfolds, as well as ways to promote the psychological process, thus increasing the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Comprehending how Stockholm syndrome develops requires an understanding of the mind-set of the captive. Hostages have to concentrate

on survival, requiring avoidance of direct, honest reactions to destructive treatment.¹⁰ They must become highly attuned to the pleasure and displeasure reactions of their captors. As a result, victims seem more concerned about the perpetrator's feelings than their own. Hostages are encouraged to develop psychological characteristics pleasing to hostage takers, such as dependency; lack of initiative; and an inability to act, decide, or think. The captive actively devises strategies for staying alive, including denial, attentiveness to the captor's wants, fondness (and fear) of the perpetrator, apprehension toward interference by authorities, and adoption of the hostage taker's perspective. Victims are overwhelmingly grateful to captors for giving them life and focus on their acts of kindness, rather than their brutality.¹¹

Law enforcement and psychology professionals have offered several opinions concerning the development of Stockholm syndrome. However, most agree on the conditions necessary for it to occur.

- A person held in captivity cannot escape and depends on the hostage taker for life. The captor becomes the person in control of the captive's basic needs for survival and the victim's life itself.

- The hostage endures isolation from other people and has only the captor's perspective available. Perpetrators routinely keep information about the outside world's response to their actions from captives to keep them totally dependent.

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- The hostage taker threatens to kill the victim and gives the perception as having the capability to do so. The captive judges it safer to align with the perpetrator, endure the hardship of captivity, and comply with the captor than to resist and face murder.
- The captive sees the perpetrator as showing some degree of kindness. Kindness serves as the cornerstone of Stockholm

syndrome; the condition will not develop unless the captor exhibits it in some form toward the hostage. However, captives often misinterpret a lack of abuse as kindness and may develop feelings of appreciation for this perceived benevolence. If the captor is purely evil and abusive, the hostage will respond with hatred. But, if perpetrators show some kindness, victims will submerge the anger they feel in response to the terror and concentrate on the captors' "good side" to protect themselves.¹²

HUMANIZATION OF THE CAPTIVE

While many experts consider encouraging the development of Stockholm syndrome to increase hostage survival difficult, crisis negotiators can attempt to humanize the captive in the mind of the perpetrator, thereby stimulating the emergence of the critical, third characteristic in the hostage taker—positive feelings toward the captive. To this end, determining the number of people involved, as well as their names, is paramount.

Another way negotiators can attempt to personalize the hostage is to ask the subject to pass on a personal message to the victim (e.g., "Tell Mark that his children love him very much

and will be there to meet him when he comes out.”). This type of dialogue reminds the perpetrator of the hostage’s name and that the victim is a real person with a family. It also inserts a suggestibility statement (“when he comes out”) that implies a peaceful resolution.

Trying to initiate Stockholm syndrome in the perpetrator involves a delicate blend of personalizing captives without overhauling them. “Most hostage takers want it to be all about them. If the negotiator asks too many questions about the hostages, he may begin to feel ignored and discounted. If you want to solve the hostage’s problems, you need to solve the hostage taker’s problems.”¹³ To strike the balance necessary for successful negotiations, asking about the welfare of the captor first, and the captive later, is key.

Using those simple strategies may assist in formulating a bond between the victim and perpetrator. That being said, law enforcement personnel must be aware that although they are attempting to maintain the “balancing act” of increasing rapport with the hostage taker and influencing the safety of the hostages, the ultimate goal is to peacefully resolve the crisis for all involved. If achieving that result involves manipulating hostage takers’ belief that

the focus remains on them, then negotiators must be willing to understand the rationale behind the maneuver and learn the skills necessary to employ it.

CONCLUSION

The subject of Stockholm syndrome, fueled, in part, by a number of high-profile cases, has generated a lot of discussion and opinions. Many people find the phenomenon as difficult to understand as it is fascinating.

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Although, at first, this psychological process may appear complex and uncontrollable, further exploration with those experienced in the area of crisis negotiation revealed that the condition and its effects can serve as a useful tool in successful outcomes. In understanding the basis behind the mental state and behavior of both the hostage taker and the captive, law enforcement agencies can place Stockholm syndrome in the

appropriate perspective and see it as a catalyst in improving the training of hostage negotiators and encouraging peaceful resolutions. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Maggie Haberman and Jeane MacIntosh, *Held Captive: The Kidnapping and Rescue of Elizabeth Smart* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 2003).

² Paul Wong, “Elizabeth Smart and Stockholm Syndrome”; retrieved from http://www.meaning.ca/articles/stockholm_syndrome.htm.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm_syndrome

⁴ Pete Williams, “Twenty Years Later, Stethems Still Seek Justice”; retrieved from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8219264>.

⁵ G. Dwayne Fuselier, “Placing the Stockholm Syndrome in Perspective,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1999, 22-25.

⁶ Stephen J. Romano served as chief of the Crisis Negotiation Unit of the Critical Incident Response Group at the FBI Academy.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id: The Standard Edition* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 1960).

⁸ Thomas Strentz, “Law Enforcement Policy and Ego Defenses of the Hostage,” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, April 1979, 2-12.

⁹ Edna Rawlings, Dee Graham, and Roberta Rigsby, *Loving to Survive: Sexual Terror, Men’s Violence, and Women’s Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Anne Jones, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Rape Trauma Syndrome, and Battering”; retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/new/victimpow/student/postram.htm>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Supra note 6.