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Terrorism, Hostages, and Stockholm Syndrome

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Abstract. This article critiques the construct of Stockholm syndrome as a viable explanation of hostage psychology in the context of a terrorist operation.

The construct of Stockholm syndrome was first conceived as an explanation of psychological phenomena related to the four hostages of a 1973 bank robbery at the Sveriges Kreditbank in Stockholm, Sweden. The hostages were bank employees who were held in a small vault for about five-and-one-half days. Upon their rescue, and in subsequent analogous cases, they and other hostages exhibited behaviors that seemed unexpected to legal authorities, many analysts, and recipients of information about the hostage taking and its aftermath—viz., they seemed to profess some degree of sympathy for their captors, confessed that during the ordeal they feared harm at the hands of potential rescuers, and (in some cases) expressed willingness to testify in the defense of their captors or even to help raise money for their captors' defense. These behaviors are contrasted with what was expected—viz., the expression of negative attributions towards their captors, a retrospective accounting of fear of harm at the hands of their captors, and behaviors contributing to the successful prosecution, conviction, and punishment of their captors.

A number of psychological explanations have been advanced to explain that which was unexpected. One is the psychodynamic gambit of an identification with the aggressor wherein someone in an inferior position unknowingly takes on some aspects of an individual who has a superior position (and, often, control) relative to the individual with inferior status. This defense mechanism affords the inferior individual—because of newly acquired and more powerful identify elements—less inferiority than some objective assessment might yield. Other explanations include the conscious intention to act compliantly to maximize the probability that captors will not cause harm; the logical fear that rescuers can inadvertently harm captors or will act according to a calculus that a few hostage casualties are politically, operationally, and ethically acceptable; the logical fear that a failed rescue mission may lead to captors' retaliatory violence; the reasonable observation that as time goes by captors may be seen as multidimensional individuals; and the possibility that as time goes by a more primitive defense mechanism may be effected wherein the precipitating course of events is actually denied as if they never occurred and the whole situation is relabeled as if the captors and hostages are in a situation together against legal or governmental representatives. This denial may seem salutary in that it allows hostages to be with captors as one team against The Other—rescuers—as opposed to being with The Other—captors—with allies only on the outside.

These explanations as putative phenomena seem reasonable enough that one might ask why they are unexpected as opposed to expected. This is especially the case because there is ample behavioral science research to suggest that an intensive taking on of intrapsychic and external behaviors may actually lead to long-term psychological change—a founding premise of cognitive-behavior therapy (cf. Kazantzis, 2003). However, the most parsimonious explanation may be that hostages should accept captors' psychology—whether as supporting so-called non-political crime such as bank robbery or political violence as exemplified in terrorism. This explanation endangers the legitimacy of a society's power structure and the access to power of a social elite but may be identified often enough. For

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example, after farmers were taken hostage in Kashmir by terrorists whom were later killed by the authorities, one released hostage stated "They [the hostage takers] did the right thing...Kashmiris want freedom from India" (Rohde, 2003).

The Stockholm syndrome, then, may as easily yield another unexpected result. It is the victims (hostages) of a society seen as unjust by the captors whose Stockholm experience is one of normality and health. It is those who support the injustice (through ordering potentially lethal means or risking their own lives if necessary to prevent or end a hostage situation) who are the victims of a syndrome. Whether in Iraq or in any locus of aviation throughout the world, expecting the gratitude of hostages may be a prescription for counterterrorist disaster (cf. Crenmiter et al., 1997; Slatkin, 1998). (See Crenmiter, D.; Crocq, L.; Louville, P.; & Batista, G. (1997). Posttraumatic reactions of hostages after an aircraft hijacking. *Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease*, 185, 344-346; Kazantzis, N. (2003). Therapist competence in cognitive-behavioural therapies: Review of the contemporary empirical evidence. *Behaviour Change*, 20, 1-12; Mackey, T.M. (1997). Reverse Stockholm Syndrome in Pedro y el capitan: Paradigm for the cycle of authoritarianism in Latin America. *Literature & Psychology*, 43, 1-15; Slatkin, A.A. (1998). The Stockholm syndrome and situational factors related to its development. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences & Engineering*, 58(7-B) 3970.)