



# Psychology in pathology: Stockholm syndrome

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## Abstract

Stockholm syndrome is a term used to describe the positive association which a person develops for their captors and abusers. A person can develop Stockholm syndrome when they experience a threat to their physical or psychological well being. Stockholm syndrome is a 'contested illness' due to doubt about the legitimacy of the condition. Formation of emotional bonds between captor and captive is considered irrational in light of danger or risk endured by the victims. Stockholm syndrome has never been included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual or DSM mainly due to lack of consistent body of academic research. This research paper aims to review the evidence of Stockholm syndrome.

Key Words: Stockholm syndrome, Psychological Distress, captivity.

## Introduction

Stockholm syndrome is a condition in which hostages develop a psychological bond with their captors during captivity. It is a kind of a psychological response wherein a captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors as well as with their agenda and demands. Stockholm syndrome results from a rather specific set of circumstances, namely, the power imbalances contained in hostage- taking, kidnapping and abusive relationships.

The syndrome, named by Nils Bejerot, a psychiatrist, is derived from a botched bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden. In August 1973, four employees of Severiges Kreditbank were held hostage in the bank vault for six days. During this

time a seemingly bizarre bond developed between captives and captors. The hostages defended the captor after being released and would not agree to testify in court against them. There are four basic factors that characterize Stockholm syndrome:

- A hostage's development of positive feelings toward the captor.
- No previous relationship between hostage and captor.
- A refusal by hostages to cooperate with police forces and other government authorities.
- A hostage's belief in the humanity of the captor, ceasing to perceive them as a threat when the victim holds the same value as an aggressor.

There are certain physical and psychological effects of Stockholm syndrome.

- Cognitive: Confusion, blurred memory, delusion and recurring flashbacks.
- Emotional: Lack of feeling of fear, helplessness, hopelessness, aggression, depression, guilt; dependence on captor.
- Development of Post Traumatic Stress disorder.
- Social: Anxiety, irritability, cautiousness and estrangement.
- Physical: Increase in effects of pre-existing conditions, development of health conditions due to positive restriction from food or sleep and exposure to outdoors.

Many researchers, psychologists and criminologists, do not fully understand Stockholm syndrome. However experts believe that Stockholm syndrome can develop when:

- The captor treats their victims humanely.
- The captives and captors have significant face to face interaction which provides opportunities to bond with one another.
- The captives feel that law enforcement personnel are not doing their jobs well enough.
- A captive thinks that the police and other authorities do not have interest at heart.

### **Psychological Explanation of Stockholm syndrome:**

Ronald Fairbairn has given a psychological model to explain Stockholm syndrome. In his research he has explained this phenomenon by giving a hypothetical example of abused children. According to Ronald, the abused children become deeply attached to their abusers. He saw that lack of love, chronic indifference and abuse led to the counter

intuitive emotional attachment to the very parent who was abusing them. The child becomes concerned for the abuser's welfare because their developmental progress hinges upon the whims, moods and emotional state of the abusive parent.

The first way that the child protects themselves is by using the greatest reality altering defense that humans have at their disposal- disassociation. The more frequent the abuse, the more frequently disassociation is required and the larger and larger the number of intolerable memories are forced into the unconscious. Once wedged in their unconscious, the child cannot

remember the horrifying incidents that they previously experienced.

The child not only disassociates memories of abusive parents, but also memories of themselves in those anxiety filled encounters with their rejecting parents. Over time, these memories of themselves in relationship to their rejecting parent blend and form internal representation. The process of disassociation of the memories of the self and of the parent is called "Splitting of the

Ego".

Once the child has split off memories of abuse, they create an illusion for themselves that they are living in a safe environment. The psychological mechanism begins when the child selectively takes those few moments of attention that has been shown to them by their parents and magnifies them and creates a "Better parent". The child holds a view that somewhere in their parent's heart there is a hidden storehouse of love. The splitting defense prevents the integration of good and

bad object images into a single ambivalent object.

Explaining the Stockholm syndrome, psychologists believe that hostages face the same environment as abused children; that is their lives are absolutely dependent upon the good will of their captors, who had unlimited power over their lives. Their captors were far more important to them than were police who were a threat to all of them. Fairbairn's model assumes that the

captives used the splitting defense to abolish the most terrorizing aspects of their captivity, in order to keep from breaking down into an absolute state of anxiety. One of the primary reasons for keeping horrifying memories in the unconscious was because of the emotional disruption

caused when they're-experienced.

Another psychological explanation of Stockholm syndrome is LOVE to survive given by Dee Graham (1994), she claimed that it is a group or collective response to trauma rather than individual reactions. Constant fear drives captives

to perform actions that they know will be pleasing to avoid emotional, physical or sexual assault. According to Graham Stockholm

syndrome may be more likely to occur under the following four conditions:

- victims feel perceived threats to their survival at the hands of their captors.
- victims perceive small kindness coming from the captors such as receiving food or not getting hurt.
- victims are isolated from perspectives other than those of the captors.
- victims feel they can't escape from their situation.

One possible explanation for how the syndrome develops is that, at first, the Hostage takers may threaten to kill the victims, which establishes fear. But if the captors didn't harm the victims, The

hostages made them feel gratitude for the small kindness.

Hostages also learn that, in order to survive they must become attuned to the reactions of their captors and develop psychological traits that please those individuals, such as dependency and compliance. Experts have speculated that it's the intensity of the dramatic incident along with a lack of physical abuse toward victims, Despite the victim's fear of its occurrence, that creates a climate conducive to Stockholm syndrome, according to a 2007 FBI law enforcement bulletin. Hostage Negotiators mainly encourage the development of the syndrome, because they believe victims may have a better chance of surviving if the Hostage takers develop some concern for

their hostages welfare.

The present research paper aims to systematically review the existing published literature on Stockholm syndrome and describe and analyze psychological diagnostic criteria. In spite of psychological explanations, mental health experts do not recognize Stockholm syndrome as an official mental health disorder. As a result, it is not listed in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders (DSM-5).

## Review of Research Literature

In a study conducted by Mary Namnyak, N.Tufton (2008), it was concluded that there is little published academic research on Stockholm syndrome. Although study of media reports reveal

similarities between well publicized cases. This may be due to reporting and publication bias.

Celia Jameson (2010) discusses key work on the development of the Stockholm syndrome and psychological explanation for the development of a bond between hostage taker and hostage in hijack and siege situations within this work. Stockholm syndrome is explained in part as an unconscious identification, but is also regarded as a coping strategy which can be understood as a

form of adaptive behavior, providing hope for the victim in an otherwise hopeless situation.

Ian K Mc Kenzie (2004) is of the opinion that since the identification of a grouping of signs and symptoms, labeled as the Stockholm syndrome, the label has been used as a cover. All shorthand devices by journalists and many academicians seeking to simplify complex human behavior. There is something more to explain in the bonding which occurs in some hostage incidents is

reduced to friendship and many of the associated symptoms are ignored.

Nathalie De Fabrique (2007) states that Stockholm syndrome is 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.

Amma Ahmad (2018) studied intimate partner violence, physical and psychological effects. Psychological distress is considered as a natural consequence of intimate partner violence. The analyses of the study revealed that psychological damage fully mediated and love dependency

partially mediated the effect of violence on psychological distress.

Favaro et al (2000) concluded that Stockholm syndrome is an indicator of severity of the experience, linked to isolation and dehumanization. No correlation with development of PTSD was found.

Graham et al (1995) stated that strong states of arousal, caused by fear, may be misinterpreted as attraction (bonding). By labeling feelings of love, it provides hope and therefore possible routes of escape. Length of the time in relationship both before and after abuse started, relates to likelihood of development of Stockholm syndrome.

Wesselus and De Sarno (1985) conducted a structured interview and concluded that only one out of six hostages developed Stockholm syndrome. This hostage had more positive contact with the hostage taker.

Robert Harnischmacher, Josef Muther (1987) studied that Stockholm syndrome seems to be an automatic, probably, unconscious emotional response to the traumatic experience of being a victim. It affects hostage and hostage taker alike and serves to unite both, being victims of the siege environment, against outsiders.

### **Discussion:**

Stockholm syndrome isn't a psychological diagnosis; it is a way of understanding the emotional response that some people have towards a captor or abuser. The DSM -5 is widely used as the classification system for psychological disorders by the American Psychiatric Association. Stockholm syndrome has not historically appeared in the manual as many believe it falls under trauma bonding or PTSD. There is no consensus about the correct clarification. In addition there is no extensive body of research to solve the argument. The majority of the literature is based on case reports with little reference to how Stockholm syndrome was diagnosed.

Many review studies conclude that this syndrome is a rare occurrence. Furthermore, this review was unable to identify any studies that validate Stockholm syndrome. The question whether this term is entirely fabricated by the media so that the behavior of the captor and captive can be assimilated in the society or there is distinct phenomenology of a psychiatric syndrome still remains unanswered.

In summary, a systematic literature review has identified large gaps in research in Stockholm syndrome. The term Stockholm syndrome has yet not received comprehensive assessment and validating criteria.

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