Stockholm Syndrome

People are continuously amazed by their own psychological conditions and reactions. People are also continuously perplexed by how others react in a stressful situation. It’s especially difficult for some to understand how intelligent and well-grounded individuals fall prey to cults, find themselves in an abusive relationship that they just can’t walk away from or fall in love with their kidnapper. While there may never be an exact explanation for these situations one thing that seems to tie them all together is the Stockholm Syndrome. According to medical-dictionary.com Stockholm Syndrome is “a phenomenon in which a hostage begins to identify with and grow sympathetic to his or her captor (web).” How can a kidnapping or terrorist hostage become sympathetic to their captor? It could be that they depend on their captor for survival, or maybe they sympathize with their cause.

Stockholm Syndrome takes its name from a botched bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden on August 23, 1973. Prison escapees Jan-Erik Olsson and Clark Olofsson entered the bank blasting machine guns and took four bank employees (three women and one man) hostage in the bank vault for the next five and a half days. During their
time together the hostages bonded with their captors. They sympathized with their captors and tried to thwart rescue attempts. Upon release the hostage hugged the fugitives and declared their loyalty to them. The victims tried to save their captors from harsh sentencing by raising money for their legal defense and refusing to testify against them. It is even rumored that one of the hostages became engaged to one of the captors (Encyclopedia.com).

Stockholm syndrome is a complex reaction to a terrifying situation and experts do not agree on why some people are more susceptible to developing it than others. The disagreement in the medical and scientific fields may be due to the fact that there is no way to test theories about the syndrome in a controlled environment because it is unethical to test it on humans. As a result, all the data comes from actual hostage events and information sometimes differs considerably from one hostage to another because each person views the situation from a different perspective and human memory recall is not always reliable in traumatic situations.

Symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome are easy to identify because the captives will have admiration for their captors, resist rescue attempts, defend captors, refuse to runaway, refuse to testify against captors, or try to please captors (PrimeHealthChannel).

The exact reasoning for this psychological phenomenon may not ever be completely understood, but over the years criminologists and psychiatrists have been able to outline several causes for Stockholm Syndrome: 1) hostages are grateful to their
captors for sparing their life, 2) captors treat their victims in a sympathetic manner by providing food, water, and a good living environment, 3) captives are isolated from the outside world, 4) captives develop a physical or emotional attachment to their abductors from living with them for an extended period of time, 5) the captive begins to continuously please the captor, and 6) the captive develop a dependency on their captors for survival (PrimeHealthChannel).

A perfect example of Stockholm Syndrome where the captive not only sympathized with her captors, but also started to fight for their cause was the case of Patty Hearst. Hearst was kidnapped from her Berkeley, CA apartment on February 4, 1974 by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a left-winged urban guerrilla group. SLA’s plan was to swap Hearst for some jailed SLA members, when that plan was rejected they made Hearst’s father pay millions of dollars to feed the poor in the California Bay Area. Heart’s father did as he was requested, but they still refused to release Hearst. Hearst claimed she was coerced, brainwashed, humiliated, and confined to a closet during her time with SLA, but on April 3, 1974 she announced she was joining the SLA and has changed her name to “Tania”. On April 15, 1974 Hearst was photographed wielding a M1 during a bank robbery. A warrant was issued for her arrest in 1975 for armed robbery and when she was booked in jail she listed “Urban Guerilla” as her occupation, and remained faithful to SLA (biography.com).

It’s fascinating to me that Patty Hearst would take up arms with a violent group that extorted money from her family, abused and humiliated her, and found it necessary to carry guns, use extreme violence, and rob banks all in the name of helping
the poor. I was amazed that it took less than two months to completely break her and make her change her beliefs. She went from an heiress, socialite, and actress, to a gun wielding bank robber in two months.

I’m sure some people are more susceptible to Stockholm Syndrome than others and I’m certain Hearst had never been exposed to that kind of life or experienced poverty and hunger on any level so it shocked her to her very core. Combined with the humiliation she endured and the confinement it was just more than she could handle and those two months probably felt like an eternity to her.

The case of Elizabeth Smart is quite a bit different than Hearst, but it does have a familiar ring. Elizabeth Smart was abducted from her home in Salt Lake City, UT on June 5, 2002; she was 14-years old. Smart was abducted by a man who had done some handyman work at her house. She was held captive for nine months. She was found alive on March 12, 2003 only 18 miles from her house. It is unclear why the teen didn’t try escaping some specialist believe it was a form of Stockholm Syndrome. Alan Hilfer, Ph.D., child psychologist at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, NY, states that Smart was threatened to the point that she just became passive and compliant for fear that her captor would kill her, abduct her sister, hurt her family, or all of the above. Hilfer goes on to add that he believes her actions were a kind of survival tactic she made unconsciously (WebMD).

Elizabeth Smart was able to do something that a lot of victims in these types of situations could never do. She was allowed to confront her abductor and even though
he wouldn’t look her in the eye she was able to tell him how she felt. I’m sure he wouldn’t look at her because he was too much of a coward to face her.

One of the most troubling kidnapping cases I researched was that of Natascha Kampusch’s. Kampusch was 10 years old when she was abducted on March 2, 1998 in Austria. She was held in a hidden, windowless cellar for more than 8 years. At first she was not allowed to come out of the cellar at all, but eventually she gained the trust of her captor and was slowly granted more and more time out. She was eventually allowed to work outside and one day while her captor was distracted on the phone she ran away. Later Kampusch was told that her captor killed himself when he discovered she had fled and Kampusch cried inconsolably. She admitted that her captor did some cruel and unspeakable things to her but, for the most part he treated her well and she felt sorry for him. Kampusch denies that she has any form of Stockholm Syndrome (Bates).

Natascha Kampusch’s story is the most fascinating of all. She not only became attached to her captor, she empathized with him, felt sorry for him, and even defended him upon his death. She denies any sign of Stockholm Syndrome, but according to the books, she’s got about every symptom, except for the fact that eventually she ran away.

Before I started researching Stockholm Syndrome I thought I knew exactly what I would do in any kind of hostile situation. I never thought for one second that I would empathize with my captor in anyway. I was sure that I would fight anyone who took
me away from my family tooth and nail, but your instincts to survive take over. The brain is an amazing thing. It will take your own conscious thoughts out of the equation and go on auto pilot to survive.

Stockholm Syndrome is not just restricted to kidnapping victims. It can also be found in family, romantic, and interpersonal relationships. Stockholm Syndrome is not just caused by terrorists and kidnappers. It can also be caused by a boyfriend or girlfriend, father or mother, or husband or wife. Abused children, battered spouses, prisoners of war, cult victims, incest victims, or anyone in a controlling or intimidating relationship may be diagnosed with Stockholm Syndrome.

Since Stockholm syndrome initially starts with the captive identifying with the captors with the belief if one cooperates they won't get hurt, then the captive realizes that if any help is too come to them it must first come within, as the captors have little to lose. Over time long term captivity builds increasing attachments allowing the captives to become familiar with their captors aspirations and in some cases identifying with them out of desperation. So, without the initial immediate danger, can this process apply to a cult dynamic? According to Morris A Inch, a professor emeritus of biblical studies at Wheaton College it can.

Professor Inch states in his article, "Stockholm Syndrome & the Cult Dynamic”, that even without an immediate danger of life itself, the cult has already stressed that some sort of threat or crisis is coming. Then once the attention of their target is gained the cult leader will initiate a role of importance in his or her cult victim’s life. The cult
will begin to isolate the convert from family and friends until the cult victim is only exposed to the cult and the cult beliefs. Any pain the cult victim endures from the loss of family and friends is met with an outpouring of support from the cult. When one is saved from a cult either because the group has broken up or a loved one has stepped in cult victims are treated much like hostage victims because they both have been isolated from the outside world and the only information given to them is from their captors and often not the truth (Inch).

In cases where Stockholm Syndrome has occurred the captive is in a situation where he or she has been stripped of all forms of individuality, his or her families have been killed or threatened, and the captor has gained entire control of his or her life. The very survival of the captive is dependent on the captor; as a result the captive is grateful for the life given to them simply because they haven’t been killed. The captive is entirely at the mercy of the captor.

There is one more aspect of Stockholm Syndrome I want to address. That is the situation of an abusive relationship in which the abused does not see anyway of escaping their abuser. This may be because the abused depends on the abuser’s income for food and shelter, the abused doesn’t know of any place to go to, or the abused is fearful the abuser will take out frustrations on other loved ones.

Abusive relationships are often controlling and once again we are reminded of the basic foundations of Stockholm Syndrome. The abuser will often isolate the abused and limit the amount of outside contact to a minimum. The consequences for
disobedience will be made clear, as will the consequences for trying to flee. The victim may feel constantly fearful of saying or doing anything that will cause a violent or intimidating outburst. The victim will begin to see things in the abuser’s perspective. They will try to avoid outbursts by trying to make the abuser happy. They will thwart any problems before they reach the abuser, act or dress how the abuser wants them to, and avoid anything or anyone in their own lives that may cause a problem (Joseph M. Carver).

The abused takes on the abusers perspective as a means of survival. If the abused can understand what causes the abuser to explode with violence then he or she has a chance of avoiding the abuse. This technique can become so intense that the victim will often lash out at anyone who tries to intervene in their relationship to help them. The abused knows that the abuser already has anger for anyone who is trying to help them, so in an attempt to protect their family and friends the abused will often push them away (Joseph M. Carver).

In severe cases the victim feels like the abuse is their fault and in cases where the abuser gets arrested the abused feels like they are the ones who caused the arrest. There are actually cases where mothers have allowed their children to be taken into protective custody rather then leave the relationship. In these desperate cases once the children have been removed the mother feels less stress because the children are no longer at risk of emotional or physical harm from the abuser (Joseph M. Carver).
As with any hostage situation the victims of domestic violence often have the perceived inability to escape. It’s not just a matter of living together often there are other factors involved such as financial issues or legal issues. Abusers may also use threats of harming themselves or others to guilt the abused into staying in the relationship.

I think Dr. Carver said it best when he said: “Stockholm Syndrome produces an unhealthy bond with the controller and the abused. It is the reason many victims continue to support an abuser after the relationship is over. It is also the reason they continue to see ‘the good side’ of an abusive individual and appear sympathetic to someone who has mentally and sometimes physically abused them (Joseph M. Carver).” There simply are no winners in domestic violence.

As I have outlined in this paper Stockholm Syndrome can come from several situations, it may be active in kidnapping situations, abusive relationships, cults, or any other unusual group that isolates one from their families. In some cases the abuser or controller may actually be a group or some other type of organization.

The treatment of Stockholm Syndrome is often a combination of medications (usually for short term sleep disturbances) and psychotherapy. Many people fully recover from Stockholm Syndrome, but there are many variables that decide how long recovery will take. Such as, the type of hostage situation and the length of time the individual had to endure it. It is also dependent on the type of support received once
rescued. With professional guidance and loving support one can overcome Stockholm Syndrome in time (PrimeHealthChannel).

Stockholm Syndrome remains a mystery to all of us. Some say it’s a fabricated disorder, others say it’s the worse thing one can experience. I believe it’s real. When someone is taken from their family, stripped of all that they are and all that they know and forced to be in a situation where they have to depend on another individual for their very life it has to cause some kind of damage to ones psyche. It may even permanently destroy ones will to live. I believe that there are factors that make some people more susceptible to “Stockholm Syndrome” than others, ones core beliefs, faith, and will has to be iron strong. But, I understand every situation is different and the survival and wellbeing of the captive is ultimately up to the captor.
Works Cited


