The Anomaly of Captivity: Comprehending Stockholm Syndrome, Its Origins, and Its Consequences

Introduction

While many psychological conditions are present in various types of entertainment media, very few are as commonly used and glamorized as Stockholm Syndrome. From children’s movies to adult literature, Stockholm Syndrome is an undoubtedly popular choice when a creator wishes to add a darker element to their story without making it too disturbing for audiences. Unfortunately, due to its commonness and potential in more “romantic” situations, Stockholm Syndrome is often misrepresented in ways that can be harmful to anyone wanting to truly learn more about it. In an attempt to make the affliction seem more light-hearted and less debilitating, it is often watered down, and even made to seem charming in some instances. In order to truly understand this curious phenomenon, let’s start at the beginning.

The Emergence of Stockholm Syndrome

Stockholm Syndrome was named in 1973 after the populous capital of Sweden, the city in which the first documented case of this phenomenon occurred. On August 23rd, 1973, an escaped convict by the name of Jan-Erik Olsson walked into the Sveriges Kreditbanken in Norrmalmstorg Square, armed with a submachine gun and a plan, and made history in a way that has baffled psychologists ever since. Olsson took a total of four employees of the bank hostage, demanding over $700,000 in Swedish and foreign currency, a getaway car, and the release of Clark Olofsson, a friend of Olsson’s who was being held at a prison in Norrköping, Sweden. After only hours Olofsson was released and brought to Olsson along with the money and a blue Ford Mustang, filled with gas and ready to aid the men in their escape from the authorities. Though Olsson was given everything he had asked for, he refused to release the hostages, demanding that he be able to take them with him to ensure his safe passage away from the police. The authorities refused and as a result, the hostages and their captors remained tucked inside the bank vault for six days. While the robbery and hostage situation itself could be news enough to garner attention, what surprised everyone was what was happening inside the vault. Throughout the six-day standoff, Olsson was, reportedly, oddly kind, and sympathetic with the hostages, going as far as to cover one of the women, Kristin Enmark, with a jacket whenever she got cold, and encouraging a distressed Brigitta Lundblad to try calling her family again when she was unable to reach them. The one male captive even described Olsson as an “emergency God” (Safstrom) when describing his captor. It is unclear why Olsson treated them this way, or if he was aware of the effects that his behavior would have, though even he seemed surprised by what came next. After a long six days, the bank vault was flooded with teargas, flushing out the convicts who surrendered soon after. The now-freed hostages were oddly mistrusting of the police and even protected their captors, refusing to walk out of the bank without them, concerned that the police would shoot Olsson and Olofsson if they were separated. This behavior was, of course, extremely odd and confused the public as well as the captives themselves who wondered why they didn’t feel negatively toward these people who had kept them locked away for nearly a week. So why didn’t they? Why were they so bonded with these people who took them hostage?

Symptoms and Requirements

The APA (American Psychiatric Association) does not formally recognize Stockholm Syndrome as an illness or ailment, but psychologists have labeled it as an unofficial condition. Though there is no official list of symptoms and requirements as one cannot truly be diagnosed with Stockholm Syndrome, behaviors have been noted as pertaining to it and being caused by this condition. Behaviors such as positive feelings toward the captors or abusers, sympathy for their captors’ beliefs and behavior, and negative feelings toward police or other authority figures have all been found to be indicators of Stockholm Syndrome. While its uniqueness as a condition is part of what makes Stockholm Syndrome so baffling many traits closely link it with a psychological ailment that has faced similar issues with not only its portrayal in media but also its acceptance as a real psychiatric disease, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Difficulty relaxing, anxiousness, distrustfulness, flashbacks, and trouble concentrating are all symptoms of PTSD that have also been observed in individuals struggling with Stockholm Syndrome. As of now, there are no official criteria to determine whether or not someone has Stockholm Syndrome and while there are several behaviors that psychologists agree are linked to the condition there are also several differing beliefs on circumstances that lead to the development of Stockholm syndrome, for example, some believe that in order for Stockholm Syndrome to occur the captive must have never met their captor before their time in captivity. In direct contrast, however, many believe that Stockholm Syndrome is more likely to appear if the captive knows their captor well or is familiar with their captor. Unfortunately, this condition is very vague in its nature and until we gather more knowledge, perform more tests, or receive an official diagnosis from the APA, its finer workings will continue to be a mystery to all.

The Foundations of Dependence

Dependence is defined as “the quality or state of being influenced or determined by or subject to another.” (Merriam-Webster) In many situations where Stockholm Syndrome is likely to appear, we are met with the captive having a strange, fundamental dependence on their captor. This is often caused by one, if not both, of two key aspects; the captive being made to feel helpless or powerless, the captive relying on their captor for basic needs. Throughout our entire existence, humans have adapted to place one thing above all else in terms of priority, survival. When placed in a situation where survival is not guaranteed our mind tends to shift into a “survival brain mode” (Cnc) where its main goal is to continue living, typically by any means possible. While in this survival mode, the brain does not process things the same way, and if a person, even a captor who placed it in the situation requiring the change, comes in offering everything it needs to survive, it is not too far of a stretch that our brains would begin to positively associate the captor with these things it, and we, need to continue living. Food, water, and shelter, things we tend to take for granted and overlook in our normal day-to-day lives, could begin to mold the views we have on someone whom we would otherwise hold a negative interpretation of. This could seen as a coping mechanism to prevent emotional or physical outbursts to ensure that needs continue to be met. Though dependence on someone as a means of survival is a fairly good incentive for an otherwise unlikely bond to form, it is not the only form of dependence that works as a base for Stockholm Syndrome to form.

Social Animals

While everyone has specific physical requirements that must be met in order to keep their body functioning, there are also various psychological aspects that are not as commonly discussed. Almost every single living creature on this planet naturally seeks the attention of others of its kind with very few exceptions. Humans, being social beings, are no exception. Though there are people who are less inclined to social interaction, all of us seek social gratification at some level. This need for social interaction is one of the key causes of Stockholm syndrome, well perhaps not the need itself but rather the sudden lack of social interaction that most captives get once they are placed in captivity. It is unsurprising that when faced with no other means of attaining social interaction, captives tend to turn to the only choice they have. Their captor. The process of bonding with a captor can be slow and complex. Initially, it may involve seeking any form of connection, even though it’s with someone who has caused them harm. Given enough time, this attachment can deepen, leading to a confusing mixture of fear, dependence, and even loyalty toward the captor. The captor becomes the primary source of social interaction, and the captive’s survival instincts kick in, driving them to form a bond. It is vital to remember that Stockholm Syndrome is a survival mechanism, not a conscious choice. As humans, our minds adapt to frightening situations in unexpected ways, and this phenomenon serves as a stark reminder of our innate need for social connection, even when that connection comes from an unlikely and potentially harmful source.

Unconventional Kindness

Whenever you think about a situation in which someone is being imprisoned by another person unlawfully your mind likely imagines cruelty, sadism, and even abuse. Psychological torment is oftentimes the underlying goal when people are abducted and held against their will after all. But there is more than one way to warp the human mind than just through negative means. Think back to the first case of Stockholm Syndrome, the Norrmalmstorg Robbery, that was discussed earlier. Olsson and Olofsson were oddly kind to their hostages, considering the situation that they were in at least, committing several acts that were in direct opposition to what most would expect a captor to do. Actions such as covering a hostage with a coat when she shivered and consoling a hostage who couldn’t reach her family were odd acts of kindness that were simply not necessary for the success of their plan. So why did they do it? Was it simply their better nature slipping through, or something more nefarious? While the latter would likely be a more entertaining story, the convicts knowingly using their hostages' emotions against them, it is far more likely that their captors were just as surprised by the hostages at how well the tactic worked. Even now no one is sure exactly why it did work, surely the bad these two men did to the captives should outweigh the good, which begs the question, why exactly did it work? In most cases, the answer is humanity, more specifically the captor’s humanity. Whenever a captor performs small acts of kindness, they are showing a kinder, more humane side of themselves. The captive who has been all but starved of human interaction for a length of time, latches on to this side of their captor, sympathizing with them. In reality, it is much harder to hate someone when you realize the fact that they are a living, imperfect, human being. It is much easier to villainize someone when you refuse to acknowledge their humanity.

Rationalizing Abuse

Though it is not the case in all situations, it is likely that while confined to their captor’s clutches a captive may be faced with some form of abuse, be it emotional, physical, or sexual in nature. The power dynamics in captivity can be brutal, and captors often wield their authority to maintain control over their victims. In some instances captors may use forms of abuse as “punishments”, warning the captive ahead of time that should they misbehave by doing something such as attempting escape, they will be “punished” for their actions This twisted form of cause and effect becomes ingrained in the captive’s psyche. The captor’s threats and actions create a warped understanding: “I was warned, I acted, and now I’m receiving punishment—just as my captor promised.” Rationalization becomes an, albeit unhealthy, coping mechanism. The captive might convince themselves that they deserve the abuse, that it’s somehow their fault. The mind twists reality to fit the captor’s narrative, creating a distorted sense of cause and effect. The captive’s desperate need for social interaction, any connection, drives them to accept this toxic, unending cycle. This cycle leads to the captive coming to the realization that if they defer from the captor’s wishes, they may not survive. And thus, survival instincts kick in. The captive’s brain adapts to the extreme situation, seeking ways to endure. The stress of being held against one’s will takes a toll on mental health. The mind clings to any semblance of stability, even if it means accepting abuse from the very person who imprisons them. It’s crucial to recognize that this rationalization is not healthy or sound. It’s a tragic consequence of extreme, unimaginable circumstances.

Wrap Up

In conclusion, Stockholm Syndrome is a complex and fascinating psychological phenomenon that has baffled researchers and psychologists alike for decades. Given its portrayal in the media, thus condition is often misunderstood and sometimes glorified or romanticized. Let’s take a quick look at a few key points of the topics we researched in this chapter.

**History:** The term “Stockholm Syndrome” originated from a bank robbery incident in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973. During the six-day hostage situation, captives unexpectedly developed emotional connections with their captors, going as far as defending them from the police when they were finally freed.

**Characteristics and Symptoms:** Victims of Stockholm Syndrome often exhibit positive feelings toward their captors. These feelings may manifest as empathy, loyalty, or even romantic attraction. The captive’s behavior can be confusing to outsiders and possibly the captive themself, as they may defend or protect their captor.

**Psychological Mechanisms:** The bond between the captor and the captive plays a critical role in the makings of Stockholm Syndrome. Captives tend to perceive their captors as essential for survival, leading their minds to rationalize the captor’s actions as acts of kindness or protection. This psychological connection develops as a coping mechanism during distressing circumstances leading to an odd connection forming, often confusing to the captive in the process.

**Dependence and Isolation:** Isolation intensifies the captive’s emotional dependence on the captor. Captives, deprived of social interaction and normalcy, cling to any semblance of human connection, even if it comes from the source of their isolation. The captor becomes their sole source of companionship, leading to a distorted perception of the relationship.

**The Role of Trauma and Abuse:** Trauma and abuse can significantly contribute to the development of Stockholm Syndrome. Captives may experience extreme fear and helplessness, leading to an emotional bond with their captors as a survival strategy.

In summary, Stockholm Syndrome sheds light on the intricate workings of the human psyche. Whether in hostage situations, abusive relationships, or cult-like environments, this phenomenon emphasizes the resilience and intricacy of the human mind. As we continue to explore the depths of psychology, understanding Stockholm Syndrome remains a crucial aspect of understanding the human mind and how it functions.

Works Cited

Namnyak, M., et al. “‘Stockholm Syndrome’: Psychiatric Diagnosis or Urban Myth?” Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, vol. 117, no. 1, Jan. 2008, pp. 4–11. EBSCOhost, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.2007.01112.x.

Klein, Christopher, and Christopher Klein. “Stockholm Syndrome: The True Story of Hostages Loyal to Their Captor.” *HISTORY*, 23 Aug. 2023, www.history.com/news/stockholm-syndrome.

Cnc, Ariane Resnick. “Learning Brain vs. Survival Brain: What's the Difference?” *Verywell Mind*, 23 Nov. 2022, www.verywellmind.com/learning-brain-vs-survival-brain-6749311.

Professional, Cleveland Clinic Medical. “Stockholm Syndrome.” *Cleveland Clinic*, my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22387-stockholm-syndrome.

Merriam-Webster. “Dictionary by Merriam-Webster.” *Merriam-Webster*, [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com).

Sweeney, Gary. “6 Chilling Cases of Stockholm Syndrome.” *https://the-line-up.com*, 30 Nov. 2016, the-line-up.com/stockholm-syndrome.