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# Hostage taking.

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# The threat and challenge of hostage taking

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- Abstract:** A hostage incident is a crime which may have many motives. It can have long term and serious effects on the hostage. Steps can be taken to reduce the risk of being taken hostage, and there are ways to minimize the adverse effects of being a hostage.
- Keywords:** Hostage taking, negotiation, effects, coping

## Introduction

### *(a) Definition*

According to Scots Law and English Law “abduction” and “kidnap” respectively represent the crime of detaining another person against their will without legal authority, whatever the reason.

“*Hostage taking*” is not a legal term: it is a lay term. However, it will be used here because of its familiarity.

### *(b) Aims*

This paper aims to cover:

- motives for hostage taking,
- why we use negotiation to resolve a hostage incident,
- normal and pathological reactions to being a hostage, and
- survival and coping techniques for hostages.

### *(c) History and features of hostage taking*

This is not a new crime, there being reference to it in the Bible and medieval texts (Alexander and Klein, 2009). It has however achieved, over about 40 years, a particular prominence, particularly because of recent terrorist activity. It is a low cost, high yield crime.

As Box 1 confirms a number of groups who take hostages.

Box 1 about here

Most incidents are short-lived but some may go on for years, and a number end tragically in the death of or serious injury to the hostage. Whatever the duration of the incident, the hostages are at most risk during the initial capture and during the rescue. Unfortunately, some deaths are caused by the rescuers, as was the case with Linda Norgrove, an aid worker in Afghanistan, whom the USA Special Forces tried to rescue in 2010. Even more catastrophic failures occurred in the abortive attempts to rescue hostages from the Dubrovka Theatre in Russia (2002) and children in the Beslan School, also in Russia (2004) (McMains and Mullins, 2014). The efforts to effect these rescues by the Russian authorities resulted in 130 and 334 hostages respectively, largely due to poor preparation, poor tactics, and poor operational procedures.

Some incidents are opportunistic but others, particularly those involving hostages with a high “market value”, may be carefully planned and carried out by well-organised, professional groups. Targeted groups include VIPs (e.g., wealthy business people, politicians and “celebrities”), Aid workers, NGO personnel, staff employed by international companies, and military and police personnel. The days when a Red Cross on your back and vehicle afforded your immunity are gone. There are a number of high risk areas, although they change over time.

- Libya
- North Africa
- Nigeria
- Afghanistan
- Pakistan
- Iraq
- Chechnya
- Columbia

Aircraft hijacks are now uncommon because of enhanced security but maritime incidents have become a serious problem particularly around the Horn of Africa, and Somalia (Haberfeld, von Hassell and Brown, 2013). The capture of a fully loaded oil tanker and its crew represent a lucrative prize.

### **Different groups have different motives.**

Motives can be divided into two main categories (although these are not mutually exclusive): “expressive” and “instrumental” (Lipsedge, 2004). The former describes the

efforts of those who want to air a grievance or frustration. “Instrumental” motives underlie attempts to gain a certain outcome, e.g., a ransom or release of prisoners. Sometimes demands offer opportunities for negotiation, but some are totally unrealistic. (When I was in Iraq, a common demand was for the Coalition Forces to evacuate within a week!).

Sometimes it is difficult to identify the real motive, and there may be mixed motives. Initially, the motive may appear to be a simple financial one, eg., a ransom, but ransoms can be used to fund and support different political, religious and ideological causes. Hostages may be “sold on” to certain organizations including terrorist groups which have their own motives.

Recently, there has been an increase in the frequency of hostages being executed as a gruesome way to highlight a cause. Nobody could forget the carefully and dramatically orchestrated beheadings (broadcast on Al Jazeera) by Mohammed Emwazi (aka “Jihadi John”). (Verkaik, 2016). Sometimes body parts have been sent to the families or the authorities.

Unfortunately, it is clear that major terrorist groups are expert at manipulating and using modern IT systems of global communication.

## **Ransoms and financial gains**

Popular crimes in South America are “Tiger Kidnapping” and “Express Kidnapping”. In a Tiger Kidnap the hostage is captured and forced to make a withdrawal from a bank or building society account, or a family member is forced to do this. Express Kidnaps involve a level of financial demand which can be readily met. Thus, these can be abbreviated events.

The UK authorities will not pay out for ransom demands, although they cannot stop families or insurance companies doing so (as was the case with the Chandlers, an elderly husband and wife captured by Somalian pirates whilst sailing in the Indian Ocean, near the Seychelles in 2009).

Sadly, the payment of a ransom does not guarantee the safe release of a hostage, as the person may already be dead. This is why the negotiating authority will regularly seek “Proof of Life”. Most of us who travel in high risk areas, complete a “Proof of Life” form. It contains some very personal information as well as a number of questions which [ideally] could only be answered by us. The perpetrators would be asked to put a couple of these questions to us. Correct answers would as good as a guarantee that we were alive. These documents must be left with a totally reliable and informed person whose name should be given, e.g., to an authority such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

## **Why do we negotiate?**

Up until about the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century the usual response of the authorities to a hostage incident was overwhelming force, sometimes described as the *Suppression Model* (Needham, 1977). A much publicised successful example was the armed intervention by

the Special Air Service to end the siege at the Iranian Embassy in London in 1980. It has heavily influenced opinion and expectations such that many cannot understand why it is not the method of first choice in response to a kidnapping.

Armed tactile interventions have not always enjoyed such success, as we saw above. Another failed effort, which represented a landmark in developments regarding the response to such incidents, was the tragedy of the 1972 Munich Olympics (Jonas, 2005). Eleven members of the Israeli wrestling team were taken hostage by the “Black September” group (a faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation). During the attempt to rescue them eleven athletes and one police officer and ten terrorists died.

The USA authorities, concerned that their country might not be capable of dealing effectively with such an incident, reviewed options. Following an initial review by the New York Police Department, the FBI developed the *Negotiation Model*. This was not intended as a substitute for armed intervention, because there will always be a need for that, but as another option to be tried to avoid death and injury to all those involved in such an incident.

Opening up a dialogue with perpetrators has proved to be very successful for various reasons, particularly because it “*buys time*”. The advantages of this are set out in Box 2.

Box 2 about here

The covert and time-consuming nature of the negotiation process is however often a source of frustration to the families and friends of hostages. For so long nothing seems to happen, and, even when advances are made, these may not be made public for tactical and/or security reasons. In the UK the police will deploy Family Liaison Officers who can inform and support families as well as collect from families information which might assist negotiations.

## **Negotiating with terrorists**

This is a contentious issue. Many governments claim that they will “*never negotiate with terrorists*”. The reality is that whatever governments claim in public, they do negotiate with terrorist groups, as Prime Minister Thatcher did with the IRA, and the Nigerian authorities did with the terrorist group, Boko Haram, who kidnapped over two hundred schoolgirls. Of course, it is a tough challenge dealing with terrorists who commonly make almost impossible demands; display a disregard for the welfare of the hostages, and have no fear of imprisonment or even death. However, the gains described in Box 2 still prevail.

## What is negotiable?

In the UK only certain items are negotiable; others are certainly not as shown below.

### *Negotiable (include)*

Food

Cigarettes

Money

Freedom for hostages

Publicity

Non-alcoholic drinks

Third Party Intermediary

### *Non-negotiable (include)*

Alcohol/drugs

Exchange of hostages

Weapons

Release of prisoners

## Third Party Intermediaries (TPIs)

Occasionally the police will permit certain individuals to communicate with hostage takers. These include: family members; lawyers; representatives of the media, clinicians, and partners or close friends.

There has to be strong justification for involving a TPI because the tactic can backfire badly. For example, it has been known for a TPI to blurt out (either accidentally or deliberately) information of value to the perpetrators).

## Acute reactions to a kidnap

Although individual victims vary, especially if they have been trained in “survival techniques” (see page 9) there are a number of typical reactions.

- shock, denial (some of the audience in the Moscow theatre siege thought that the appearance of the Chechnyan terrorists was part of the military musical they were attending)
- anxiety (panic is not very common)
- “frozen fright” (a complete lack of emotional and physical response)
- disorientation (captors will create this through e.g., the use of hoods and blindfolds)

- anger and aggression (this can be risky: see page 9)
- helplessness

## **Subsequent reactions**

As the incident progresses, some of these acute reactions will wear off, and be replaced with, for example, withdrawal into oneself, marked dependence on the captors, depression, hopelessness, abandonment (“*where are the rescuers?*”) and guilt. Some hostages feel guilty because of the suffering or deaths of other hostages (“*survivor guilt*”) or for not putting up more resistance during the initial kidnap (“*performance guilt*”).

## **Psychological reactions after escape or release**

For ethical and practical reasons, it is often difficult to follow up former hostages. Much of our knowledge derives, therefore, from biographical and autobiographical accounts of hostages’ experiences and reactions. Some helpful ones are provided in Box 3.

Box 3 about here

Generally, former hostages display remarkable resilience, and some claim to feel psychologically stronger after their experience. However, for some it was a damaging experience. “At risk” factors for long term and adverse reactions include: the extended duration of captivity; severe confinement and restraint; demoralizing living conditions (e.g., no light, excessive cold or heat, no fresh air; cramped conditions, or no exercise); lack of any meaningful social contact, and physical and or sexual abuse, and torture. Busuttil (2008) provides an excellent description particularly of the effects of torture and deprivation.

Box 4 lists a number of common longer-term reactions reported by former hostages.

Box 4 about here

It should be noted that children and younger persons may not report the same post-traumatic reactions as adults. Their distress may be translated into “bad behaviour” such as tantrums, bed-wetting, truancy, disobedience, and petty crimes (e.g., shop lifting). They may also display excessively dependent and clinging behaviour.

## **Psychopathology**

Many former hostages do not develop a mental illness attributable to their captivity. A number do, and these conditions can be enduring, disturbing and incapacitating (Alexander and Klein, 2009).

The most common psychiatric disorders are, according to the International Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorder (ICD-10, WHO, 1992).

- phobic and anxiety
- adjustment disorders (including depression)
- somatoform and dissociative disorders
- substance misuse
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD was deliberately listed last to counter the over-emphasis there has often been on this condition. Most trauma victims (including kidnap victims) do not develop PTSD. When it does occur, in about 80% of the time, it occurs along with the co-morbid conditions of depression, anxiety and substance misuse (Klein and Alexander, 2009).

“Enduring personality change after catastrophic experience” (ICD-10: WHO, 1992) is less common than those listed above. It is however perhaps the most disabling. It has been observed in former hostages as well as concentration camp survivors, torture victims, and those exposed to the most severe and/or extended trauma.

The characteristic symptoms are:

- a permanently hostile and mistrustful attitude
- social withdrawal
- feelings of emptiness and hopelessness
- chronic feeling of being “on edge”
- a sense of estrangement



## **Physical effects of being a hostage**

It is important to remember that being kidnapped can have a number of physical symptoms both at the earliest phase and even subsequent to escape or release. Nausea, physical weakness and hyperventilation may occur during and immediately after the kidnap. Due to poor diet, lack of sleep, lack of exercise, poor sanitation and other adverse environmental circumstances, hostages may develop dermatological, musculoskeletal, dental and gastro-intestinal problems during captivity. Also, the experience may exacerbate pre-existent health problems such as angina, diabetes and hypertension.

The “*Stockholm Reaction*” (or “*Syndrome*”)

The so-called “*Stockholm Syndrome*” was first described by Nils Bergerot, a Swedish psychologist, after an armed raid on a bank in Stockholm. The authorities noted that hostages and their captors seem to have bonded during the siege. After their release the hostages collected finance to fund the robbers’ defence. Some would not give evidence against them. The raiders displayed a reciprocally respectful and positive attitude to the bank employees.

It is certainly not a “syndrome” as that term implies a pathological reaction: it is not. It is a normal, understandable and, usually, adoptive reaction (Cantor and Price, 2007). Also, these reactions have been observed among prisoners and others detained for considerable periods. It is an over-used term, as it does not always occur. It requires certain pre-conditions, which are listed in Box 5.

Box 5 about here

## **How to survive as a hostage**

In addition to trying to cultivate the Stockholm Reaction, there are a number of tactics which hostages can use to lessen their chance of abuse and death. These include those listed in Box 6.

Box 6 about here

### **Should you try to escape?**

Any effort to escape must be assessed carefully. You must have a chance of success. If you try but are recaptured, you will suffer through punishment and increased security: you might even be killed.

### **Should you use physical force to overwhelm your captors?**

Again, such an attempt must be thought through, if at all possible. If you are in the hands of terrorists or other serious criminals, you need to remember that they are likely to be “street-wise” and be familiar and comfortable with violence. If they are armed, it is very likely that they know how to use their weapons.

There are a number of questions to consider (time permitting), as presented in Box 7.

Box 7 about here

NB: If you are trained in some martial art, use your most incapacitating moves.

If you are not trained, do not make mock moves and utter clichéd grunts and guttural “Karate-like” noises. You do not know in what they might be trained. If they see through your deception, you are in trouble. If they are persuaded that you are trained, you are also in trouble as they may consider you to be an unwelcome source of threat and trouble: they may kill you.

## **Are there ways of reducing the risk of being kidnapped?**

There is no absolute protection, but there are steps you can take.

- Seek expert, local advice, including the reports provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- In the threat area be much more alert and vigilant than normal
- Every now and again check discreetly if you are being followed. (Our view is that if you “feel” you are being followed, you are probably correct.) Do you see the same person around the entrance to your hotel or workplace when you come and go? When I have been away from the hotel or residence, I often ask the hotel Reception if there had been anybody enquiring about me, and who they were.

Prospective hostages, especially “high market” value ones are commonly held under surveillance for a spell to check regular routes, habits etc. This enables them to develop a plan of action with likely success and least risk to themselves.

- Demand that your “meet and greet” arrangements, e.g., at the airport, do not include your name, place of origin or destination on a board or card.
- Be cautious about taxis you get into. Use only firms recommended to you by your hosts or a reliable source.
- When out walking alone, do avoid isolated area and darkened alleys etc. even if they do represent short cuts.
- When walking in streets, walk facing the oncoming traffic (to ensure nobody can creep up behind you in their vehicle).
- Learn your route: do not walk about with a map in your hand (“Spot the visitor”!)
- On your route, identify where there are possible refuges ( e.g., police stations, hospitals, Embassies) should you get into difficulties.
- You should inform somebody, e.g., hotel Reception, where you are going and your route. (I also inform my host, and provide an ETA.)

## Summary and conclusions

Hostage incidents vary greatly because of the perpetrators' different motives and the response of the authority. However, they have the potential to cause serious and enduring psychological damage, even though humans display remarkable resilience in the face of adversity.

Armed tactile intervention must be used on occasions, but negotiation is usually the first response. Even if a tactile intervention is ultimately required, the earlier negotiations will have generated valuable intelligence to facilitate it.

Travellers, workers and locals can reduce the risk of being kidnapped by taking simple precautions, largely based on vigilance. Also, there are techniques hostages can use to ameliorate their situation and reduce risks to their personal safety whilst in captivity.

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### **Box 1: Who takes hostages?**

- criminals interrupted in the commission of crime
- political, ideological and religious extremists
- mentally disturbed
- those under the influence of alcohol/drugs
- prisoners

## **Box 2: “Buying time”: key feature of negotiation**

- chance for all parties to “cool down”
- chance to clarify perpetrators’ motives and demands
- gather intelligence to facilitate negotiation and a tactical intervention, if required
- time to prepare a rescue plan
- time to prepare an “exit” plan should the perpetrators agree to end the incident.  
(We never use the word “surrender” to the perpetrators.)

### **Box 3: List of helpful texts**

- Brian Keenan (1991) (hostage in Lebanon for four and a half years).
- Terry Waite (hostage in Lebanon for four and a half years).
- Stephanie Slater (and Pat Lancaster) (1995) (Slater was held for 8 days in a wheelie bin with lockable lid.)
- Natascha Kampusch (2010) (abducted as a 10 year old; held for 3096 days in secret cellar).
- Paul and Rachel Chandler (2011) (elderly couple, yachting near the Seychelles, kidnapped by Somalian pirates and held for a year until ransom was paid).
- Peter Shaw (kidnapped in Tbilisi, held in underground prison for 13 months).
- Puk Damsgard (2016) (held by the ISIS for 13 months; forced to watch cellmate die).



**Box 4: common reactions on release or escape include the following**

- Cognitive
  - \* poor memory and concentration
  - \* disorientation and confusion (especially after extended captivity)
  - \* preoccupation with the incident
  - \* Hypervigilance (excessive sense of risk)
  - \* flashbacks of the incident (usually visual but can be any modality)
  - \* nightmares
  
- Emotional
  - \* irritability
  - \* anhedonia (a loss of pleasure from things that were previously enjoyable)
  - \* anger (at the way the incident was handled, and at how the hostage has been dealt with after release or escape)
  - \* guilt (“performance guilt”) for not having handled the incident better; “survivor guilt” if other hostages have suffered even worse; have been murdered, or are still in custody)
  
- Social
  - \* withdrawal from friends (many families have described it as though the former hostage “... had built a wall round himself”)

### **Box 5: Pre-conditions of the Stockholm reaction**

- captors and hostages must be exposed to the same adverse conditions (e.g., lack of heat, food, sleep etc.), which are also emotionally charged
- the two groups must have opportunities to bond
- threats of extreme violence and death by the captors are not carried out
- captors and hostages start to personalise their relationship (e.g., through the use of personal names, sharing of experiences, and acts of mutual respect, kindness and interest)

## Box 6: Survival techniques for hostages

- keep a low profile (“stay grey”)
- avoid sustained, challenging eye contact
- do not show too much assertiveness or too much passivity
- pleading for mercy rarely helps and may antagonise the captors
- be courteous
- maintain as much control as you can over your environment (e.g., keep it tidy, clean, orderly)
- maintain your identity. (Remind yourself of who you are, use your name with your captors. They may try to anonymise you.)
- maintain your dignity as a human being by attending to your habits, dress, hygiene and appearance. (The captors may aim to de-humanise you, and treat you as an animal – it is easier to abuse and to kill an animal.)
- try to keep orientated with regard to time, person and place.
- deal with one day at a time.
- create ways to take regular physical exercise

- use your brain (Some hostages have devised new languages, converted pop songs into classical arias, used mental arithmetic puzzles, and even “drafted out” in their minds a book following their release, e.g., Terry Waite, 1993.)
- use prayer if you have a faith
- day-dream
- maintain as many positive thoughts as you can. (Johnston, 2008, the BBC journalist captured in Gaza City kept reminding himself that things could be worse.)

### **Box 7: Ask yourself these questions**

- are you sure about the number of perpetrators there are? (There is often a “silent, sleeping” one in reserve for emergencies.)
- how confident are you in your physical ability and fitness?
- will you use improvised weapons? (if so, what?)
- are you sure you can fight “dirty” and to the “bitter end” – whatever that might be? (The perpetrators will have no “rules of engagement. Could you stick a steel biro, or similar object, into an eyeball or into the supraclavicular notch? [the soft boneless area just below the “Adam’s Apple”]. Are you confident you could strangle sufficiently strongly until you achieve unconsciousness or death?)
- if there are other hostages with you, can you rely on their support?