

# *Practitioner Report*

# *The Hostage Experience: Implications for Negotiation Strategies*

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From a clinical and social psychological perspective, this exploratory study aims at relating the hostage experience to hostage negotiation strategies. Therefore, we conducted 11 semi-structured and in-depth interviews with victims of two types of hostage-taking: sieges and kidnappings. The results showed that all hostages reported feelings of helplessness. Additionally, feelings of uncertainty and isolation were particularly strong for victims of kidnapping, while this was not the case for victims of sieges. Furthermore, our analyses suggest that prudence is called for labeling the positive bond that is likely to develop between hostages and their captors as some sort of psychological artifact. We conclude with some general guidelines for estimating and promoting the psychological well-being of hostages during their captivity. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## INTRODUCTION

To manage hostage incidents, police forces tend to adopt a communication-based approach instead of tactical intervention, because this decreases the chance of casualties (cf. Greenstone, 1995). In most of the world, priority is given to saving the lives of the hostages (Giebels, 1999; McMains & Mullins, 2001). In this article, we depart from the notion that this priority should be directed not only at the mere physical survival of the hostages, but also at minimizing the psychological injury of the hostages as much as possible. Oftentimes, it is felt that the victim has been fortunate to walk away from the incident alive, whether or not he or she is psychologically harmed (cf. Harkis, 1986). Notwithstanding the importance of physical survival, the psychological consequences of hostage-

taking are substantial. For example, research shows that approximately one-third of ex-hostages still suffer from symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) many years after their hostage-taking (van der Ploeg & Kleijn, 1989). An important way to reduce the psychological injury associated with hostage taking is offering psychological debriefing and/or post-incident counseling. Yet, also during captivity, there might be opportunities to influence the psychological well-being and reduce the psychological damage of hostages. More particularly, during most negotiations contact between police negotiators and hostages is likely to occur. This suggests that the actions of police negotiators are not only important in light of a successful outcome, but also in terms of the impact on the victims' psychological well-being. Moreover, these two processes may be mutually connected. Because of the oftentimes close proximity between the hostage and his or her captor, the psychological well-being of the hostage and the relationship with the hostage-taker is likely

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to influence the process and outcomes of the negotiation. Departing from this perspective, this exploratory study aims at identifying implications of the hostage experience for hostage negotiation strategies, and vice versa, of implications of hostage negotiation strategies for the hostage experience. From a clinical and social psychological perspective, we will discuss relevant theory and research on the psychological consequences of being held captive first. A distinction is made between two different situations: siege situations and kidnappings. Next, we will present the results of 11 in-depth interviews with victims of both types of hostage-taking.

### *Psychological Reactions to Being Held Captive: Sieges Versus Kidnappings*

A hostage incident is any incident in which people are being held by another person or persons against their will, usually by force or coercion, and demands are being made by the hostage-taker (McMains & Mullins, 2001). Although an infinite number of hostage-taker types have been identified, three broad categories of hostage-takers include the emotionally disturbed, the criminal and the ideologically motivated hostage-taker (see, e.g. Butler, Leitenberg & Fuselier, 1993; Soskis & Van Zandt, 1986). Characteristic of all hostage-taking is that the life of hostages is used as some sort of bargaining chip to fulfill the demands of hostage-takers. Usually, the idea of being totally surrendered to the mercy of someone else, who can decide whether you will live or die, is likely to result in a series of feelings such as helplessness, fear of death and horror comparable to the feelings accompanying an acute stress disorder (DSM-IV-TR, APA, 2000). These feelings may especially occur when the hostage-taker openly intimidates the hostages to put extra pressure on the police during negotiations. Because of the lack of power over one's fate, the hostages may also be plagued by feelings of uncertainty. Hostages may feel uncertain as to what the intentions of the hostage-taker are, what is going to happen to them, how long it will take, what the police will do and so on.

Furthermore, from the hostages' perspective, an important distinction has to be made between sieges and kidnapping situations. Two differences may be important in this respect. First, in sieges, the hostage-takers barricade themselves with the hostages in a location known to and surrounded by the police, and usually there is much visible activity. The hostages may also be confronted with

media attempts to cover the incident and to interview the hostages or hostage-takers. Moreover, the hostages may see the incident on television or hear about it on the radio, particularly when media coverage is one of the hostage-takers' demands (Wilson, 2003). For the hostages, this may feel as if they are 'in the center of the world'. In contrast, victims of kidnapping are usually brought to an isolated location unknown to the police and the media. They usually have no contact with the outside world, and therefore are unaware of attempts by authorities to save their lives and by the attention paid to their situation by the media. This abrupt isolation from anyone and anything may result in feelings of aloneness and desolation, of being 'cut off of the world' (cf. Kentsmith, 1982).

Another important distinction between sieges and kidnappings is that the latter usually last substantially longer. While an acute stress reaction is prominent in the beginning stage of hostage-taking, the longer the hostage-taking lasts, the more the hostages adapt to the situation. More implicit adaptation mechanisms, such as denial, usually occur in the earlier stages of captivity. As time goes by, the hostages will start using more explicit and deliberate coping strategies to deal with the new situation (Kentsmith, 1982; Tinklenberg, 1982). These coping mechanisms are usually directed at reducing stress and regaining some sort of control. Victims of prolonged captivity may start keeping a diary, make detailed plans for the future, or gather information about their situation (Strentz & Auerbach, 1988). Also, the hostages may start to help the hostage-takers in attaining their goals (Tinklenberg, 1982). Particularly the latter behavior points to the positive bond that oftentimes develops between hostages and their captors. This much-debated aspect of the hostage experience may have important consequences for negotiation strategies and therefore will be discussed separately below.

### *The Relationship Between the Hostages and Their Captors*

During hostage incidents, the hostages and their captors are convicted to each other. Presuming that most hostages spent much of their time in the presence of their captors, some contact between the hostages and their hostage-takers is likely to occur. After the first hectic moments and with the passage of time, the hostages and their captors will start to interact and communicate. This may also be regarded as a logical consequence of a fundamen-

tal human need to belong to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This *need to belong* is generally considered to have an evolutionary basis, because it is beneficial to survival (Ainsworth, 1989). Therefore, it may become particularly salient in life-threatening situations, such as hostage-takings. The positive bond that may develop as a result is known as Hostage Identification Syndrome (Turner, 1985; see also Wilson, 2003) or, more popularly, as the Stockholm Syndrome (Ochberg, 1980a; Strentz, 1982). That is, it was first observed in a lengthy siege following a failed bank robbery in Stockholm in 1973. During the hostage-taking, a strong friendship between the two hostage-takers and their hostages developed. These feelings apparently were so strong that one hostage fell in love with one of the hostage-takers and they started a sexual relationship that persisted even after the siege. The hostage also refused to testify against the captors in court. Since then, the term 'Stockholm Syndrome' has become synonymous to the strong emotional bond that may develop between hostages and hostage-takers. Usually, it is regarded as an irrational reaction to a situation of extreme stress and dependency, resulting in some sort of gratitude towards the hostage-takers that one is kept alive (Turner, 1985). Some researchers stress that the Stockholm Syndrome is the result of the unconscious mechanism of identification with one's captor, sometimes even literally trying to transform into the person who makes the threat, in order to reduce stress (e.g. Tinklenberg, 1982). Others draw a parallel with extreme dependency in early childhood, and therefore regression to these early stages (e.g. Ochberg, 1980b). It has also been suggested that there are two important prerequisites for the actual development of the Stockholm Syndrome: the hostages and their captors should spend a substantial amount of time in each other's presence, and the hostages should not be physically abused (see, e.g. Call, 1999).

Traditionally, and in line with its labeling, the development of a positive relationship between hostages and their captors is considered a 'syndrome'. This suggests that some abnormal psychological processes occur and that the development of positive feeling of a hostage towards the captor should be seen as some sort of 'psychological defect'. Wilson and Smith (1999; see also Wilson, 2003) argue that—to a certain extent—the development of a positive bond between hostages and their captors results from rather normal social processes. They state that the reason why we consider it irrational is that it devi-

ates from our expectations. Normally, our expectations about behavior in specific situations are captured in scripts. Scripts are schemes of events, which guide us to behave appropriately in a particular situation or setting (Donald & Canter, 1992). As a rule, scripts are based on experience, such as 'meet and greet scripts' or scripts about 'dining in a restaurant'. Usually, individuals do not have an experience-based script of hostage situations. If such scripts exist, they are oftentimes based on unrealistic representations from the media, such as movies or TV series. Consequently, during the actual contact between hostages and their captors their expectations do not meet reality. On the one hand, captors usually do not appear to be 'monsters' but rather to behave humanly to a certain extent. Many hostages may see their captor as also a 'victim of the situation', particularly when they do not condemn the motives of the hostage-takers and think their captivity is not an act against them personally. Similarly, the hostage-takers may realize that their 'bargaining chip' is not a thing but of flesh and blood with, for example, positive sides and a caring family. Wilson and Smith (1999) call the process that results from these intrapersonal processes and eventually leads to more normalized social interaction between hostages and hostage-takers *script breakdown*. This suggests that some positive feelings between hostages and their captors are almost inevitable. Additionally, since bonding with hostage-takers undoubtedly contributes to the hostages' survival chances, it may be called on for instrumental reasons. This casts doubt on whether one should always speak of it in terms of a syndrome. Indicators of the actual existence of abnormal behavior are hostages who abandon their own norm and value system and develop an authentic emotional bond with their captors that is not solely a function of survival (Wieckzorek, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

Regarding the implications for the psychological well-being of hostages and the implications for negotiation strategies, a negative side-effect of a close bond between the hostages and the hostage-takers is that, together, they develop negative feelings towards the police. This may be fed by the likely refusal of the police to give in to the hostage-takers' demands. Hostages may feel their life is not worth much to the authorities, and they are in fact the true enemies (Eitinger, 1982). On the other

<sup>1</sup> This was the case in the original Stockholm incident, where the intimate relationship between the hostage and the hostage-taker persisted after the hostage incident.

hand, a positive relationship between hostages and their captors may improve on their treatment and thus increase the hostages' psychological well-being.

Based on the above, the current study aims at addressing the general psychological reactions to captivity as well as the type of relationship that develops between the hostages and their captors in relation to negotiation strategies.

## METHOD

### *Procedure and Respondents*

After approval of our research proposal by the justice departments in both the Netherlands and Belgium, we invited 11 Dutch and Belgian ex-hostages who had been recently taken hostage to participate in our research project. In a letter, sent to them through the involved police departments, we explained the purpose of our interview—to gain more insight from their experience and perspective for the management of hostage incidents and, more specifically, communications with them—and assured them that the information they shared would be handled confidentially. If they were willing to participate, they could contact us directly or through a police liaison. All ex-hostages agreed to do an interview, primarily because they would like to 'help future hostages'. Table 1 gives an overview of the hostage incidents in which the interviewees were involved. In all incidents, demands were made by the hostage-takers, ranging from money or other tangible goods to media coverage. Except for one hostage (case 11), all hostages were taken hostage with others.

### *The Interviews*

We conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the ex-hostages. Depending on the wishes of the interviewee, the interview took place either at a person's home address, in a police interrogation studio or even at the actual crime scene. In the first part of the interview we asked the ex-hostages to tell us in their own words '... what exactly happened'. Afterwards, we discussed several general themes, such as their relationship with the hostage-taker(s) or other hostages and more specific themes or questions we had (for the entire interview scheme, see the appendix). These themes were often inspired by additional information that was available concerning the communication with the hostages during the incident, such as the communication between the police negotiator and the hostage and letters from the family sent to the victims. Each interview lasted approximately two to three hours and was recorded on either video or audiotape.

Subsequently, each of the recorded 'stories in own words' were coded independently by two raters. The coding scheme included two main categories. The first category included statements about general psychological reactions to being held captive, such as feelings of helplessness, uncertainty and isolation. Furthermore, statements referring to behavioral coping mechanisms, such as developing new routines, were noted. The second category included all statements about the captor, including statements about intimidation by the hostage-taker, a focus on the hostage-taker and positive and negative affiliations, as well as statements revealing some sort of normal social inter-

Table 1. Overview of the hostage incidents the interviewees were involved in

	Location	Duration	Hostage-taker category	Hostage gender*	Physical abuse hostage
Siege					
1.	Belgium	<1 day	criminal	M	–
2.	Belgium	<1 day	criminal	M	–
3.	Belgium	<1 day	criminal	M	–
4.	The Netherlands	<1 day	criminal	F	+
5.	The Netherlands	<1 day	ideological	M	–
6.	The Netherlands	1 day	criminal	M	+
7.	Middle East	8 days	ideological	M	–
Kidnapping					
8.	South America	8 months	ideological/criminal	M	–
9.	Africa	6 months	ideological/criminal	M	–
10.	South America	5 months	ideological/criminal	M	–
11.	The Netherlands	3 days	criminal	M	+

\*M = male, F = female.

action with the hostage-taker. In over 90% of the cases, the two raters agreed on the occurrence and type of the statement. In the case of disagreement, consensus was reached through discussion. More exploratory, interesting statements, for example about the police or about fellow hostages, that were made during the entire interview were noted. These statements were also compared afterwards and discussed until consensus was reached.

### *Additional Interviews with Family Members of Hostages*

During our research period, police contacts provided us with the opportunity to also interview family members of four hostages. These family members all had regular contact with police negotiators while their family member was kidnapped for a substantial amount of time. The interviews included two situations in which the hostages were also interviewed (see Table 1; Nos 10 and 11) as well as the family members of two children (ages 6 and 8), who were taken hostage for ransom. These interviews were less structured than the interviews with the ex-hostages, since as far as we know no framework on their experience exists. Some insights that emerged from these interviews will also be discussed.

## RESULTS

### *The Interviews*

As mentioned in the 'Method' section, our primary analyses were based on the first part of the inter-

view, in which the ex-hostages reported on their hostage experiences in their own words. The lengths of these parts differed substantially. In the case of siege situations the length of their own stories varied from 15 to 30 minutes ( $M = 28$  minutes). This time was substantially longer for victims of kidnapping: the length of their stories varied from 42 to 90 minutes ( $M = 61$  minutes).

All victims, but particularly siege victims, described their experience with a certain psychological distance. Some explicitly mentioned that they would rather not involve too many feelings, particularly not in the parts where they reported on aggressive behavior by the hostage-takers. Furthermore, usually they seem to go back to the situation, and report it as if it was playing 'in front of their eyes'. Without exception, the ex-hostages told their story in a chronological order.

### *Being Captivated: Reactions to Sieges and Kidnappings*

Table 2 gives an overview of the number of statements each interviewee reported for the more general psychological and behavioral reactions to their captivity. The results clearly show that all hostages reported feelings of helplessness. Furthermore, feelings of uncertainty and isolation were particularly strong for victims of kidnapping, while this was not the case for victims of sieges. The only victim of a siege who did report feelings of uncertainty was in a relatively lengthy siege of 8 days. This suggests that feelings of uncertainty are particularly linked to the length of the hostage-taking. Furthermore, while the siege victim

Table 2. Number of statements of ex-hostages about general psychological and behavioral reactions during their captivity

	Psychological reactions			Behavioral reaction
	helplessness	uncertainty	isolation	developing new routines
<b>Siege</b>				
1.	2	—	—	—
2.	2	—	—	1
3.	—	—	—	—
4.	1	—	—	1
5.	2	—	—	3
6.	2	2	—	1
7.	1	—	—	1
<b>Kidnapping</b>				
8.	2	5	3	5
9.	2	1	2	7
10.	8	1	3	5
11.	5	1	2	2

expressed uncertainty about what was going to happen to him and whether the police would intervene tactically, the kidnapping victims were more occupied by finding an answer to the question of whether the outside world actually knew they had been kidnapped. All in all, to reduce their uncertainty, they were highly primed to obtain information, something police negotiators may be able to provide.

Additionally, and as expected, feelings of isolation seem to be particularly linked to the type of hostage incident. That is, only victims of kidnapping indicated that the feeling of being cut off from the world played an important role during their captivity. In this respect, one ex-hostage mentioned the importance of getting an old radio after he had been held captive for some time. Another victim tried to obtain information from his kidnappers about news from the outside world. This isolated situation of most kidnapping victims probably also led to many remarks referring to an identity crisis. A victim of kidnapping said 'now and then, it is important to think of who you actually are; you tend to forget because you lack interaction with family and friends'. This ex-hostage also mentioned the importance of receiving a picture of himself with family and friends. This not only reduced his uncertainty of whether his family and friends knew he had been taken hostage, but also reminded him of 'who he was'. Similarly, another ex-hostage reported the importance of obtaining a mirror, because he had almost forgotten what he looked like.

The above findings suggest that getting *proof of life* is not merely tactically important in negotiations with kidnappers to make sure the hostage is still alive. Yet, from the hostage's perspectives, it may also be psychologically important in three ways. First, searching for proof of life by posing a question only the hostage can provide the answer to may give a signal to the hostage that the outside world knows about the kidnapping. This may reduce feelings of uncertainty. Second, from proof of life the hostage may also infer that negotiations about his or her release are actually taking place, and thus may provide moral support to the hostage and keep up the faith that their release is within reach.

Finally, hostage negotiators should be aware not only of the psychological impact of asking for proof of life in itself, but also of the specific way it is established. For example, asking for the nickname of an ex-girlfriend may be considered a good question tactically, but not psychologically. We

would like to suggest that in determining the way to establish proof of life the anticipated contribution to the hostage's well-being should also be taken into account. Our previous discussion suggests that one way to induce positive feelings is to reinforce the hostages' social identity. An interesting point in this respect is that individuals who have a relatively high risk of becoming a victim of hostage-taking, for example employees of aid organizations or journalists working in conflict regions, are oftentimes advised to carry a picture of themselves and significant others with them. The underlying idea is that in the case of hostage-taking showing this picture to the hostage-takers might promote a positive bond between them (Wilson, 2003). In addition to this, we would like to suggest that it might also be beneficial to the psychological well-being of hostages because it reinforces one's own (social) identity.

In contrast with victims of kidnapping, and as expected, hostages in a siege situation rather expressed feelings of being in the center of the world. They particularly spoke of the many parties in the vicinity of the compound. One such party that played a very prominent role were the media. In fact, all of them mentioned that there was contact with the media and that both the media and the hostage-takers initiated this contact. The media often called to the premises to inquire about the aim of the hostage-taking and to obtain information about the hostages. In addition, the hostage-takers themselves sought contact with the media, even if they did not plan this upfront. In the latter case, it was the victims' opinion that they did so because they were afraid of being shot by the police. The involvement of the media would mean some sort of assurance that this would not happen. In none of the cases did the hostages feel happy with the involvement of the media, because they were convinced the media operated primarily from self-interest and were not there to help them survive the hostage-taking. Thus, it seemed in the hostages' interest to try and keep the interference of the media as limited as possible, except for situations in which media contact may be necessary for a speedy and peaceful ending of the incident.

Furthermore, particularly victims of kidnapping reported the development of new routines. This varied from morning rituals to keeping a diary. One interviewee said 'it was comforting to trust my feelings to paper. It provided some sort of peace. I could tell stuff and get rid of certain feelings'. Others talked about doing exercises or having lengthy conversations with virtual others.

Kidnapping victims also talked about the sometimes-dreadful circumstances they were in, i.e. lacking personal hygiene, being ill, being bothered by parasites and malnutrition. Furthermore, they talked about boredom, thinking about the past and making plans for the future, yet at the same time realizing that they might not survive. Kentsmith (1982) also identified these themes in a study on reactions of American soldiers taken as prisoner of war in Vietnam.

Taken together, hostage-taking in general induces feelings of helplessness. Furthermore, the victims' reactions and needs seem to be particularly dependent upon the duration of the hostage-taking and the type of hostage-taking. The latter finding undermines earlier findings that the hostage experience is not different as a function of the type of situation (Siegel, 1984; see also Call, 1999).

### *The Relationship with the Hostage-Takers*

Table 3 gives an overview of the number of statements each interviewee reported on several aspects of the relationship with their captor. All hostages reported that they felt intimidated by the hostage-takers on one or several occasions. Furthermore, particularly hostages that were in a siege situation reported that they focused on the hostage-takers to find out what their intentions were. Only the one kidnapping victim who was kidnapped for a relatively short period of time also mentioned this. This suggests that hostages are particularly focused on the hostage-takers in the first stages of hostage-taking, probably as a result of an acute stress reaction to a life-threatening event.

As expected, most victims of hostage-taking reported positive feelings towards their captors. The three victims that did not, were in fact all physically abused (cf. Table 1). Remarkably, in none of the siege situations did the hostages report negative feelings towards their captors. This suggests that some form of dissociation may have occurred.

Furthermore, kidnapping victims reported both positive and negative feelings, indicating that, as time goes by, rather normal interaction between hostages and their captors is likely to occur. The way the kidnapping victims described these interactions supported this. One kidnapping victim said 'I made jokes with the guys, we talked about women, we drank together, and at a certain point I showed them photos of friends and wind mills. . . .'. Another kidnapping victim told us that he and his personal guard had lengthy talks about their mutual passion for car mechanics. Victims of sieges also made remarks about social interaction with their captors, but they were of a somewhat different kind. One ex-hostage said 'The communication happened in an orderly fashion and almost businesslike. One by one we could ask them questions . . .'. Another victim recalled a conversation with the hostage-taker in which he asked him about his weapon and the shooting club he belonged to. These examples suggest that the hostages in siege situations seem to be particularly directed at gaining some insight into the danger setting. In the case of more than one hostage-taker the hostages particularly focused on the hostage-taker they felt most threatened by. These hostages furthermore indicated that they tried to bond with another—less threatening—hostage-taker, hoping that this person might be able to protect them against

Table 3. Number of statements of ex-hostages on the relationship with the hostage-takers (HTs)

	Intimidation by HT	Focus on HT	Feelings towards HT		Normal interaction
			positive	negative	
<b>Siege</b>					
1.	3	—	4	—	14
2.	4	2	1	—	1
3.	2	—	2	—	—
4.	4	3	—	—	2
5.	3	1	1	—	2
6.	5	3	—	—	2
7.	7	1	1	—	—
<b>Kidnapping</b>					
8.	1	—	4	3	3
9.	3	—	3	6	2
10.	7	—	2	6	1
11.	6	1	—	3	—

aggression from others. In addition, several victims mentioned that they thought along with their captors about how to reach their goals or handle problems. One victim of a siege situation tried to help the hostage-taker by calling up people who might be able to supply the demanded media coverage.<sup>2</sup> All victims clearly stated they had only behaved this way to gain the trust of their captor. One victim mentioned that he deliberately shared his fruit, a mandarin, with his captor to create a positive bond with him. Of course, the question is whether these remarks about actively trying to bond with the hostage-takers concerns rational behavior at the time, or whether it is based on 'hindsight' and rationalized afterwards.

Overall, we found little evidence to conclude that the positive bond that is likely to develop between hostages and their captors should be considered some psychological artifact. It rather seems to result from normal social processes as well as instrumental behavior in trying to maximize one's survival chances. Unfortunately, the development of the Stockholm Syndrome during hostage-takings has become universally prominent in the mindset of individuals (Wilson, 2003). This labeling of most hostages as suffering from a syndrome, suggesting there is something wrong with them, may rather damage than help the psychological well-being and recovery of hostages. In fact, by labeling their behavior as such, they may be victimized again.

In the following, we will discuss several other findings that resulted from our interviews with the victims of hostage-taking. This includes statements about role expectations and the presence and evaluation of fellow hostages, as well as the communication with the police.

### *Role Expectations*

One important additional finding from the interviews was that the reactions of hostages are partly dependent upon the role expectations they might have. That is, one victim we interviewed was taken hostage while being at work as a security official. He described into detail how he thought about disarming the hostage-taker. Also, he felt he had failed because 'it was his job to prevent problems'. A

police officer who was taken hostage reported similar feelings. Another victim we interviewed mentioned how his military background influenced his reaction. During his military training, he had learned that 'doing something' was better than 'doing nothing'. Therefore, he was seriously thinking about intervening by trying to disarm the hostage-taker. This suggests that police negotiators should be aware of the strong influence of role expectations and should address it in conversations with the hostages when necessary.

### *The Paradox of Fellow Hostages*

Another finding is related to the fact that practically all hostages were taken hostage along with others. This presence of fellow hostages seems to be a two-edged sword. An important positive aspect was that the hostages felt 'not alone in this'. Moreover, they could provide each other with social support, something that has been identified as an important buffer to long-term negative effects of traumatic stress (Ursano, Grieger, & McCarroll, 1996). On the other hand, many hostages also reported negative emotions towards other hostages. One victim said 'At some moments you are really irritated by each other. It leads to tensions when somebody starts playing the victim... it makes you afraid what the effect would be on the hostage-taker'. Considering the general need to belong, another negative side of the presence of fellow hostages may be that the hostages may be less likely to bond with their captors and vice versa. That is, intergroup processes may foster in-group cohesion, but also out-group hostility, feeding feelings of 'us versus them' (see, e.g. Worchel, Andreoli, & Folger, 1977; see also Forsyth, 1999). This may prevent the development of a positive bond between hostages and their captors (cf. Gachnochki & Skurnik, 1992), something that may be regarded as desirable in terms of survival chances and the psychological well-being of the hostages.

### *Communication with the Police*

In all sieges there was also contact between the negotiators and the hostages, while this was not the case for kidnappings. In general, they made both positive and negative remarks about these contacts. As for the negative sides, some of these victims had the impression that negotiators were more interested in the hostage-taker than in them.

<sup>2</sup>Sometimes, the ex-hostage also mentioned typical hostage-taker behavior that reflected a positive bond with the hostage. In one incident, the hostage-takers gave part of the ransom to the hostage and they suggested 'to hide it well'.



The hostages mentioned the importance of really getting the feeling that they mattered. One interviewee said 'the police officer I talked to said "how are you doing?" in a way you say it when you meet an acquaintance. In these situations there is only one answer possible (. . .) It did not fit the situation'. In addition, the hostages reported a high need for moral support. Interestingly, in one siege situation, part of the negotiations were conducted face-to-face. This victim mentioned how important this was for keeping up her spirit, because the police officer said what she actually thought ('why don't you quit?'), but felt she could not say. In this way, she felt that the police officer acknowledged her feelings.

Another issue was that the ex-hostages sometimes did not understand why things sometimes took a very long time. For example, they wondered why it took so long to get food or drinks or to get an answer on a relatively simple question. They expressed that it would have helped if they got a good explanation, thus getting the feeling the police are professional and know what they are doing. Thus, getting content or procedural information would not only help to reduce feelings of uncertainty, but would also increase confidence in the authorities to respond adequately to the hostage-taking.

Finally, most hostages indicated that in order to estimate the danger setting and progress of the negotiations they listened carefully to the conversations between the police negotiators and the hostage-takers. An exception to this were hostages who were physically abused and severely intimidated by their captors. These hostages appeared to be rather unaware of the content of the communication between the police negotiators and the hostage-takers, probably because the terror is so stressful that it inhibits the accurate processing of information (Kaufman, 1999). These victims also mentioned that when conversations between police negotiators and hostage-takers took place they felt primarily relieved, because it provided a moment of relaxation.

### *The Experience of Family Members*

Often forgotten is that the significant others of the hostages are in fact victims of the hostage-taking as well (cf. Harkis, 1986; van der Ploeg & Kleijn, 1989). However, they may be considered more indirect rather than direct victims of hostage-taking, since they are not under the immediate

control of the hostage-taker. Insight into their experience is important because oftentimes an additional task of the police in kidnappings is to support the family of the hostage. In many cases, there is also contact between them and the hostage-takers or hostages, for example in kidnappings where they function as intermediaries.

Our interviews showed that the family members very much feel the responsibility they have for the life of someone else. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for them to get the feeling the police work professionally and have dealt with these issues before. They expressed a high need for concrete information, for example, providing insight into why things happen in a certain way. Even if the police would not be able to disclose confidential issues, they would like to have explained why this is the case. That is, procedural information can often be provided, and gives them the feeling the police take the case very seriously and 'something is being done'. Another way to show professionalism is to discuss different kinds of scenarios with the indirect victims, making them feel prepared for different kinds of situations. In general, they feel a strong need to do something, especially as time goes by. One way to realize this is to ask the family to write a letter to the hostage, or keep a diary during the hostage-taking. In addition, they appreciate the social and informational support police officers are able to give, for example in contact with schools, employer or financial institutions. In this way the police fulfill a liaison function.

### *Concluding Remarks*

During hostage incidents, authorities initially tend to focus on the hostage-taker. This is understandable, since this individual is primarily responsible for causing the life-threatening incident and his cooperation is needed to achieve the primary goal: saving the lives of the hostages. Notwithstanding the importance of physical survival of the hostages, we also concluded that relatively little attention is paid to opportunities to promote the psychological well-being of the hostages during their captivity. We would like to suggest that authorities should address this more systematically and consider involving behavioral experts or mental health professionals to advice on these matters. To date, such professionals are primarily consulted in two different areas: they advice on the negotiation strategies with different types of hostage-takers and they provide post-incident

counseling to ex-hostages. Provided that behavioral experts or mental health professionals are familiar with the handling of hostage incidents, they might also give valuable advice on the relationship between the hostage experience and negotiation strategies. Some general guidelines for estimating and promoting the psychological well-being of hostages during their captivity are the following.

- Because the feeling of helplessness is prominent in all hostage situations it seems vital for the hostages to (1) hear that they really matter and (2) pay attention to creating a professional appearance: having experience, being trustworthy and actually doing things.
- Bear in mind that stress may inhibit accurate information processing. As time goes by stress usually decreases, while feelings of uncertainty increase.
- Anticipate that hostages usually develop both negative and positive feelings towards the hostage-takers, particularly when time goes by and the hostages are not physically abused. Furthermore, be careful with labeling the positive bond that is likely to develop between hostages and their captors as a (Stockholm) syndrome.
- Anticipate undesirable or desirable reactions of hostages that follow role expectations (i.e. security officers/police) or background (i.e. military training).
- Regular contact between police negotiators and the hostage-takers is appreciated by the hostages. Most hostages listen carefully to the conversations to estimate the danger setting and the progress of the negotiations. Individuals who encounter physical aggression by the hostage-taker primarily welcome these conversations as a moment of relaxation.
- Consider the psychological importance of establishing proof of life in kidnapping situations. Evaluate proof of life in terms of (1) reduction of uncertainty, (2) provision of moral support and (3) reinforcement of the hostage's social identity.
- Evaluate the possible impact of multiple hostages and hostage-takers. Think of the importance of social support, irritation towards difficult hostages, ingroup-outgroup processes, and a buffering function of less aggressive hostage-takers.
- Anticipate that family members of hostages, who may be considered indirect victims, usually have a high need to do something. Keeping a diary, writing letters or discussing different kinds of scenario may be beneficial to them. Also, receiving (procedural) information and practical help is important to them.

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- independent researchers of the *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*<sup>3</sup> and the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*<sup>4</sup> are examining at present incidents in the course of which persons were taken hostage in the Netherlands and Belgium. The purpose of this interview is to enable police negotiators to learn from your perspectives, so that they can use this knowledge in future incidents.
- It is extremely important for us to hear also *your view* of what has happened. To that end, we request you to be as open as possible. Essentially, I am going to ask you everything that could be important to us, yet you decide of course what you either want or do not want to tell.
- In this framework, I would like to stress that all information we receive from you will be used solely for research purposes and will be treated anonymously. The findings of our research will be published in book form in the course of 2004. This book will never contain any personal information with respect to you.
- The interview is expected to last two or three hours. In consultation, we can of course decide to insert a short time-out from time to time.
- I suggest splitting up our conversation into two parts:
1. First, I would like to give you the opportunity to tell in your own words what happened (for instance, the way you would tell someone who does not know about the incident).
  2. Then, I would like to continue talking on the basis of a number of topics. To that end, I have a file with a number of things I do not want to forget to ask and I will also take some notes every now and then.
- Do you have any questions before starting the interview?

### Part 1. Own Words

*Paraphrasing, summarizing, emotional reflection; for every part, it is important to keep on asking questions: Why do you think that? How did it happen? Can you give an example? What happened afterwards?*

- Could you tell in your own words what happened on . . . ?
- What exactly happened?
- How did it happen?

## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH AN EX-HOSTAGE

### Introduction

Welcome. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview. As I have already said, the

<sup>3</sup>University of Groningen, The Netherlands.

<sup>4</sup>Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

- Where did it happen?
- Why there?
- How did it end?

## Part 2. Topics

Depending on the specific incident, the order of the following topics can be varied, or topics may be left out if they are not applicable.

For every part, it is important to keep on asking questions: *Why do you think that? How did it happen? Can you give an example? What happened afterwards? How did that feel? In what sense?*

In a nutshell, several parties were involved. They spoke to each other or had contact in a different way. That is what I would like to talk about now. (*Visualization of relations*)

### Hostage-Taker

1. How would you characterize him?
  - Why?
  - Can you give an example?
  - How did this appear?
2. (optional) If there is more than one hostage-taker: how did they deal with each other?
  - In terms of power for instance?
  - In terms of friendship for instance?
  - How open were they to one another?
  - Did they talk a lot?
  - How intensively?
3. Did certain things strike you?
  - At which moments did this intervene?

### You Versus the Hostage-Taker(s)

1. Broadly speaking, were you afraid of abduction/hostage-taking/extortion before the incident?
2. (optional) Did you have contact before the incident?
  - Did you expect such an action from him?
  - Had he threatened beforehand to do so?
  - Did you mention the possibility for something like this to happen to a third person?
3. How was your attitude during the incident itself?
  - Did you do so consciously or subconsciously?
  - Recognizable? Do you act like this in other situations too? For this incident also?
  - How did you feel?
  - To what extent did you feel let down?
  - To what extent did you feel in danger?

- Did you try to escape?
  - Did you reproach yourself with something?
  - How did this appear?
  - To what extent did you have the possibility to eat and to drink?
  - To what extent did you have the possibility to go to the toilet or to sleep?
  - Did you have a particular schedule? If so, what did you do all day?
4. Communication during the incident
    - Did the perpetrators and you communicate?
    - How did this communication go?
    - In terms of power for instance?
    - In terms of friendship for instance?
    - How open were you to one another?
    - Did you talk a lot?
    - How intensively?
    - About what?
    - Did he take you into his confidence?
  5. Did (a threat of) violence come up?

If so: (optional)

- How exactly did it go?
- At what moment?
- Did he request particular things? Did it last long?
- Were you tied or restricted in your freedom of movement in any other way?
- What effect did that have on you?

### The Police and the Negotiators

- With which police officer(s) did you have contact during the incident?
- In which manner?
- How did you feel about that?

Focusing on the negotiations

- Were you informed of the negotiations?
- Did you know who negotiated and how it was done?
- Where did those conversations take place?
- Where were you at those moments?
- How would you characterize those conversations? In terms of power? In terms of friendship/relations?
- Did certain things strike you? Notably right before or immediately after the conversations?
- What generally happened immediately after the conversations?
- Did you feel the hostage-taker reacted positively to certain things?
- At which moments did the hostage-taker react well?
- How did it appear?

- Why was that, do you think?
- Did you feel the hostage-taker reacted negatively to certain things?
- At which moments did the hostage-taker react badly?
- How did it appear?
- Why was that, do you think?

#### *External Parties*

The main parties, being you, the perpetrators and the (police) negotiators, were discussed. Did other parties play a part? (*Think of the media, mediators, family*)

If so (optional):

- Which parties played an accessory part?
- In which manner did they play a part?
- What was their exact influence or what were the consequences?
- To what extent did you like that?
- To what extent did the media cover the incident?
- To what extent did you feel the image of the police in the media coverage influenced the course of the incident?

#### *Influence of Culture*

Did your cultural background, or that of the perpetrator(s), the negotiator and possible other parties influence the incident?

#### *Incident-Specific Moments*

I would like to return to a number of specific moments now.

*Recalling a number of moments (based on incident-specific information; fill out)*

- Can you remember . . . ?
- How did you experience . . . ?

#### *Looking Back and Ahead*

- What was of great help to you?
- Would you have done certain things differently?
- Do you feel some persons, except for the perpetrator, should have acted differently?
- Why do you think the hostage-taking incident lasted . . . ?
- How would you advise a person who found themselves in a similar situation?
- What is the right or the wrong thing to do?

Also think of:

- General and specific needs
- Frequency and type of contact (letters and so on) with the outside world (police/family/friends)

Would you like to add anything to this?

#### *Yourself at Present*

1. How often do you recall the incident?
2. To which extent does it still enter into your life?
3. Have you changed? In what sense?

Should other particular topics be discussed?

Thank you for your collaboration!!!

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