

Identification With The Aggressor (aka Stockholm Syndrome)

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1. Core Definition and Conceptualization

The concept known as **Identification with the Aggressor**, often more popularly referred to as **Stockholm Syndrome**, represents a complex psychological defense mechanism observed in individuals who experience prolonged and traumatic captivity or abuse. This intricate response manifests as a profound and often unconscious psychological alliance that develops between the victim and their abuser. Such an alliance transcends simple compliance, delving into a deep-seated emotional and cognitive bond where the victim begins to adopt the perspectives, values, and even sympathetic sentiments towards the very individual or group inflicting harm upon them. This psychological phenomenon is distinct from mere submission under duress; it involves a reorientation of the victim's emotional landscape, where their survival instincts may unconsciously compel them to forge a connection with their captor as a means of mitigating perceived threats and fostering a sense of security, however illusory.

As a defense mechanism, identification with the aggressor serves to protect the victim's psyche from overwhelming trauma by allowing them to internalize aspects of the aggressor's power and perspective. This can manifest as an attempt to control the uncontrollable by aligning with the source of danger. The duality of the name, encompassing both the more clinical 'identification with the aggressor' and the more event-specific 'Stockholm Syndrome,' highlights its presence across a spectrum of traumatic interpersonal dynamics, from specific hostage crises to broader contexts of domestic abuse, cult indoctrination, and even child abuse. Regardless of the nomenclature, the core psychological operation involves a profound shift in the victim's perception, where the aggressor is no longer seen solely as a threat but as a potential protector or even a sympathetic figure, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator in a profoundly disorienting manner.

This psychological phenomenon is not a choice made by the victim but an involuntary coping strategy, often occurring in situations where the victim perceives a direct threat to their life, feels isolated, and experiences a sudden, unexpected act of kindness or absence of abuse from the aggressor. The victim's profound state of dependency on the aggressor for survival can foster an environment ripe for such an identification, as the hope for continued survival becomes intertwined with the perceived humanity of the captor. This intricate interplay of fear, dependency, and the rudimentary expression of human connection forms the bedrock of this perplexing defense mechanism.

2. Etymology and Historical Development of Stockholm Syndrome

The term **Stockholm Syndrome** was coined following a dramatic bank robbery that occurred in **Stockholm, Sweden**, in August 1973. During a six-day standoff at the Kreditbanken, four bank employees were held hostage by an escaped convict, Jan-Erik Olsson, who was later joined by Clark Olofsson. Throughout the ordeal, despite being threatened and confined, the hostages developed a strong emotional bond with their captors, expressing fear of the police rather than the robbers. After their rescue, the hostages notably defended their captors and expressed unwillingness to testify against them, a perplexing behavioral pattern that captured significant public and psychological attention. This unexpected loyalty towards their abductors led criminologist Nils Bejerot, who assisted the police during the crisis, to coin the term "Stockholm Syndrome" to describe this unique psychological reaction.

Before the events in Stockholm, similar phenomena had been observed and documented in various contexts, though not formally named. Instances of prisoners of war developing rapport with their captors, concentration camp survivors forming unexpected bonds, and victims of cults exhibiting loyalty to their leaders provided anecdotal evidence of this psychological dynamic. However, the high-profile nature of the Norrmalmstorg robbery and its immediate, puzzling aftermath provided a clear, public case study that necessitated a specific designation. The immediate media attention and subsequent psychological analysis solidified "Stockholm Syndrome" as a widely recognized, albeit non-diagnostic, term in the lexicon of trauma psychology.

The formal conceptualization of Stockholm Syndrome received further academic attention through the work of psychiatrist Frank Ochberg, who helped define the criteria for the syndrome for the FBI in the 1970s. Ochberg's insights helped move the understanding of this phenomenon from a mere curiosity to a recognized, albeit debated, psychological pattern with implications for hostage negotiation and trauma recovery. The syndrome's emergence marked a crucial point in understanding the profound and often counter-intuitive ways the human psyche responds to extreme duress and sustained abuse, challenging simplistic notions of victimhood and aggression.

3. Psychological Dynamics and Underlying Mechanisms

The development of identification with the aggressor is rooted in several complex psychological dynamics, primarily centered around survival instincts and the human need for connection, even under dire circumstances. The source content highlights the victim's **unconscious hopes that by identifying with the aggressor, emotional connection may develop**, leading to the abuser's empathetic feelings towards the victim. This notion underscores a fundamental survival strategy: when escape is impossible and authorities seem unable to intervene effectively, the victim's primary focus shifts to survival through appeasement and fostering a bond, however tenuous, with the source of their captivity or abuse.

This process can be conceptualized through lenses such as **trauma bonding**, where cycles of

abuse and intermittent kindness create powerful emotional attachments that are difficult to break. The initial terror and helplessness experienced by the victim can be profoundly overwhelming, leading to a psychological regression to a more childlike state of dependency. In this vulnerable state, any perceived act of kindness or even the absence of violence from the aggressor can be interpreted as a significant positive gesture, fostering gratitude and a sense of shared humanity. This mechanism is far removed from being "brainwashed" in a simplistic sense; rather, it is a sophisticated, albeit involuntary, coping strategy where the victim's reality is warped to accommodate the extreme circumstances.

Moreover, the overwhelming power imbalance inherent in hostage or abusive situations plays a critical role. The aggressor controls every aspect of the victim's life, including their basic needs, safety, and information. This total control can lead to a profound sense of dependency, where the victim's self-perception becomes intertwined with the aggressor's actions and moods. Cognitive dissonance may also be at play, where the victim attempts to reconcile the stark reality of their abuse with the need to maintain some semblance of psychological stability, often by rationalizing the aggressor's behavior or minimizing the harm they have endured. This intricate web of psychological responses contributes to the baffling yet understandable manifestation of Stockholm Syndrome.

4. Key Characteristics and Behavioral Manifestations

The manifestation of identification with the aggressor is characterized by a distinctive set of behavioral and emotional patterns observed in victims. These characteristics, often occurring in concert, delineate the syndrome from other psychological responses to trauma:

Developing Positive Feelings Towards the Captor: This is a cornerstone of the syndrome, where victims begin to express sympathy, empathy, or even affection for their abuser. These feelings can range from rationalizing the captor's actions as justified under certain circumstances to genuinely believing in the captor's humanity or good intentions. This emotional bond often develops despite the captor's previous or ongoing abusive behavior, creating a perplexing emotional landscape for the victim.

Absence of a Former Relationship with the Captor: Crucially, these positive feelings emerge in situations where there was no prior personal relationship between the victim and the aggressor. The bond is forged entirely within the context of the traumatic event, distinguishing it from pre-existing relationships that might involve complex dynamics of abuse and attachment. This highlights the immediacy and situational nature of the syndrome's onset.

Defending the Captor: A striking manifestation of the syndrome is the victim's active defense of their abuser, even against external rescuers or law enforcement. This can involve refusing to testify against the aggressor, providing misleading information to authorities, or outwardly expressing

loyalty and protection for the captor. This defensive stance is often driven by the internalized belief that the captor is misunderstood or that the authorities pose a greater threat.

Developing the Same Values with the Captor: In more profound instances, victims may begin to adopt the aggressor's worldview, ideology, or values. This can involve internalizing the captor's justifications for their actions, agreeing with their political or social beliefs, or even participating in their criminal activities. This assimilation of values further solidifies the psychological alliance, blurring the lines of individual identity and moral compass.

Negative Feelings Towards Authorities: Often accompanying the positive feelings towards the captor is a corresponding development of negative feelings, distrust, or hostility towards authorities attempting to intervene or rescue the victim. This paradoxical response stems from the victim's perception that the authorities threaten the fragile bond they have formed with the captor, which they have come to associate with their own survival, or that the rescue attempts are poorly executed and endanger them more.

5. Illustrative Cases: The Patty Hearst Abduction

One of the most widely cited and dramatic examples illustrating identification with the aggressor is the case of **Patricia "Patty" Hearst**. In February 1974, Hearst, a 19-year-old heiress, was abducted from her Berkeley, California apartment by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a radical left-wing guerrilla group. Her captivity was marked by intense physical and psychological abuse, including being confined in a closet for extended periods, subjected to sensory deprivation, and repeatedly raped. The extreme conditions of her captivity created a textbook environment for the development of Stockholm Syndrome, as she was stripped of her identity, subjected to constant threats, and entirely dependent on her captors for survival.

Over the course of her captivity, Hearst's psychological state underwent a profound transformation. Within weeks of her abduction, she publicly renounced her family and former life, adopting the nom de guerre "Tania" and declaring her allegiance to the SLA's cause. This dramatic shift culminated in her active participation in the SLA's criminal activities, most notably the armed robbery of the Hibernia Bank in San Francisco in April 1974. Photographs from the robbery showed Hearst, armed with an M1 carbine, actively involved in the heist, a stark image that deeply bewildered and shocked the public.

Beyond her direct involvement in criminal acts, Hearst also made public statements expressing her **sympathy towards her captors** and articulating their revolutionary ideology. These actions provided compelling evidence of her identification with the aggressor, demonstrating several key characteristics of the syndrome: she developed positive feelings and loyalty towards her captors, adopted their values and ideology, and actively defended their actions, even at the cost of her former identity and personal safety. Her case highlighted the powerful, involuntary psychological

mechanisms at play when individuals are subjected to extreme trauma and captivity, becoming a pivotal example in the study and popular understanding of Stockholm Syndrome.

6. Theoretical Perspectives and Criticisms

While widely recognized in popular culture and often referenced in discussions of trauma, **Stockholm Syndrome is not formally recognized as a mental health diagnosis** in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association. This lack of official diagnostic status has led to ongoing academic debates regarding its precise definition, scientific validity, and diagnostic utility. Critics argue that the concept can sometimes oversimplify complex psychological responses to trauma, potentially mislabeling victims and obscuring other co-occurring psychological conditions.

One primary criticism revolves around the risk of misapplication. The popular understanding of the syndrome, often epitomized by the notion of being "brainwashed," can lead to a reductive explanation of a victim's actions, potentially undermining their agency or suggesting they are complicit in their own abuse. This perspective can be particularly harmful in legal contexts, where a victim's "identification" might be used to discredit their testimony or minimize the culpability of the abuser. There is a fine line between understanding a complex psychological defense mechanism and inadvertently blaming the victim for their involuntary coping strategies.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that the behaviors attributed to Stockholm Syndrome might be better explained by existing psychological theories, such as **trauma-induced attachment**, survival strategies, or the psychological impact of severe stress and isolation. The challenge lies in differentiating the specific dynamics of Stockholm Syndrome from a broader spectrum of post-traumatic stress responses or other forms of coercive control. Despite these criticisms, the concept remains a valuable framework for understanding certain extreme and paradoxical responses to captivity and abuse, prompting further research into the nuances of human resilience and vulnerability under duress.

7. Significance and Societal Impact

The concept of identification with the aggressor holds significant importance in understanding the psychological aftermath of various traumatic experiences beyond initial hostage situations. Its framework is crucial for comprehending dynamics in contexts such as **domestic violence**, where victims may remain in abusive relationships, defending their abuser and expressing loyalty despite ongoing harm. Similarly, it sheds light on the psychological manipulation within **cults**, where members often exhibit profound loyalty to their leaders, even after suffering severe exploitation and abuse. In cases of child abuse, children may develop a strong attachment to their abuser as a primary caregiver, making it difficult for them to report the abuse or separate from the perpetrator.

Moreover, the concept has had a tangible impact on the field of **hostage negotiation** and law enforcement training. Understanding that hostages might develop a bond with their captors influences strategies for communication, rescue, and post-release debriefing. Negotiators are often trained to recognize the signs of Stockholm Syndrome, not as a weakness of the victim, but as a predictable psychological response that must be managed delicately to ensure the safe resolution of a crisis. This awareness helps in anticipating hostage behavior and planning interventions that account for the complex emotional state of the victims.

In broader societal terms, Stockholm Syndrome has permeated popular culture, appearing in countless films, books, and media narratives. While this popularization has increased awareness of the phenomenon, it has also sometimes led to oversimplification or romanticization of a deeply traumatic experience. Nonetheless, its continued presence in public discourse underscores its power as a metaphor for complex human responses to power imbalances, coercion, and survival, compelling ongoing examination of the human psyche's remarkable capacity for adaptation in the face of extreme adversity.

Further Reading

[Stockholm Syndrome - Wikipedia](#)

[Stockholm syndrome - Britannica](#)

[Norrmlmstorg robbery - Wikipedia](#)

[Patty Hearst - Wikipedia](#)

[Complex Trauma - American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)