# The abused child as a hostage
## Insights from the hostage theory on pathological attachment and some developmental implications

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*In a theoretical extension of Goddard's Hostage theory, the authors propose that a pathological attachment may be formed between the abused child and the abuser. While this attachment may have value in the short term for the abused child, it may have longer term developmental costs. Some preliminary evidence for a pathological attachment can be found in the literature.*

### The Hostage Theory

This paper draws on the Hostage Theory to gain theoretical insights into the relationship between the abused child and the abuser. The Hostage Theory was first proposed by Goddard in 1988 to account for some of the features in the relationship between the abusive family and the child protection worker, particularly, the apparent failure in some cases, of the worker to protect the child from re-abuse (Cohn & Daro, 1987; Goddard, 1988; Goddard & Carew, 1988; Goddard & Tucci, 1991). Evidence that the child protection worker may at times act like a hostage, was found in a small exploratory study (Stanley & Goddard, 1993) and a major study is currently being undertaken.

The Hostage theory is drawn from the literature on political terrorism and hostage taking which has evolved since the 1970s. The terrorist deliberately evokes fear in a totally dominating environment, in order to achieve his or her aims (Symonds, 1982). In response, the political hostage frequently displays a distinctive and unique behavioural pattern, which has been named the 'Stockholm Syndrome' (Wardlaw, 1982). This often life-saving behaviour in the hostage, develops in response to an overwhelming threat, in association with helplessness or an inability of the person to engage in normal evasive and self-protective behaviour.

The hostage draws on the ego defences of denial, regression to earlier stages of functioning, 'identification with the aggressor' and 'introjection' of the now admired values of the terrorist or captor (Strentz, 1982: 151). The defences of reaction formation, or adoption of beliefs which are, in fact, opposite to the person's conscious or unconscious impulses, and the defences of 'intellectualisation', 'creative elaboration' (escape through dreams or fantasies) and 'humour' are also utilised (Tinklenberg, 1982:65). Where it occurs, the practical outcome of the Stockholm Syndrome is that the hostage accepts his or her subjugation and co-operates with the terrorist, at times to the point of actively promoting the terrorist's objectives (Strentz, 1982).

In a previous article (Goddard & Stanley, in press), it was argued that in some cases and some situations, many of the characteristics and the behaviour of child abusers appear to be analogous to those of terrorists, and similarly, the behaviour of many abused children appear remarkably like the behaviour of political hostages.

The value of drawing attention to this similarity lies in the greater understanding it can give to some of the unusual, little explained and at times overlooked behaviour in many abused children. An example is role reversal, where the child adopts a nurturing and protective role towards the abuser (for example, Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991; Morris & Gould, 1963; O'Hagan, 1993). Similarly, the Hostage Theory appears to offer a possible explanation for the unusual type of attachment behaviour commonly found in abused children, but which is not as yet adequately explained (Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett & Braunwald, 1989).

Another value of the analogy is that it draws attention to a critical component of abuse that is often overlooked: the impact of the abusive relationship on the child's development. The literature reports that victims of terrorism experience serious and long-lasting damage to their physical, mental and emotional health (Flynn, 1987). This impact may last for many years after the captive is released, and may even adversely effect the victim's future children (Eitinger, 1982). If a previously mentally stable adult is seriously adversely effected, how much greater must be the impact on a child who has not yet developed, or is in the process of forming, personality and emotional foundations. Thus

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in addition to the physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse that the child may receive from a parent or parent substitute, where a pathological attachment relationship is present with the abuser, this in itself is likely to have adverse consequences on the child's emotional well-being and developmental progress.

## The experience of being a hostage while a child

Drawing from the political terrorism and child abuse literature, in some situations the abuser, like the terrorist, utilises a state of fear or terror in the victim to obtain compliance (Crelinsten, 1987; Jones, 1991). Both seek to create an isolating, hostile, and totally dominating environment so the victim feels powerless and helpless (Cameronchild, 1980; Steele & Pollock, 1974; Symonds, 1982; Wardlaw, 1982). The terrorist 'dehumanises' the hostage (Cordes, 1987:326), and the abuser often sees the child as '... a need satisfying object ...' (Martin & Rodeheffer, 1980: 258).

Throughout the child abuse literature, many reports can be found of the situation and behaviour of abused children which are suggestive of a political hostage's situation and response. The following examples illustrate the point. The abused child:

- **lives in a state of fear or terror** (Crittenden, 1992; Hopkins, 1984; Jones, 1991; Kempe & Kempe, 1978);
- **lives in an often unpredictable and incomprehensible environment**(Cameronchild, 1980; Crittenden, 1992; Garber, Miller & Abramson, 1980; Steele & Pollock, 1974);
- **experiences helplessness or a loss of personal control over his or her life** (Crittenden, 1992; Garber & Seligman, 1980; Peterson & Seligman, 1983);
- **has the experience of being seen as an object or dehumanised** (Gilgun & Connor, 1989; Martin & Rodeheffer, 1980);
- **may experience isolation and alienation** (Steele & Pollock, 1974);
- **may deny the abuse** (Cameronchild, 1980; Crittenden, 1992; Larson & Maddock, 1986; Reynolds, 1990);
- **may use the defences of splitting and disassociation** (Jones, 1991; Mueller & Silverman, 1989; Putnam, 1993);
- **may identify with the abuser, adopting his or her goals and interpretation of events which may include the abuser's explanation that the child deserves the abuse** (Martin & Rodeheffer, 1980; Summit, 1983), **or may include the defence of creative elaboration - idealising home and parents** (Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Spring, 1987);
- **is prone to role-reversal, a phenomenon where the child nurtures the abuser** (DeLozier, 1982; Helfer, 1987; Morris & Gould, 1963; Wright, 1980).

The effect of living with this reality can be examined with regard to some of the impacts it may have on the child's emotional and personality development.

## Child development and attachment

Whilst there are a number of theoretical formulations on child development, Maslow (1968) reports that the outcome or end-point of personality development tends to be fairly similar whatever the perspective. It is variously called, '... growth, individuation, autonomy, self-actualisation, self-improvement, productiveness, [and] self-realisation ...' (Maslow, 1968:24). Similarly, there tends to be agreement that the child needs to pass through a hierarchy of developmental phases or goals to achieve the end-point. Cicchetti (1987) believes that successful completion of early developmental phases is a necessary precursor for successful completion and competence in the later developmental phases.

Some of the suggested theoretical implications of the abused child being a hostage is illustrated with particular reference to the first few years of life. The broad attributes to be achieved at each of the early developmental phases can be summarised as:

- **birth to six months, regulation of internal physiological states** (Freud, A., 1965; Sander, 1969; Sroufe, 1979);
- **approximately six to twelve months, establishment of an attachment relationship, security and trust** (Erikson, 1963; Sroufe, 1979; Winnicott, 1965);
- **approximately twelve months to three years, establishment of autonomy from others, self-identity, and self worth** (Erikson, 1963; Sander, 1969; Sroufe, 1979).

These attributes are obtained through continuous adaptation by the child to his or her environment (Cicchetti, 1987). The child in fact seeks environmental stimulation, and selects and organises his or her behaviour in order to achieve mastery at each developmental phase (Sroufe, 1979). For the young child to successfully do this, the quality of the child's early relationship with his or her caregiver is of fundamental importance, as this person is the major component and interpreter of the child's environment (Solnit & Provence, 1979). Thus in normal or healthy development, the child learns that there will be appropriate responses to his or her internal needs and drives, such as hunger or rage. His or her basic trust develops from an understanding of order or reliability in the environment; for example, if his or her caregiver leaves, he or she will return. The child learns that he or she is a separate person from his or her mother or major caregiver and a person of value and importance.

While the essential ingredient of the young child/caregiver relationship is referred to in different ways by different theorists, its presence, importance, and similarity in characteristics is generally acknowledged. Erikson (1963:249) talks of the 'quality of the maternal relationship' as vital in the establishment of trust, which enables the child to complete healthy development. Many theorists believe that it is the quality of attachment between the child and caregiver that is the '... very foundation of normal development' (Kestenbaum, 1984:35). Winnicott believes that the early child development and maternal care 'together form a unit' (Winnicott, 1965:39).

The process of the child's interaction with the caregiver is what Sroufe refers to as 'motivational duality' (Sroufe, 1979:835). The child will reach out, explore, problem-solve and develop a sense of efficacy, if he or she feels that there is a caregiver who provides a secure, comforting, and predictable base, where he or she can obtain confidence, reassurance and interpretation of events (Lee, 1976). The child who does not have a basis of secure attachment to his or her caregiver may abandon exploration in his overriding preoccupation to satisfy the desire to feel secure and have attachment confirmed (Ainsworth, 1982).

## The implications for the abused child in a hostage relationship

The abused child may well experience the antithesis of an optimal interaction with his or her caregiver when this caregiver is also an abuser. Instead of a secure, nurturing person for the child to turn to when experiencing anxiety or fear, the caregiver him or herself may be an additional source of fear. Thus the child may be left in great conflict and confusion and possibly left with feelings of abandonment in a very frightening world. The unpredicability of the abuser/caregiver must also be a source of great confusion to the child and may deprive the child of any feelings of control over the environment. Thus the child may develop a sense of helplessness and not be motivated to learn (Seligman, 1975).

As with the hostage, the abused child may be too fearful and insecure to express feelings of rage or anger towards his or her abusive caregiver. The child may learn that instead of exploring the world and meeting his or her own developmental needs, it is far safer to abandon or 'place on halt' his or her own needs and instead work on meeting the needs of the abuser/caregiver (role-reversal).

> One little girl, who suffered severe head injuries, gave the impression that her only wish was to please adults: every sentence was sweetly worded and ended with the upward inflection of a question - no risk of displeasing an adult there!
>
> (Kempe & Kempe, 1978:33)

To achieve this, the child may deny his or her own needs and dissociate him or herself from the painful and/or fearful experiences. The child may identify with the abuser and the abuser's interpretation of events. A pathological or disturbed attachment may be formed between the abused child and the abuser. As a result, the child may fail to complete developmental phases and thereby fail to establish the basic building blocks of satisfactory personality development.

Once this pathological attachment is formed, it tends to become self-reinforcing. A child is in no position to adequately meet the nurturing needs of the parent, as he or she is developmentally immature and trying to get his or her own needs met. With this failure to meet the adult's needs, the child may be viewed, as is reported in the literature, as bad, a failure and unworthy of love (for example, Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991; Morris & Gould, 1963; Steele & Pollock, 1974). The more the child is exposed to anger and abuse, the more the child tries to appease the abuser and the more the pathological attachment is reinforced. The abuser's terrorist-like behaviour becomes reinforced as it produces the abuser's desired result in the child - co-operation with the abuse.

## Evidence from the literature

The literature has not given a great deal of attention to the implications of child abuse from a developmental perspective, and in particular, little empirical work has been done. However, developmental delays in abused children was noted early in the literature. For example:

> By far the most disturbing and consistent finding in observation of young children who have been abused and neglected is the delay, or arrest, of their development.
>
> (Helfer, McKinney & Kempe, 1976:64)

This delay tends to be described in the literature in general terms, such as reduced intelligence, behavioural disturbances, and low self-esteem (Oates, 1985). Helfer and his colleagues document a number of studies that report delays in social and motor development, in manipulation of object relations, delayed speech, and reduced intelligence (Helfer et al., 1976). Extreme developmental delay is seen in the syndrome of abuse dwarfism, where the abused child even fails to grow physically as well as mentally (Money & Werlwas, 1980).

Since the mid 1980's, a number of empirical studies (Aber et al., 1989; Carlson et al., 1989; Cicchetti & Toth, 1987) report findings that both the establishment of a secure attachment relationship with his or her caregiver, and the development of the sense of an autonomous self, are disturbed in the abused child. This finding is reflected in another empirical study which examined caregiver's behaviour in facilitating the child to engage in developmental tasks. Erickson and Egeland (1987: 161) found that a deficit in nurturance by the caregiver towards the child, was 'central' to each type of abuse examined (physical, sexual, emotional or psychologically unavailable caregivers, and neglect). They go on to say that:

> In many cases maternal attention was intrusive, reflecting the mother's own agenda rather than sensitivity to the needs and wishes of the child.
>
> Erickson & Egeland, 1987:162)

The study also found that the caregivers reflected 'great difficulty' in responding appropriately to the stage where the child is defining 'self' (Erickson & Egeland, 1987: 163). This difficulty can possibly be understood if the abuser is dehumanising the child or not seeing the child '...as a person with rights, feelings, drives and interests of his own...' (Martin & Rodeheffer, 1980: 258).

The reason for developmental delays in abused children is usually interpreted as a failure in learning. The parents have never learned good parenting skills and so are unable to transmit them to their children (Graziano & Mills, 1992; Steele, 1987; Wolfe, 1987). Helfer (Helfer et al., 1976) interprets the fact that abused children do not explore and reach out to people and objects in their environment as a failure of the mother to stimulate and encourage the infant, or due to punishment of attention-seeking efforts. The theory presented in this paper does not conflict with the notion of inadequate learning, rather it offers an

additional explanation of the reasons for developmental delays in abused children - the presence of a pathological attachment.

From the late 1970s, a small group of theorists have proposed that child abuse is a product of insecure or poor attachment, or a complete absence of attachment, by the child to the caregiver, and/or the caregiver to the child (Ainsworth, 1982; Bowlby, 1979, 1984; DeLozier, 1982; Zsizsmann, Weerasinghe & Belcher 1991). For example:

> Abuse is perhaps the most extreme expression of a parent's incapacity to form an attachment to the child.
>
> (Argles, 1980:35)

Ainsworth's 'strange situation' test is widely reported as a method of assessing the degree of attachment of a child to his or her caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Test outcomes are classified in one of three major attachment-type categories:

**A** - anxious/avoidant attachment found in approximately 20 percent of children;

**B** - secure attachment found in approximately 70 percent of children;

**C** - anxious/resistant attachment found in approximately 10 percent of children.

Subsequent review of the cases that proved to be difficult to classify (approximately 10 percent), found that the attachment behaviour of these cases formed a consistent pattern which warranted a group of its own, category **D** (Carlson et al., 1989). Children in the D category displayed attachment behaviour which was 'disorganized and disoriented' (Carlson et al., 1989:504), and characterised by:

> ... fear or wariness of their attachment figure, dazed and disoriented facial expressions, and contradictory attachment behaviors ...
>
> (Cicchetti, 1987:841)

Carlson and colleagues (1989), using the 'strange situation' test on children whose families were known to protective services, found that 81.8% of the children were considered to be in the D category. Thus there would appear to be an association between child abuse and a distinct and distinguishing form of parent/child attachment.

Two details reported in the attachment literature are interesting to note. It was found that children who were classified in the D category at 12 months of age, displayed role-reversal behaviours when their attachment behaviour was reviewed at six years of age (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, cited in Cicchetti & Carlson, 1985). Secondly, in a re-classification of past studies (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989), many of the most severely maltreated children, now in the D category, had previously been rated as securely attached, rather than insecurely attached. This finding could possibly be viewed as a mis-interpretation of a hostage-type response in the child. It is understandable how features such as denial of the abuse, identification with the aggressor, creative elaboration and role reversal, could be seen as evidence of secure attachment.

Thus this new category of attachment behaviours would seem to offer support to the theory outlined in this paper. It could be expected that a child 'hostage' would experience confusion and ambivalence in their relationship with their abusive caregiver. Rather than an absence of attachment or insecure attachment, there appears to be a set of behaviours which form a strong but disturbed or pathological attachment to the caregiver. However, in their reformulation of the D category, the researchers, Carlson and colleagues (1989), gave no consideration to the two-way nature of relationships. Perhaps greater insight into the D category could be gained if the nature of the abuser's interaction with the child was examined in association with the child's response.

## Conclusions

The hostage theory is used to aid understanding of the relationship between the abuser and the abused child. A major value of this theory is that it provides a framework for gaining greater understanding of the abusive experience from the child's perspective. While not detracting from the impact on the child of the specific event of abuse, such as being hit, the hostage theory enables this event to be placed into context. It draws attention to the child's reality, that the person who is there to provide nurture, security and self-worth, may also be the same person who is the source of pain, fear and denigration to the child.

It is proposed that in some circumstances, the child accommodates to this dreadful paradox in a similar way to a political hostage, by establishing a particular type of relationship with the abuser - a pathological attachment. While this pathological attachment is functional in the sense that it allows the child to live in what may be terrifying circumstances, the formation of this type of attachment also has its costs. These costs may be that the child is unable to successfully complete his or her essential developmental stages to achieve satisfactory end-point personality development.

> *... [the hostage theory] draws attention to the child's reality, that the person who is there to provide nurture, security and self-worth, may also be the same person who is the source of pain, fear and denigration to the child.*

Not a great deal of attention has been paid in the literature to the long-term impact of developmental disruptions. Broad, general statements of '... lasting consequences...' (Sroufe, 1979:840), and '... seriously detrimental...' effects (Toro, 1982: 422) can be found. Similarly, as attachment theory is relatively new, there has been little written on the long-term impact of a failure of healthy attachment (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). We do know from the terrorist literature, that the experience of being a hostage may be so dominating even for a mature adult, that it has the effect of dis-engaging the person from other relationships and society in general (Goddard & Stanley, in press).

While a great deal of work needs to be done on this theory, the literature does appear to offer some preliminary support. Even the early child abuse literature noted the detrimental effects of abuse on the child's personality development. There is also a small amount of empirical evidence to support this. Empirical studies have also identified a unique type of attachment by the child to

the caretaker in abusive families, the features of which appear to be analogous to behaviour frequently found in political hostages. The authors and colleagues are currently undertaking further empirical research on pathological attachment in abused children.

Research has tended to overlook the abused child. Much of the child abuse research has concentrated on the needs of the child's parents or family, and the socio-economic circumstances around the abuse (Graziano & Mills, 1992, Stanley, 1991). The authors suggest that there is a great deal to learn from a closer examination of the abused child him or herself, and the nature of the relationship between the child and the abuser. ♦

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