Review

The Psychological impact of Kidnapping

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Accepted 10 March, 2016

Kidnapping is one of the most psychologically damaging crimes of all. Victims typically take many years to heal from the psychological wounds inflicted upon them, and some never completely recover. Kidnappings cause deep emotional and mental scars that leave victims to battle through issues of trust, independence, love, sex, respect, and a litany of others. This research work looks into psychological basis for kidnapping. First to understand the reason and motives of kidnappings and to understand its effects on victims in order to provide effective help to them, their families and the society at large. The psychology behind kidnapping often leads back to a need for power over an individual. Ransom kidnappers may have some of the same motives, but are usually more concerned with the financial gains of their crimes. Kidnapping places its victims under psychological pressure similar to those that experience trauma. People who have survived kidnapping often go on to battle issues of trust for the rest of their lives, as being deprived of freedom and being held against their will can erode trust in humanity as a whole. It is necessary for victims to undergo cognitive behavioral therapy. It involves allowing the victim to change their way of thinking, replacing negatives for positives, until they have reached a point in which their worldviews are different.

Key words: Kidnapping, attachment, therapy, victims, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Kidnapping is a growing global epidemic with no realistic solution. According to Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), Nigeria in the recent years is among the top ten countries with high kidnapping incidence globally. By definition kidnapping is “the taking away or transportation of a person against the person’s will, usually to hold the person in false imprisonment, a confinement without legal authority.” This may be done for ransom or in furtherance of another crime, or in connection with a child custody dispute. Non-custodial parent abductions of children were, by far, the number one type of kidnapping occurring across the globe in 2010 and often do not get included in the most common statistical reporting of abductions.

When it comes to kidnapping, in terms of forensic psychology, there are generally a few main motivations. First and foremost is sexual gratification. Often a person will kidnap in order to hold the victim prisoner as a sexual slave. In extreme cases, kidnappers may torture and kill their victims when they no longer have any use for them. These types of cases are incredibly disturbing and often leave a lasting impact on the psyche of society. Kidnappers may also commit their crimes for ransom. Unlike sexual kidnappings, ransom kidnappings require the abductors keep their victims from harm. Sadly, even in ransom kidnappings, the abductor may have no real intention of ever returning the victim.

If a kidnapper is going to take a hostage for ransom, he will target the victim based upon an outward appearance of wealth or information given to him from someone who knows the victim intimately, such as a household employee, a bank teller, a waitress at the victim’s favorite restaurant or someone else that suspects that the victim has a lot of cash. Hostage-for-ransom victims tend to survive their ordeal.

Zealots, extremists and terrorists tend to target their victims based upon such things as nationality, ethnicity, religion, social status or organizational affiliation (i.e. employees of a specific company or political party might be targeted). Unfortunately, because the primary aim of these types of abductions is to create sensationalism, be visible or to make a statement, the percentage of hostages that are killed can be quite high. Strong emotion and mental defect also play a large part in the overall number of kidnappings. The kidnapping of a child by a non-custodial parent or other adult is usually based upon
Non-custodial parent kidnappings also occur out of spite or revenge. People take hostages during periods of rage and profound loss, too. Gender-based kidnappings occur as well; the mentally disturbed who have sexual deviances often target people just because they are male or female. The kidnapping itself involves a sudden and unpredictable life threatening experience. Subsequently, the victim is placed under the complete control of the abuser who determines when the victim can eat, go to the bathroom, and sleep. The lack of privacy (the victim must eat and relieve him-, or herself in front of the abuser) coupled with absolute vulnerability (there is usually sleep deprivation, nakedness, and social isolation) results in an almost infantile state of dependency upon the abuser. In this way, the abuser/tortmentor also becomes an attachment figure, the person who relieves the victim's pain, isolation, hunger, and all other physical and social-emotional needs. If this dependency is combined with threats that escape will be futile and/or lead to more pain and suffering and/or pain and suffering to the victim's family, then once given apparent liberty of movement and lack of supervision, the victim will not try to escape. The victim becomes psychologically bound to the abuser.

**Statement of Problem**

Although the history of kidnapping and hostage-taking is a very long one, it is only relatively recently that there has been a systematic attempt to understand the effects, both long-term and short-term, on individuals and their families. This is an important issue for clinical and academic reasons. The advice of mental health professionals is sought with increasing frequency with regard to the strategic management of hostage incidents and the clinical management of those who have been abducted. There is evidence to suggest that how best to help those who have been taken hostage is a sensitive and complex matter, and those who deal with such individuals should be as well informed as possible since such events can have long-term adverse consequences, particularly on young children. Kidnapping is one of the most psychologically damaging crimes of all. Victims typically take many years to heal from the psychological wounds inflicted upon them, and some never completely recover. Kidnappings cause deep emotional and mental scars that leave victims to battle through issues of trust, independence, love, sex, respect, and a litany of others.

The psychology behind kidnapping often leads back to a need for power over an individual. As sexual kidnappings also include rape, battery, and homicide, the abductor is typically not simply perpetrating the act for physical gratification. Sexual kidnappers are thrilled by the psychological aspect of the act, as they hold complete power over their victims. A kidnapper's mentality is that once they have another human being in their possession, that person has to rely on them for everything, including food and water, and it is this power that drives many kidnappers to commit these gruesome acts. Ransom kidnappers may have some of the same motives, but are usually more concerned with the financial gains of their crimes. Regardless of the motive, a person who commits the offense of kidnapping often has disordered thinking, either as a result of a mental disorder, a personality disorder, or a combination of both. The most unfortunate aspect of kidnappings, however, is the psychological effects it has on victims. People who have survived kidnapping often go on to battle issues of trust for the rest of their lives, as being deprived of freedom and being held against their will can erode trust in humanity as a whole. Some victims may even become distrustful of family members, believing their families didn't do enough to get them back or to protect them from being abducted in the first place. This can begin a vicious cycle of disordered thinking within victims' lives, leading to difficulty in relationships both personal and professional.

Furthermore, kidnapping victims may have psychological disturbances in other aspects of their everyday lives. Trouble sleeping is one of the most common reported psychological impacts of kidnapping, as the victims are afraid to fall asleep and let their guard down, lest they be taken again. Sexual effects are also likely in cases of kidnappings that involved sexual abuse. Survivors may find it hard to trust their partners or to allow themselves to be vulnerable. Victims of abduction may need many years of therapy to overcome the sexual damage of kidnapping, and to form healthy sexual relationships.

**Psychological effects**

In general terms, the psychological impact of being taken hostage is similar to that of being exposed to other trauma, including terrorist incidents and disasters for adults and children.

Typical adult reactions include:

1. **Cognitive:** impaired memory and concentration; confusion and disorientation; intrusive thoughts ('flashbacks') and memories; denial (i.e. that the event has happened); hyper vigilance and hyper arousal (a state of feeling too aroused, with a profound fear of another incident).
2. **Emotional:** shock and numbness; fear and anxiety (but panic is not common); helplessness and hopelessness; dissociation (feeling numb and 'switched off' emotionally); anger (at anybody – perpetrators, themselves and the authorities); anhedonia (loss of pleasure in doing that which was previously pleasurable); depression (a
reaction to loss); guilt (e.g. at having survived if others died, and for being taken hostage).
3. Social: withdrawal; irritability; avoidance (of reminders of the event). Denial (i.e. a complete or partial failure to acknowledge what has really happened) has often been maligned as a response to extreme stress, but it has survival value (at least in the short term) by allowing the individual a delayed period during which he/she has time to adjust to a painful reality.

Two extreme reactions have also been noted, namely, ‘frozen fright’ and ‘psychological infantilism’. The former refers to a paralysis of the normal emotional reactivity of the individual, and the latter reaction is characterized by regressed behaviour such as clinging and excessive dependence on the captors.

Extended periods of captivity may also lead to ‘learned helplessness’ in which individuals come to believe that no matter what they do to improve their circumstances, nothing is effective. The International Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders (ICD-10) also recognizes the ‘Enduring personality change after a catastrophic experience’ as a possible chronic outcome after a hostage incident. This condition is characterized by:

1. A hostile or mistrustful attitude;
2. Social withdrawal and estrangement;
3. Feelings of emptiness or hopelessness;

A chronic feeling of being ‘on edge’ as if constantly threatened.

Denial, ‘frozen fright’, ‘psychological infantilism’ and ‘learned helplessness’ are not age-specific. Children may also display: school refusal, loss of interest in studies, dependent and regressed behaviour, preoccupation with the event, playing at being the ‘rescuer’, stubborn and oppositional behaviour, and risk-taking. The impact can be particularly serious if the children have been detained over an extended period and if the incident entailed a breach of trust.

**Attachment**

According to research, hostage survivors often develop an unconscious bond to their captors and experience grief if their captors are harmed. Attachment does not have to be reciprocal. One person may have an attachment to an individual which is not shared. Attachment is characterized by specific behaviors in children, such as seeking proximity with the attachment figure when upset or threatened (Bowlby, 1969). Learning / behaviorist theory of attachment (e.g. Dollard & Miller, 1950) suggest that attachment is a set of learned behaviors. The basis for the learning of attachments is the provision of food. When a victim is held captive the victim would rely on their captor for basic needs. These needs are usually withheld to inflict pain and then it is given as reward for compliance. Over a period of time the victim would learn to associate the feeder with the comfort of being fed and through the process of classical conditioning, come to find contact with the captor comforting. They also find that certain behaviors (e.g. compliance) bring desirable responses from others (e.g. comfort), and through the process of operant conditioning learn to repeat these behaviors in order to get the things they want.

**DISCUSSION**

There are generally a few main motivations for kidnapping: sexual gratification, kidnappers may also commit their crimes for ransom. Motives can be divided into ‘expressive’ (i.e. an effort to voice and/or publicize a grievance or express a frustrated emotion) and ‘instrumental’ (i.e. to obtain a particular outcome such as ransom). In reality it is usually difficult to identify any single motive, particularly when the event is terrorist-inspired. Material motives (e.g. ransom) may be conveniently masked by alleged religious, political and moral ones. Moreover, ransoms may be used to fund political and religious activities. Also, some insurgency groups sell hostages on to other groups for their own purposes. The taking of foreign hostages has become a particularly popular modus operandi for terrorists (who tend to be well-organized and selective in their ‘target’ hostages), particularly due to their cynical but generally effective use of extensive media coverage.

Also, the frequency of kidnapping of overseas personnel has markedly increased in Nigeria since the last 5 years. Most incidents in Nigeria are carried out by criminal gangs for ransom with motives there appear to be largely criminal, for financial gain, rather than political. Sometimes such events can be described as ‘Economic Extortive Kidnapping’. However, kidnapping for ransom is a part of a larger story. The current wave of kidnapping began with the abduction of expatriate oil workers by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND, a youth group) in late 2005 as a means of alerting the world of the many years of injustice, exploitation, marginalization and underdevelopment of Niger-Delta region. Like an inferno, other states outside the Niger-Delta region are drawn to this evil practice, mostly for monetary purposes. The shift in focus has been tremendous, from kidnapping of expatriate oil workers to relatives of politicians to relatives of those in the Diaspora and now anybody on sight. Kidnapping takes place anytime and anywhere, in the churches, on the streets, in the hospitals and even at home. This random abduction makes kidnap anxiety inducing to the general populace because any person could be a victim.
The motive for kidnap to a great deal determine how the victim is treated, and it accounts for the chances of survival or death. When the kidnap is done with terrorist intention or for political reasons, there may be physical torture, terrible treatment and frequent treat of being killed. Generally, kidnap places its victims under psychological pressure similar to those that experience trauma. The shock of an unprecedented event, the sudden realization of being held captive loads their mind with trauma inducing thoughts. As their captors begin to unfold the mystery behind their abduction, either demanding for some money (ransom) from family members or for some conditions to be met before their release; all these process affects the victims psychologically.

Kidnappers threaten their victims in order to compel them to release certain information about family members or related issues, depending on the purpose of their abduction. Often time victims are threatened with death or the threat of cutting of some part of the body, some victims experience physical battery; some are often beaten or tortured till they slump off. These threats psychologically affect the victims even after the event. Symptoms including disturbing recurring flashbacks, avoidance or numbing of memories of the event, and hyper arousal, continue after the occurrence of the kidnap. Also, Kidnap victims frequently experience "survivor’s guilt" for remaining alive while others died in cases were others were killed. In other cases they feel this guilt for releasing personal information about their family members to their captors and depending on their captors for basic daily needs. It makes them feel like they permitted the evil or that they were part of the process. In general terms, the psychological impact of being taken hostage is similar to that of being exposed to other trauma, including terrorist incidents and disasters for adults and children.

**Therapy**

Freedom almost always brings a sense of elation and relief. However, adjusting back to the real world after being held hostage can be just as difficult as abruptly leaving it. Upon release, many hostage survivors are faced with transitioning from conditions of isolation and helplessness to sensory overload and freedom. This transition often results in significant adjustment difficulties. They may also feel guilty for developing a bond. This is typically referred to as the Stockholm syndrome. Hostage survivors may also have feelings of guilt for surviving while others did not. It is important for survivors to recognize that these are usual human reactions to being held captive.

Hostage and kidnap survivors can experience stress reactions. Typical reactions occur in:

**Thinking:** Intrusive thoughts, denial, impaired memory, decreased concentration, being overcautious and aware, confusion or fear of the event happening again.

**Emotions:** Shock, numbness, anxiety, guilt, depression, anger and a sense of helplessness.

**Interactions:** Withdrawal and avoidance of family, friends, activities and being on edge.

Such reactions to an extremely stressful event are understandable and normal. These are typical responses and generally decrease after a period of time. It is common for people's reactions to vary from one individual to another.

In terms of healing from the psychological strain of being a kidnap victim, it is necessary for victims to undergo cognitive behavioral therapy. It involves allowing the victim to change their way of thinking, replacing negatives for positives, until they have reached a point in which their worldviews are different. An event such as a kidnapping can cause very deep negative connections to be made within the mind of a victim, and these connections need to be rewired in order to reach a point of normalcy once again. Cognitive-behavioral treatments involve attempting to change the individual’s thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and physiological arousal as well as their behavior, such as their coping behaviors and social skills. It is usually based in the social learning theory.

Another type of treatment mentioned by Brooks-Gordon et al. (2006) that is often used is behavioral intervention, also known as behavior modification or behavior therapy. These interventions include aversion therapy (exposure to deviant material followed by aversive stimulus), covert sensitization (imagining deviant sexual experience until arousal and then imagining powerful negative experience), and olfactory conditioning (an unpleasant odour is paired with a high-risk sexual situation) (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2006).

One last type of therapy that may be used is psychodynamic therapy which involves insight-oriented or supportive approaches in an individual session.

**CONCLUSION**

It is imperative for parents and society as a whole to be more actively involved in assisting kidnap victims. In order to help reduce the psychological effect of kidnap, Psychological debriefing is the most simple and often used preventive measure, partly because of the relative ease with which this treatment can be given to individuals directly following an event. It consists of interviews that are meant to allow individuals to directly confront the event and share their feelings with the counselor and to help structure their memories of the event. Involving social supports, interpersonal psychotherapy, and relaxation therapy may also be important. Physical activity can have an impact on people's psychological wellbeing and physical health. The U.S. National Center
for PTSD recommends moderate exercise as a way to
distract from disturbing emotions, build self-esteem and
increase feelings of being in control again.

They recommend a discussion with a doctor before
starting an exercise program. Play is thought to help
children link their inner thoughts with their outer world,
connecting real experiences with abstract thought.
Repetitive play can also be one of the ways a child
relives traumatic events, and that can be a symptom of
traumatization in a child or young person. To defeat
kidnappers and abduction attempts, it is imperative for
parents and society as a whole to be more vigilant, as
well as continue to be educated about avoiding
dangerous situations. In the age of the Internet, this is
even more important, as predators use this technology to
gain access to people every day. Only when we all
recognize the dangers that exist in our communities can
we begin to eradicate these dangers.

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