

The over concern about Stockholm syndrome

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People all over Taiwan heaved a collective sigh of relief with the news this past week that a disturbed man in Taitung had released a college student without apparent harm after holding him captive at gunpoint for nearly 24 hours.

Surely parents of students and all of us in the “business” of education followed this news story with tangible anxiety.

Let me begin at what some readers may feel is an odd place. I prefer to start at the end of the story and work backwards.

An interesting feature of this event links to the so called Stockholm syndrome.

Several media reports beat quite a drum about the fact that the released student, Chang Yu-ming, did not do something. He did not fall victim to “Stockholm syndrome.” His emotions had to have been boiling like water in a hot pot. The “not” that we are following here may then be important. That odd Stockholm thing did not happen. Why?

The Stockholm syndrome worry arose when a dean at National Taitung University (NTU) reportedly opined that Mr. Chang might have become unduly sympathetic to the gunman. NTU by the way is the school at which the released hostage studies. His two mates, also held against their will, but released early on, are also NTU students. After Chang acted as his captor's mouthpiece to police, the dean opined that Chang might have become unduly sympathetic to the gunman. The media leapt at the remark like wolves at raw meat. Suddenly rumors flew that the student was suffering from that malady from Sweden.

What exactly is “Stockholm syndrome”? Bank robbers in Stockholm, Sweden got caught in a standoff with police in the summer of 1973, took captives, and held them hostage for five tense days. The captives emerged voicing positive views of their kidnapers. These abused persons seemed unable to face emotions of anger or resentment at their victimhood. They appeared not to grasp the social evil that such criminal behavior represents in a civilized society. Put simply, Stockholm syndrome is a catch-all term to describe a type of brain-washing that victims may experience, a devastating loss of objectivity, while undergoing a potentially traumatic ordeal.

Suspicious of facile definitions, I am wondering to what degree Stockholm syndrome may be self-inflicted. Curiosity prompts me to ask: Do our personalities or backgrounds set us up to fall into the trap of Stockholm syndrome?

I held up my hand the minute I heard of public words that the captive student in Taitung could “go Stockholm.” Even then, however, I told myself not to over-react to an apparent over-reaction. “Stay calm,” I told myself. “Don’t commit without more information.”

I could be wrong, but it seems to me that many of us in Taiwan rush to extremes without using our heads. We quickly draw metaphorical guns and fire away at targeted problems. We give little forethought to our words and actions. We reach for shallow, convenient, and quick answers to what are actually serious problems. We rarely sweat over the necessity of analysis. High leaders in our society have in recent years effectively crippled themselves by ignoring their appallingly low analytical abilities.

One reason the application of Stockholm to Taitung was a misfit is that Stockholm was so different than Taitung. The time factor was far off kilter. Five days rain more pain upon someone than one single, admittedly very long day.

I sometimes err by crediting students with unrealistically high levels of maturity. Maybe I make that goof because I’m so tired of hearing colleagues who I respect describe college students as “xiao peng yo” (little friends), the same term for kindergarten and grade school children. The media and others underestimated the strength and maturity of Chang Yu-ming. He was no “xiao peng yo.”

Young Mr. Chang and his buddies at the outset of the hostage event showed no signs whatever of “Xiao peng yo” syndrome. They saw reality staring right into their eyeballs, and got an instant grip on themselves. Whether they had analysis in mind or not, they studied their terrain and stepped along with due care.

Chang acted at least as dispassionately and rationally here as anyone else in the story, and maybe more so. We in positions of influence over others in our society (including in church and education) should follow his fine example. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points

1) This column focuses on the "kidnapping" and release of a college student in Taitung for approximately 24 hours by a disturbed gunman. It is possible that you may know of this event because it actually involved 3 students. Are you aware of this news event? Did you follow it in the news until the student was freed? Are college students interested in news events?

2) "Stockholm syndrome" also appears in this column. This refers to an odd turning of emotions (maybe a kind of 'brain-washing' of self, that may happen when people held hostage develop feelings of kindness and sympathy for their captors. "Brain-washing" is a very strong term. Have you ever felt "brain-washed" in any way in your life?

3) The writer says that people who wrongly accused the captive student of suffering from "Stockholm syndrome" did not analyze the situation deeply enough. What does "analyze" mean to you? Are you learning to analyze more deeply in your college education? How can you improve your ability to analyze?

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