

## THE VICTIM'S EXPERIENCE OF HIJACKING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

**Mrs J Macgregor**

MA Psychology

**Prof. WJ Schoeman**

Head of Department: Psychology, Rand Afrikaans University

**Prof. AD Stuart**

D.Litt. Et Phil - RAU

Deputy Head of Department: Psychology, Rand Afrikaans University

**Corresponding author:** adst@lw.rau.ac.za

**Keywords:** hijacking; phenomenological; psychological trauma; victim; crime; trauma

### ABSTRACT

*This paper summarises a phenomenological study that was designed to explore the victim's lived experience of undergoing a motor vehicle hijacking. The aim of the study was to add to the knowledge and understanding of this complex phenomenon. The design of the study was qualitative. Data was collected through in-depth unstructured interviews with four people who had very recently been hijacked. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim for each subject. Both intra-individual and inter-individual analyses of the data were conducted. This paper presents a discussion of the findings of common and contrasting themes and patterns. The nature of the victim's experiences during, immediately after and in the days following the hijacking trauma is elucidated. This information can contribute towards building a theoretical framework for understanding the victim's experience of motor vehicle hijacking.*

### OPSOMMING

*Hierdie artikel verskaf 'n oorsig oor 'n fenomenologiese studie wat ontwerp is om die slagoffer se geleefde ervaring van 'n motorkaping te ondersoek. Die doel van die studie was om by te dra tot die kennis and begrip van die komplekse verskynsel. Die ontwerp van die studie was kwalitatief. Data is versamel deur indiepte, ongestruktureerde onderhoude met vier persone wat onlangs gekaap is. Die onderhoude is opgeneem op oudioband en verbatim getranskribeer vir elke persoon. Beide intra-individuele en inter-individuele ontledings van die data is gedoen. In die artikel word die bevindings ten opsigte van gemeenskaplike en kontrasterende temas aangebied. Die aard van die ervarings tydens, direk daarna en in die dae na die kaping word bespreek. Die inligting kan bydra tot die vorming van 'n teoretiese raamwerk ten einde die slagoffer se ervaring van 'n motorkaping te verstaan.*

### INTRODUCTION

The incidence of vehicle hijacking in South Africa has reached alarming proportions and plagues the lives of a growing number of people. In 1997 alone, 13 011 car hijackings were reported in South Africa (SAPS, 1998:2). Crime (particularly violent crime) may affect victims and their families in both objective and subjective ways. Objectively, people are often injured and need to be

hospitalised or counselled, and this translates into medical and mental health bills, lost productivity and increased emigration of skilled citizens. The impact of crime can also be defined more subjectively, in terms of its impact on individual and social attitudes, and on behaviour.

There is emerging consensus regarding the positive correlation between the number of traumatic events

experienced and adverse mental health consequences (Breslau, Davis, Adreski & Peterson, 1991: 216; Norris, 1992:410). Several negative mental health outcomes have been documented following crimes with threatened or actual violence, including: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse, suicidality and increased usage of mental health services (Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993: 984; Horowitz, 1999:1).

As a growing population of traumatised individuals and families will need to make use of psychological services in order to deal with the effects of the hijacking experience, it is vital that practitioners understand the nature and sequelae of hijacking on victims in order to develop a conception and a treatment approach which will meet the unique picture of this particular traumatising experience. This paper summarises a phenomenological study that was designed to explore the victim's trauma experience of undergoing a motor vehicle hijacking.

## TRAUMA

The hijacking experience constitutes a psychological trauma as the victim experiences a state of powerlessness in the face of a force perceived to be overwhelming, such that neither resistance nor escape is possible. Despite being a common occurrence, hijackings are extraordinary, because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life and the usual belief systems that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1992:23).

Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events, such as an armed hijacking, generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death, and victims experience extreme feelings of helplessness and terror. The severity of the trauma is increased by factors which essentially serve to heighten the victim's sense of helplessness and terror, such as being taken by surprise, being trapped or exposed to the point of exhaustion, being physically violated, injured or exposed to extreme violence (Herman, 1992:10; Yehuda & McFarlane, 1999:47).

### Outcomes of the experience of trauma

Trauma may result in long-term changes in

neurobiological systems, including memory loss and long-term abnormalities in the brain's neurotransmitters and neuropeptide systems. Fear conditioning, behavioural sensitisation, and a failure of extinction seem to play important roles in the persistence and re-experiencing of traumatic memories and stressor sensitivity (Krystal, Kosten, Southwick, Mason, Perry & Giller, 1999:276 - 277).

Theories of trauma have, in the last two decades, centred on explicit interactional paradigms of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:3; Yehuda & McFarlane, 1999:44). These multi-factorial models propose that post-traumatic adaption is determined by several classes of variables which include: (1) the nature and dimensions of the trauma (e.g. the prevalence rates of PTSD among crime victims vary between 19 and 75% whereas prevalence rates for natural disasters vary between 2 and 16% (Yehuda & McFarlane, 1999:46)); (2) personality traits; (3) the nature of the recovery environment; and (4) the coping resources of the person.

The most common pathological psychological outcomes of the experience of trauma are Acute Stress Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in which the symptom clusters of hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction predominate. PTSD has frequently been identified among victims of crime, especially those in which the victim is threatened with death or injury, is physically injured or raped (Holmes & St Lawrence, 1983:417; Resnick *et al.* 1993:984; Rychtarik, Silverman, Van Landingham & Prue, 1984:412; Steketee & Foa, 1987:69; Horowitz, 1999:15). Susceptibility to PTSD is a function of the interaction of several factors: genetic predisposition, constitution and physical health, age, personality make-up, past life experiences, state of mind, stage of maturational development, social support system before and after and nature and severity of the event (Horowitz, Wilner, Kaltreider & Alvarez, 1999:32 - 37).

Other maladaptive outcomes include depression or dysthymia, dissociative reactions, adjustment disorders, substance abuse, difficulties at work and in interpersonal relationships, personality alteration (negative), somatisation, hostility, anxiety and phobic anxiety, avoidance and constriction of activities, heightened mistrust of others, and a sense of disconnection from

---

self, others, the world and the future.

Non-pathological outcomes are more likely if the victim experiences good social support, and are also more probable if the victim is a "hardy coper", having an internal locus of control and responsibility; accurate appraisal and effective emotional and cognitive coping skills; and a coherent sense of personal identity, and if he/she is able to find meaning in the experience or its outcome. Non-pathological or adaptive outcomes include psychological growth and personal development; involvement in pro-social initiatives; non-pathological changes in personality; deepened spirituality; changes in the individual's need or motive hierarchy, and/or positive alteration in his/her beliefs, attitudes and values. The above-mentioned outcomes refer mostly to a broad range of trauma experiences and it is therefore necessary to study the trauma of hijacking in more detail.

## HIJACKING

The word "hijack" originated in the early years of this century, in the American Midwest when bands of hoboos would prey on harvesters, commanding them to, "Hold your hands up high, Jack!" which was later shortened to "hijack". It is broadly used to mean the coercion, which forces individuals to do things they do not wish to do (Dailey & Pickrel, 1975:161).

According to statistics supplied by the SAPS Communication Services (SAPS, 1998:1), the total number of reported car hijackings in South Africa in 1997 was 13011, while the total number of reported truck hijackings in 1997 was 4296. The most vehicle hijackings occur in densely populated areas, such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. In 1997, in Gauteng alone, an average of almost 22 cars and almost 8 trucks were hijacked every day. Countrywide, an average of approximately 36 cars and 12 trucks were hijacked per day in 1997. It should be noted that these figures do not include attempted but unsuccessful hijackings and should also be borne in mind that the statistics refer only to the number of vehicles hijacked and not to the number of people who experience being hijacked. The number of victims directly exposed to the trauma of hijackings and attempted hijackings thus greatly exceeds the statistics given above.

Contrary to common belief, most hijacking victims are male (89% of reported cases) and most hijackings take place between 16:00 and 20:00. In most cases, the victim is robbed of his/her vehicle while in or around the house or while pulling into or out of the driveway (SAPS, 1998:3). This adds an important dimension when studying the effects of hijacking as specific responses regarding the safety of one's immediate surroundings may occur.

There currently exists very little literature specifically related to the psychological aspects of experiencing a vehicle hijacking, both locally and internationally. Of the few published works which exist on the subject of hijacking, most deal with aircraft and luxury liner hijackings where passengers are taken hostage by groups, for political or financial gain, and focus on aspects such as group dynamics, timing and circumstances of release, and issues of captivity in hostage situations. These studies are nevertheless of some relevance since the victims of these hijackings, like those of "car-jackings", also experience the threat to life, to bodily integrity, to security and to self-image (Fields, 1980:77) which necessitate that victims use new coping skills to deal with their overwhelming fear and profound sense of helplessness.

Based on findings of studies of hostages in aircraft, sea craft and bus hijackings, as well as of victims of criminal traumatisation, the victim's immediate experience of hijacking was expected to include some or all of the following: shock, disbelief and dissociation; attempts to ensure survival; feelings of terror and helplessness; and heightened sensory alertness (Thompson, 1991:3). In the short-term, the victim may experience euphoria at survival; the need to talk about the experience; psychological distress; feelings of isolation and powerlessness; symptoms of intrusion, arousal and constriction; and a questioning of his/her established schemata for self and the world. Post-trauma adaptation can be helped or hindered by the quality of the victim's support environment and coping mechanisms (McDuff, 1992:826).

## AIM AND RATIONALE

As yet, there exists no theory of the victim's experience of vehicle hijacking *per se*; the phenomenon is usually interpreted in terms of the current theory on Post-



Traumatic Stress Disorder and the practice of crisis debriefing. There is extensive literature describing reactions to the experience of trauma in different settings, such as war, natural and "man-made" disasters and rape. There is, however, less work on the victim's reaction to and experience of criminal victimisation, and even less on criminal victimisation taking the form of vehicle hijacking. Only by investigating, analysing and describing the experiences of and reactions to trauma as *experienced by those involved* across different settings and experience types will it be possible to determine whether there are common features in psychological responses to different stressors or whether particular stressful experiences have specific syndromes of response. For this reason, hijacking needs to be investigated separately and specifically rather than being merely subsumed under other classes of traumatic victimisation.

This study proceeded from the phenomenological assumption that an experience is best told and understood from the frame of reference of the person who experiences it. The main goal of this study was to describe and analyse in terms of a phenomenological framework the interview responses of a small sample of vehicle hijacking victims. Further goals were to 1) discover victims' perceived experience of the hijacking and 2) to determine what effect the hijacking had, both in terms of the original experience and subsequent effects in the immediate to short-term.

## METHOD

### Sampling method

The design of this study was qualitative. Four women (aged 25, 39, 43 and 74 years respectively) who had been hijacked within the week prior to the interview participated in this study. Two of the women were English-speaking and two were Afrikaans-speaking, all were residents of Gauteng and all of them called in to the Institute for Child and Adult Guidance at the Rand Afrikaans University for counselling where they were subsequently interviewed.

Margaret (43) was hijacked while picking her daughter up from school, held captive with her four year-old daughter and eventually dropped off by the hijackers on

the side of a busy road. After running out of petrol on a highway, two armed men tried to hijack Michelle (25) but fled when someone stopped to help her. Hanlie (74) was hijacked at an on-ramp, pushed into the backseat of the car while the hijackers sped off. They eventually left her in Kathlehong where she could phone her son. Wilma (39) was on a business related errand in downtown Johannesburg. After pulling into a parking space she witnessed the brutal murder of a man in a car behind her and then a gang of hijackers tried to hijack her. She fled, injuring a hijacker in the process.

The interviews took place during the period May to July 1998. The sample selection approach followed in this study is that which Patton (1990:156) terms *typical cases*. While the aim was not that of generalisability, the fairly homogenous sample did permit the drawing of more general propositions.

### Data collection and analysis

The researcher, by means of in-depth unstructured interviews, collected data from each participant. Each interview was recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. The interview began with a broad question such as: *"Please tell me, in as much detail as possible, about your experience of being hijacked"*. Further questions were aimed at getting subjects to elaborate aspects of their responses and were based on Patton's (1990:130) concept of 'probes' or probing questions. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. This provided the researcher with the opportunity to establish a trust relationship based on a non-evaluative and non-judgemental attitude.

The tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed as a first step in data analysis. Following a careful reading of the transcripts, the data was then divided into units of meaning (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:168) and, using the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:3; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:172; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:237), themes and patterns, both similar and contrasting, were identified.

This study aimed to derive meaning from data that is still grounded in its source and yet which nevertheless permits the development of more general propositions. An intra-individual analysis of each subject's account

rendered an understanding of the individual's perceptions and understanding of her experience in context (contextualised), while an inter-individual analysis of the accounts permitted a discussion of common and contrasting themes and patterns (categorised). The nature of the subjects' experiences during, immediately after and in the days following the hijacking trauma was elucidated in detail.

## Trustworthiness

As part of its provisions for trustworthiness, this study provides clear information on the purpose of the study, how participants became part of the sample, the data collection and analysis as well as the findings. The purpose of providing detailed information is to make the research process transparent for the reader and providing a basis for judging the credibility of the study (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994:216). As limited space is available only selected quotes from the interviews are provided in the following discussion. Interested readers are however welcome to contact the authors should more information be required.

## Ethical considerations

It must be noted that all four interviewees were unknown to the researcher when they called at the Institute for Child and Adult Guidance at the Rand Afrikaans University for counselling. The participants were informed of the aims and nature of the research and gave written consent for the information to be used. To protect the identity of the participants, names and other identifying information were changed. In addition to the interview, each participant received a hijack debriefing. A trained psychologist completed the interviews and debriefing sessions under supervision of the Institute.

## FINDINGS

An appreciation of both the contextual and the categorical aspects of the victim's experience of hijacking are essential to developing a full understanding of this phenomenon in its individual and social context. The broader view, which is presented in this article, complements, rather than supersedes, the more particular view since each hijacking victim's experience is unique, while at the same time being a sample of the

set of all victim hijacking experiences.

Based both on the literature reviews of trauma and hijacking, and the findings of this study, suggested contributions towards a framework for understanding the victim's experience of hijacking can be made. It is strongly emphasised, however, that a general theory cannot be formulated on the basis of the experiences of four subjects. Nevertheless, an analysis of the victims' reported experiences did yield some common themes and patterns, which are summarised below. For ease of discussion, the victim's experience is divided into three phases: (1) reaction during the experience; (2) immediate to short-term reaction; and (3) general issues in the short to medium-term reaction. It should be noted, however, that these reactions do not occur in discrete periods; reactions and symptoms "overflow" into the longer-term. In addition to the discussion, Table 1 provides an overview of the findings.

Table 1: Summary of findings

Phase	Identified theme	Main findings
During hijacking	Initial reaction	Immediate awareness of what is occurring and attention shifts rapidly to survival strategies.
	Exacerbating factors	Being hijacked along with a child.
		Loss of property, especially that of sentimental value.
		Being taken captivity and being abandoned in area that is perceived to be dangerous and hostile.
	Strategies employed by victims	Staying calm (panic is rare), keeping a co-victim safe.
		praying.
		Negotiating, pleading or cooperating with hijackers.
		watchfully monitoring hijackers.
		Escaping (if possible).
	Sensory and cognitive distortions	Emotional shutdown and minimising loss of dignity.
		Memorising the hijacker's face to identify him later.
		Time is experienced as slowed-down.
	Memory	Heightened sensory awareness, attention mainly on leader and weapon and descriptions of hijackers extend beyond physical characteristics; also includes emotions, attitudes, intentions etc.
		Depersonalisation and derealisation.
		Some images are detailed, etched into memory while others are unclear and incomplete while flashbacks occur regularly.
Religion and Support		Prayer may serve as an adaptive mechanism.
		Event may precipitate spiritual crisis.
		High premium placed on support, and in turn, failure to assist is viewed negatively.

Immediate to short-term response	Hyperarousal	Panic attacks, sleep difficulties, exhaustion, impaired concentration, forgetfulness, motivational problems, irritability and anger outbursts.
		Heightened vigilance and need to implement security measures.
	Intrusion	Re-experiencing memories, thoughts and emotions.
		Intrusive memories e.g. flashbacks, nightmares or recollections.
	Avoidance - constriction	Disbelief and denial, attempts to suppress emotions, emotional numbness, feelings of detachment.
Gaps in memory, attempts to deliberately forget details.		
Avoidance of thoughts, memories, scenes associated with hijacking, avoidance of being alone, avoidance of activities, people or objects which may arouse recollections.		
Use of various substances to dampen hyperarousal symptoms.		
Short to medium-term issues	Support	Instrumental assistance, emotional support, empathy, concern, interest in the experience and encouragement to seek counselling are viewed as positive support factors.
		Blaming, minimising impact, lack of sympathy, morbid curiosity or denigration of reaction are viewed as negative responses.
		Indirect traumatising of family members.
		Negative views of agencies such as police and judicial system.
	Exacerbating factors	Advanced age, previous trauma experiences, concurrent life stressors.

## The victim's experience during the hijacking

*"And then already I knew...I knew I was in trouble. I knew he was going to come and do something".*

As indicated by the above quote by an interviewee, some victims of hijacking report sensing danger just prior to its onset. This might represent a post-trauma interpretation, or it might be based in a swift perusal and appraisal of the stimulus field, or some other unknown factor.

The victim's initial reaction may be one of a very brief period of shock, surprise and disbelief. Some victims experience paralysing shock and total bewilderment, but a more common reaction appears to be an immediate awareness of what is occurring and a rapid shift of attention to survival issues and strategies as Wilma recalls: *"Something warned me, be careful! And...then I realised that I must get away from here"*. Panic is rare. In terms of Wilson's (1989:56) framework, the following

dimensions of the experience serve to exacerbate the severity of the trauma: a high degree of life threat or threat of injury; fast and unexpected onset; severe and multiple stressors (e.g. multiple attackers); a relatively long duration; witnessing of violent injury to or possible death of another person; moral conflict inherent in the situation (e.g., protecting the self versus protecting others); the hijacking occurring in a location previously perceived to be "safe"; a negative impact on the victim's community as a result of the hijacking; and perceived high potential for re-occurrence. Additional exacerbating factors that were indicated by the interviewees in this study include:

- Being hijacked along with a child: *"She [the four year-old daughter] was saying things to him like, 'I don't like you!'...And then this...idiot behind me would tell me again to make her shut up" and "All I saw was this little thing on my lap and I needed to get her out of the car"*.
- Harassment (verbal or physical) by the hijackers.
- Loss of property (particularly those of sentimental value): *"And then he must have seen it dangling out or something and he said to me, 'Take it off.' And I said to him, 'Can't you leave me with anything?"*
- Being taken captive: *"No, they could just have pushed me out there and drove off with my car. No, I can't understand it"*.
- Being abandoned in an area perceived to be dangerous and hostile: *"And not one of them there would help me and there are thousands...They just stood and stared at me and did not do anything...It was terrible, really it was terrible"*.

The experience of being hijacked meets the first diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (APA, 1994), namely that the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. In the hijacking, the victim's life or bodily integrity is threatened by the hijacker's weapon as well as by other factors (e.g. the threat of rape, the possibility of a car accident, or of being victimised by other people once released). The fear of death is present even when hijackers use no weapon.

The threat of death persists beyond the actual hijacking since many victims fear retribution or re-victimisation from the hijackers (especially if they are in possession of an address, and/or house-keys). Michelle describes the feeling of helplessness and vulnerability:

- Michelle: *"I've got the alarm, but if the alarm goes off, what do I do? Do I go sit in the corner of my room and try to hide? You know, I feel...totally, like I can't do anything".*
- Interviewer: *"Totally vulnerable".*
- Michelle: *"Yes. And like they could walk into my house, the same two, or any two, and what am I going to do?"*

The confrontation with death and/or injury may propel the victim into an existential crisis, where he/she is forced to acknowledge personal mortality and vulnerability and may respond with shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and/or acceptance, even during the immediate hijacking experience: *"And immediately I knew, I was going to die"* (Michelle).

### **Strategies utilised by victims**

During the hijacking, victims employed a variety of strategies to increase their chances of survival, including:

- Staying calm: *"And then, uhm, the panic just seemed to disappear, it's as if it just went away after that".*
- Negotiating or pleading with hijackers: *"I started begging him...I said to him, 'Please just let me go'".*
- Cooperating with hijackers: Michelle recalls trying to help the hijackers pull out her car radio: *"So I leaned over and I helped them to try and pull".*
- Watchfully monitoring them: *"...he was sitting on top of me, I felt his hands were sweaty and that's when I realised that he's ..., that I can probably try and talk my way out of this".*
- Praying: *"And I prayed, 'God, now you must help me'".*
- Escaping (if possible): *"And I don't know how I got out of there, I just know I did. I turned the steering wheel this way, but I drove that way. I don't know, God helped me there..."*

Victims experience an autonomically-based fight-or-flight

response, which is usually stymied since the victim cannot escape and resistance would jeopardise his/her life. The victim thus experiences a freeze-fear response, feeling terror and a strong urge to escape, but being able to do little about the situation.

Many experience what Thompson (1991:4) described as a state of "trapped-body, racing-mind". The victim remains outwardly still and maintains a compliant attitude towards the hijackers, while simultaneously experiencing a rapid flow of thoughts. These racing thoughts seem mainly to be focused on the possibility of dying, assessing threats from various quarters, thinking of loved ones and assessing possibilities of escape or strategies for survival.

It seems that victims are unlikely to panic during the hijacking. Most report an experience of *"emotional shutdown"* or *"being switched off"* in which they feel nothing. This emotional constriction, together with dissociative processes, seems to protect against panic and distress and thereby increases the likelihood of survival. Once they believe themselves to be safe from threat, however, victims tend to experience a full panic reaction and great emotional distress. The panic versus emotional-constriction response experienced at the time of trauma (or just after) endures in the longer term intrusion-avoidance cycle of victims of post-traumatic stress.

Victims employ a variety of behavioural and cognitive strategies which serve to minimise their feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability, and to preserve some sense of control and/or self-efficacy during the experience, including: actively implementing survival strategies; praying; staying calm; keeping a co-victim safe; memorising the face of the hijacker so as to be able to identify it later; reframing the situation more positively; and minimising loss of dignity.

In contrast to the victims of aircraft and sea craft hijackings, car hijacking victims may not typically experience strong feelings of resignation, surrender or apathy during the hijacking experience. This may reflect the inherent differences between the experience of motor vehicle hijacking and aircraft hijacking, since the former is typically of shorter duration and involves a closer and more intense personal interaction with the hijackers.



---

## ***Sensory and cognitive distortions experienced by victims***

Victims appear to experience a number of cognitive distortions or alterations during the hijacking experience. They often experience time as being "slowed-down" and indicate that the encounter felt much longer than it actually was. Victims may also experience heightened sensory awareness, noticing a wealth of detail in a very short space of time. Wilma described this heightened awareness as follows: *"You know, everything is so clear, so clear. His face- I could tell you precisely-"*.

During the hijacking, victims often psychologically "escape" by experiencing a sense of not being fully present in their bodies (depersonalisation) and/or a sense that the traumatic experience is not real (derealisation); as Hanlie experienced it like a dream: *"But I could not believe it when they drove away with my car. It's like a dream"*.

The victim's attention seems to be focused mainly on the hijackers (especially the lead hijacker) and the weapons since these constitute the main threat to life. Victims are afterwards typically able to describe the weapons in minute detail and images of the weapons often return as unwelcome intrusive memories. The memories of the hijacker return later in vivid flashbacks although the consciously memorised memory, later retrieved by means of conscious recall, seems more susceptible to fading. Victims' impressions of the hijackers extend beyond physical appearance and encompass perceptions of the hijackers' emotions, attitudes, intentions and group dynamics. This is clearly illustrated in the following description of the hijacker's eyes by Wilma: *"Now, that's his eyes, that big black wheel, but the dot of light is not there and it's dull, there's no light. It's ice-cold, it's dark, it's evil, ugly."*

### ***Memory***

*"Just this person, and the gun and 'Move!' I don't even, I don't even have any from when we were driving. Just that initial- When I realised we were being hijacked - that picture is there, all the time. All the time"* (a response from Margaret when asked about flashbacks).

The victim's memory of the trauma seems to be a confusing patchwork of vivid, detailed, unforgettable images interspersed with gaps or blanks for certain

aspects or periods. These memory deficiencies may be due to faulty encoding or retrieval, and/or memory degradation, and have their origin in neurophysiological and neurochemical changes which occur in the brain during and after the experience of trauma, as well as in possible psychogenic processes such as repression, thought-blocking, or unconscious avoidance of the catastrophic imagery.

It appears that the two forms of memory described as explicit and implicit memory (Graf & Schacter, 1985:501; Sutker & Adams, 1993:3 are both involved. Explicit memories, which are consciously encoded and retrieved, are normal, narrative- or declarative-type memories and are subject to fading. Implicit memory, which appears to be the memory system involved in traumatic memory (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1991:426), is not consciously encoded, returns in the form of intrusive memories (such as flashbacks) and seems to be particularly resistant to fading or to integration into the victim's life narrative.

### ***Religion and support***

It seems that a religious orientation, in conjunction with the utilisation of prayer as a coping strategy during the traumatic encounter, might comprise an adaptive coping mechanism during the encounter. Those victims with religious orientations who pray during the hijacking seem more likely to attribute their survival to divine intervention, may experience strengthened faith and may find it easier to attribute positive meaning to their experience. The hijacking may, however, precipitate spiritual crises in victims whose established religious beliefs are not broad or flexible enough to accommodate or give meaning to their experience of being personally traumatised as illustrated by the following words of a Hanlie: *"I, do not know whether (pause) the Lord is trying to show me.... I try to do good to other people (pause). I also don't hurt other people, so why did this happen to me? What is the Lord's purpose with it?"*

Victims place high value on the practical assistance and emotional support that they receive from people at the time of the hijacking. When others fail to assist victims, this increases their sense of helplessness, isolation and vulnerability, and further challenges their belief in the benevolence of the world. Michelle believes that the man who stopped saved her life (*"the Indian gentleman that*



*helped me - I honestly feel that I owe him my life") whilst Hanlie describes her experience of not being assisted as follows: "They just stood and stared at me and did not do anything. When I asked them they turned away, they said nothing.... It was terrible, really it was terrible".*

### **The victim's experience just after the hijacking (immediate to short-term response)**

Immediately after the hijacking or attempted hijacking experience, the victim may feel euphoria at having survived. Michelle describes her initial feeling as, *"I just felt very happy to be there and to be alive and in my own bed"*, which quickly turned to, *"But the very next morning, I all of a sudden wasn't that happy anymore"*. Victims often feel the need to connect with significant others. In the immediate to short-term, the victim is likely to respond, to a greater or lesser degree, with symptoms rooted in the hyperarousal, intrusion and avoidance-constriction triad of symptom clusters.

#### **Hyperarousal**

The traumatised individual's physiological state is one of *hyperarousal*, a condition of more-or-less permanent alert which is rooted in the original traumatic hyperarousal. Specific manifestations of this hyperarousal, which occur in the immediate to short-term reaction of the victim, include: panic attacks; sleep difficulties; exhaustion; impaired concentration and attention; forgetfulness; motivational problems; increased irritability and outbursts of anger; somatic complaints and an exaggerated startle response.

Victims also respond with heightened vigilance and a need to implement increased security measures, which should not necessarily be considered as symptoms or pathological reactions, since they comprise, at least in part, an appropriate reaction to the experience of fear, distress and powerlessness engendered by the hijacking and the possible likelihood of revictimisation.

#### **Intrusion**

The second major cluster of post-traumatic stress responses, or "symptoms", comprises those in which the victim experiences a *re-experiencing or intrusion* of memories, thoughts, and emotions related to the trauma, into everyday life. Sensations, images and affect originally

experienced or processed during the trauma are "re-lived", often unwillingly, in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, memories, waves of emotion and preoccupation with the hijacking.

Immediately after being hijacked, victims are distracted, and unable to do much except talk and express their emotions. It seems that they experience emotional distress most intensely on the day of and the day following hijacking, feeling emotions of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and undifferentiated emotional distress. In the days following the hijacking, victims may be emotionally labile and experience bouts of emotional distress, which disturb and confuse them (*e.g. "I don't know why I'm reacting this way. I just want to be normal and carry on."*); the presence of supportive others may buffer somewhat against these distressing experiences.

Intrusive memories (flashbacks, nightmares, or recollections) invade the victim's thoughts on a continual and persistent basis and are accompanied by emotional distress. The intrusive memories are vivid and may take the form of a series of "frozen" impressions (described as *"photographs"* by one victim), involving many or all of the senses, which appear to be resistant to fading. While intrusive episodes are often unpredictable, they seem to occur most commonly at night, when victims close their eyes and when victims are confronted with a stimulus similar to one encountered during the hijacking.

This distress in reaction to cues connected to those present in the traumatic encounter may be understood in terms of the behavioural and social learning (Bandura, 1986:2) concepts of classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1960:3) and generalisation where the presence of a stimulus (*e.g.*, driving a car) was closely paired with an unconditioned stimulus (being hijacked and threatened with a weapon) that reliably would elicit an unconditioned response (*e.g.* fear). After one such traumatic pairing, the conditioned stimulus (driving a car) now elicits, by itself, a conditioned response (fear, emotional distress, physiological arousal) very like the original unconditioned response. The process of stimulus generalisation, whereby stimuli similar to the original stimulus tend to produce the same response, may account for the fact that this reaction occurs even when, for example, the car to be driven is not the same car as that in which the victim was hijacked.

---

## Avoidance - constriction

*"...I don't ever want to see that again, I don't ever, I don't even want to go anywhere near there. I don't want to see those men".*

As Wilma's response indicates, the third cluster of "symptoms" in the post-traumatic response includes those of avoidance and constriction or inhibition. During the hijacking, constrictive responses such as denial, dissociation and emotional shutdown may be adaptive and may increase survival. When these constrictive responses persist long after the danger is over, and when they are sufficiently severe to impair or severely inhibit the individual's functioning, then they constitute maladaptive symptoms of the post-traumatic stress response.

A variety of constrictive and avoidant responses were evident in the post-traumatic experiences of the interviewed hijack victims, including: disbelief that the hijacking actually occurred; denial of the full extent of its impact on the victim's life and psyche; gaps in memory for the traumatic event (amnesic constriction); avoidance of being alone; avoidance of thoughts, memories or scenes associated with the hijacking; avoidance of activities (especially driving a car), people or objects which might arouse recollections of the trauma; attempts to deliberately "forget" the incident; attempts to suppress emotion and crying; avoiding areas or roads perceived as "dangerous"; markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities; a sense of emotional numbness and/or a restricted range of affect; using varied substances (including alcohol and drugs) to dampen symptoms of hyperarousal and intrusion; feeling detached or estranged from others; and a sense of fore-shortened future.

Emotional constriction, a response in which emotions are blunted or numbed in an extension of the emotional shutdown which occurred at the time of the trauma, leaves victims feeling "switched off" or "numb". The alternation of bouts of emotional distress with periods of emotional constriction may aggravate the victim's sense of unpredictability and helplessness (Herman, 1992:56), or may regulate the "doses" of emotional and memory disturbances to the individual's consciousness and thus facilitate emotional balance and psychological integration (Brom & Kleber, 1989:340).

## General issues in the short to medium-term reaction

### Support

An adequate support environment (in terms of quality and quantity) can play an important role in helping the traumatised individual to cope and may buffer against possible pathological outcomes. Social support is perceived as positive by the victim when it includes instrumental assistance, emotional support and empathy, concern for the individual's welfare and interest in his/her experience, and encouragement to seek counselling. Such positive social support serves to validate the traumatic nature of the individual's experience and his/her response to it, and has a number of beneficial effects for the victim. Those victims who may be unable or unwilling to fully exploit their support systems may find counselling especially useful. Victims often believe, however, that their experience cannot be fully comprehended by those who have not personally experienced a similar fate.

Hijacking victims perceive as negative those responses from others which seem to blame the victim or minimise the traumatic nature of the experience, and which appear to the victim to be indicative of a lack of sympathy, a lack of interest, morbid curiosity or denigration of the victim's reaction. These responses serve to invalidate the victim's experience and subsequent reaction, and may comprise a secondary victimisation experience for the victim, leading to a number of negative consequences, including self-doubt, self-blame, an increased sense of isolation, impaired interpersonal relations and impaired work performance. It seems that *educating the victim's family* about the victim's experiences and warning them about unintentionally adopting a destructive attitude towards the victim can help to promote a healing recovery environment.

Family members of the traumatised victim may be indirectly traumatised by the victim's experience, particularly if they themselves have previously experienced trauma, and they may react with shock, anxiety, anger, heightened arousal, emotional distress and/or withdrawal. Children of the victim may respond with emotional distress, regressive behaviour, separation anxiety and heightened vigilance.

While validation and effective action from the media, government, police and judicial authorities can serve to assist hijack victims in their post-trauma adaption, perceived negative responses from, or interactions with, these agencies can serve to heighten the victim's feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability and frustration. In South Africa, victims of hijacking may perceive police as inefficient, unsupportive and/or corrupt, and appear to have little faith in the police's willingness or ability to apprehend hijackers, or in the judicial system's capacity to appropriately sentence and securely detain convicted criminals. Victims may, moreover, fear retribution at the hands of hijackers (or their comrades) in the event of having to identify and/or testify against the perpetrators. Victims may therefore believe that reporting the crime is an exercise in futility, frustration and self-endangerment, and may feel inclined to take the law into their own hands.

### **Exacerbating factors**

The likelihood of the hijacking experience having a deleterious effect on the individual in the longer term seems to increase if the victim is of advanced age, and/or if the victim has previously experienced trauma or significant life stresses. The hijacking trauma serves to re-elicited feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, isolation, fear and emotional distress related to these previous experiences. If the hijacking occurs at a time when the victim is experiencing concurrent significant life stressors, his/her ability to cope with the impact and after-effects of the hijacking trauma might be undermined.

### **Issues particularly pertaining to South Africa**

In South Africa at least, the issue of race seems to be a major issue in the victim's experience of hijacking. The experience of being hijacked by persons of another race appears to lead to markedly increased racist attitudes in the victim. Where the victim previously considered him/herself as non-racist, these changes in attitudes towards others are perceived to be disturbing and irrational, yet irresistible as can be seen in the following direct quote: *"...though I don't think that I'm racist, I must say that I am scared now. Of them. But not all of them..."*

Pre-existing racist attitudes appear to be confirmed and strengthened when the victim is hijacked by members of another race. Racist attitudes include feelings of mistrust, suspicion, dislike, fear and even hatred directed

at the entire race to which the hijacker/s belong. Subsequent positive interactions with members of the hijacker's race appear to do little to ameliorate these attitudes. The propensity to develop racist attitudes may reflect, in part, the victim's need to re-establish some sense of control or predictability following an experience of extreme powerlessness, by pinpointing an easily identifiable (and therefore supposedly avoidable) "enemy".

The experience of being hijacked in this country may increase negative feelings towards South Africa. It seems that hijacking reinforces stereotypes of a corrupt and inefficient government, adds to fears of spiralling crime (by providing personal proof of this), increases pessimism about the future of the country and may contribute to the emigration of economically-active persons from this country.

### **Losses**

Victims are distressed by both material losses (especially of sentimental objects) and perceived personal losses such as loss of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy; loss of faith in humanity and/or God; loss of freedom; and negative impacts on the victim's family, interpersonal relationships and community.

### **Meaning(s) derived from the experience**

*"I believe that there is a meaning in everything that happens. For everything that happens there's a reason".*

The experience of being hijacked appears to challenge or even shatter the individual's previously constructed and basic assumptions, meanings and understandings about the world and him/herself (Horowitz, 1986:45). Three major assumptions that are disrupted by trauma are the belief in personal invulnerability, the perception of the world as meaningful, and the perceptions of the self as positive; victims of trauma are more likely to view the interpersonal world as malevolent, the self as unworthy and the world as random or meaningless.

The incongruity which the victims experience between their established schemata and the hijacking experience, can be minimised if they are able to accommodate or change their beliefs in order to incorporate the experience of being traumatically victimised, and to re-establish some sense of meaningfulness and predictability in the



world, and confidence in the self. It is necessary that victims find their own unique meaning in their experience if they are to re-engage in the business of daily living without being incapacitated by overwhelming fear, anticipatory anxiety or emotional distress.

Many, but not all, victims of hijacking are able to identify various positive aspects which emerged from the experience. The crisis of trauma presents survivors with an opportunity to examine their values, re-evaluate their priorities and to reassess what they truly want from life and what life should mean, but this is an opportunity which all victims are not necessarily able to seize. The life review, which may occur soon after the hijacking, at some time after it, (or never), may ideally lead to an expanded self-concept, deepened interpersonal relationships and even a new level of spiritual growth.

*"I must admit that I'm very surprised that- It comes to my mind, after talking to you this morning, that I'm a lot stronger than I thought".*

*"I feel that I want to do the things that are most important to me - I want that family, I want children. Most of all I want to be happy in what I'm doing, workwise, I don't want to do it because this is the only way to the next step. If that's the case, then, stuff the next step - look for something else. I'm not going to tolerate things any more just because you 'should' do it".*

## LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

While a qualitative approach to describing and analysing the experiences of a small group of white, female subjects permitted a wealth of detail to emerge, it is unclear to what extent findings of this study may be generalised to other victims of hijackings. By comparing and contrasting these unique experiences, a number of common (and contrasting) themes, issues and process patterns were identified which, while representative of more than the unique experiences of single individuals, do not, however, assume to be representative of all hijacking experiences. The study provides a subset of multiple perspectives rather than "the" prototypical hijacking experience.

The study was limited both by the small sample size and by the fairly homogeneous nature of the participants.

Furthermore, a certain degree of saturation was achieved but due to the exploratory nature of the study full saturation cannot be claimed. Since all participants were white and female, comparisons between the experiences of hijacking victims of different genders, and/or races were not possible. Since all subjects were adults, the child's experience of hijacking has not been tapped. Moreover, features which are frequently found in hijacking experiences (such as, for example, being shot or injured by hijackers, or being hijacked within the grounds of the victim's home) were not features of the experiences of these subjects, and were thus not investigated. One study alone will not provide the whole picture of a phenomenon. Tesch (1990:269) notes that, as qualitative descriptions accumulate, they will make it possible for us to gradually "recognize" the phenomenon in the sense of a "second, fuller knowing".

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the findings of both the intra-individual and inter-individual analyses of the data were integrated with findings from other relevant studies to provide a contribution towards a better understanding of the victim's experience of motor vehicle hijacking and her reaction in the immediate to short-term after the experience of this trauma. It is necessary to understand the phenomenon of vehicle hijacking, as experienced by the victims, with insight into their physiological, cognitive and affective responses during and after the traumatic hijacking experience, as well as the interpretations and meanings which they ascribe to their experience. Used by future researchers and clinicians, this information can ultimately be used to benefit the increasing number of victims of hijacking by increasing understanding of their experience as well as developing and improving therapeutic interventions directed at dealing with it.

"To study and treat victims of extreme stress is to understand the psychic struggle that begins with trauma and ends with a transformation of the spirit" (Wilson, 1989:20).

## REFERENCES

AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION 1994: Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders; 4th ed. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association.

- BANDURA, A 1986: Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- BRESLAU, N; DAVIS, GC; ADRESKI, P & PETERSON, E 1991: Traumatic events and post-traumatic stress disorder in an urban population of young adults. **Archives of General Psychiatry**, 48:216-222.
- BROM, D & KLEBER, RJ 1989: Prevention of post-traumatic stress disorders. **Journal of Traumatic Stress**, 2(3):335-351.
- DAILEY, JT & PICKREL, EW 1975: Some psychological contributions to defences against hijackers. **American Psychology**, 30:161-166.
- FIELDS, R 1980: Victims of terrorism: the effects of prolonged stress. **Evaluation and Change (Special Issue)**, 1980:76-83.
- GLASER, BG & STRAUSS, AL 1967: The discovery of grounded theory. Aldine: Chicago.
- GRAF, P & SCHACTER, D 1985: Implicit and explicit memory for new associations in normal and amnesic subjects. **Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, memory and cognition**, 11:501-518.
- HERMAN, JL 1992: Trauma and recovery. Basic Books (Harper Collins): New York.
- HOLMES, MR & ST LAWRENCE, JS 1983: Treatment of rape-induced trauma: proposed behavioral conceptualization and review of the literature. **Clinical Psychology Review**, 3:417-433.
- HOROWITZ, MJ 1986: Stress response syndromes. Jason Aronson: Northvale, New Jersey.
- HOROWITZ, MJ 1999: Essential papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. New York: NY University Press.
- HOROWITZ, MJ; WILNER, N; KALTREIDER, N & ALVAREZ, W 1999: Signs and symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. (In: Horowitz, MJ ed. 1999: Essential papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. New York: NY University Press, pp. 22 - 40).
- KRYSTAL, JH; KOSTEN, TR; SOUTHWICK, S; MASON, JW; PERRY, BD & GILLER, EL 1999: Neurobiological aspects of PTSD: Review of clinical and preclinical studies. (In: Horowitz, MJ ed. 1999: Essential papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. New York: NY University Press, pp. 274 - 300).
- LAZARUS, RS & FOLKMAN, S 1984: Stress, appraisal and coping. New York: Springer.
- MAYKUT, P & MOREHOUSE, R 1994: Beginning qualitative research: a philosophic and practical guide. Falmer Press: London.
- MCDUFF, DR 1992: Social issues in the management of released hostages. **Hospital and Community Psychiatry**, 43(7):825 - 828.
- NORRIS, FH 1992: The epidemiology of trauma: Frequency and impact of different potentially traumatic events on different demographic groups. **Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology**, 60:409-418.
- PATTON, MQ 1990: Qualitative evaluation and research methods; 2nd ed. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.
- PAVLOV, IP 1960: Conditioned reflexes. Dover: New York. (A reprint of: IP Pavlov 1927: Conditioned reflexes. (Translated by GV Anrep). Oxford: London).
- RESNICK, HS; KILPATRICK, DG; SAUNDERS, BE & BEST, CL 1993: Prevalence of civilian trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder in a representative national sample of women. **Journal of Consulting and Clinical psychology**, 61(6):984-991.
- RYCHTARIK, RG; SILVERMAN, WK; VAN LANDINGHAM, WP & PRUE, DM 1984: Treatment of an incest victim with implosive therapy: A case study. **Behavior Therapy**, 15:410-420.
- SAPS 1998: Information note: hijacking of vehicles January to May 1998. The South African Police Service: John Vorster Square, Johannesburg.
- STEKETEE, G & FOA, EB 1987: Rape victims: Post-traumatic stress responses and their treatment: a review of the literature. **Journal of Anxiety Disorders**, 1:69-86.
- SUTKER, PB & ADAMS, HE 1993: Comprehensive handbook of psychopathology; 2nd ed. Plenum Press: New York.
- TAYLOR, ST & BOGDAN, R 1984: Introduction to qualitative research methods: the search for meanings; 2nd ed. Wiley: New York.
- TESCH, R 1990: Qualitative research: analysis types and software tools. The Falmer Press: New York.
- THOMPSON, J 1991: Kuwait Airways hijack: psychological consequences for survivors. **Stress Medicine**, 7(1):3-9.
- VAN DER KOLK, BA & VAN DER HART, O 1991: The intrusive past: the flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma. **American Imago**, 48(4):425-454.
- WILSON, JP 1989: Trauma, Transformation and Healing: an integrative approach to theory, research and post-traumatic therapy. Brunner & Mazel: New York.
- YEHUDA, R & MCFARLANE, AC 1999: Conflict between current knowledge about PTSD and its original conceptual basis. (In: Horowitz, MJ ed. 1999: Essential papers on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. New York: NY University Press, pp. 41 - 60).