

Research Article

UDC 159.99

<https://doi.org/10.21702/rpj.2026.1.4>

Reconstructing the Experience of Hostage-Taking Incidents Based on Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

Introduction. Hostage-taking is one of the most stressful extreme situations, with a long-lasting impact on the mental state of victims. Based on F.E. Vasilyuk's concept of experiencing, this paper explores the psychological phenomena of hostage experiences of terrorist attacks. This study represents the first contribution to the inductive reconstruction of the structure of hostage experiences as a complex subjective process that occurs during the hostage-taking incident. **Methods.** Using a grounded theory approach, we examined secondary qualitative sources — narratives (printed and video interviews, memoirs, and online diary entries) of survivors of the Beslan and Dubrovka hostage-taking tragedies. The study used a total of 23 documents. All interviewees and witnesses were 18 years of age or older at the time of hostage-taking. The analytical procedure included open and axial coding and the constant comparative method. To enhance reliability, double coding was used, and some materials were independently analyzed by an external expert in the psychology of extreme situations. **Results.** The main categories that reflect the subjective experience of hostages during the hostage-taking incident were identified. The characteristics and structural elements of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components of experience, including in the context of Stockholm Syndrome, as well as the dynamic characteristics and transitions between the identified phenomena and the structural components (from shock to hope, from numbness to mobilization) were described. **Discussion.** The results obtained deepen our understanding of individual psychological functioning in extreme situations and serve as the basis for further reconstruction of the dynamic aspects of hostage-taking as a specific internal activity in terrorist attacks.

Keywords

experience, hostages, extreme stress, narrative, Stockholm Syndrome, grounded theory

For citation

Bulich, M. O., & Soldatova, G. U. (2026). Reconstructing the experience of hostage-taking incidents based on narrative analysis. *Russian Psychological Journal*, 23(1), 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.21702/rpj.2026.1.4>

Introduction

Extreme situations are events associated with real threats to life, suddenness and high uncertainty (Drury, 2007). Hostage-taking represents one of the most traumatic forms of stressful situations. It involves a combination of physical and psychological violence, a threat to life, and the loss of freedom and control over events. Unlike natural or man-made disasters, aggression here comes from another person or group of people and is perceived as intentional, which dramatically violates fundamental ideas about security, predictability and trust in the world, distorts the image of reality and undermines stable personal structures, including core beliefs about oneself and the world (Zinchenko, Soldatova, Shaigerova, 2011; Soldatova, Shaigerova, Shlyapnikov, 2008; Shoigu, 2007; Shoigu, 2019).

An analysis by the international organization Hostage Aid Worldwide (2024) showed that between 2000 and 2019, the number of hostage-taking incidents by both state and non-state actors increased more than 30-fold. The analytical forecast noted that this trend will continue in 2020–2029 (Hostage Aid Worldwide, 2024). In Russia, the most serious cases remain the incidents in Budyonnovsk (1995), Dubrovka (2002), and Beslan (2004), where hundreds of civilians were captured. Despite the publications devoted to the consequences of terrorist attacks, the direct subjective experience of hostages during hostage-taking incidents remains poorly studied. However, understanding the characteristics of “acute” conditions and their dynamics plays a crucial role in planning rescue operations during and after an incident (Reshetnikov, 2006).

According to the concept of F.E. Vasilyuk, the experience of a critical situation is a special form of internal mental activity that aims to overcome the crisis and restore the integrity of the life-world (Vasilyuk, 1984; 2014). In legal terms, a “hostage-taking incident” or “hostage-taking” is generally considered to be a situation in which a person (persons) is captured or held as a hostage to force a third party to carry out or refuse to carry out any act as a condition for the release of the hostage (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation [CC RF], 1996, Article 206). This crime is considered one of the most severe in terms of the typology of crises, since it involves the emergence of serious threats to the individual, including frustration, threat to life, disorientation, loss of control, and destruction of meaning. In this study, the experience

is interpreted on the basis of the concept of F.E. Vasilyuk as an internal activity of the subject, which arises in response to the destruction of a stable order of life and aims at restoring it (Vasilyuk, 1984; 2014).

Currently, psychology lacks reconstructed descriptions of the subjective experience of hostages that help to identify their substantive and structural components. Despite the development of research on post-traumatic stress (Bisson, 2007; Brewin, Andrews & Valentine, 2000) and post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), the study of the consequences of extreme situations for military personnel, victims of terrorism and hostage-taking, and their families (Easton & Turner, 1991; Favaro, 2000; Solomon, 1988; Laufer & Solomon, 2006; Otradinskaya, 2011), and the negative mental processes characteristic of the period of captivity in a “hostage-taking incident” remain poorly understood.

This study **aims** to psychologically reconstruct the experience of hostage-taking incidents by analyzing narrative data of former hostages.

We propose that the subjective experience of hostages during hostage-taking incidents has a complex internal structure and includes phenomena that reflect various aspects of a person’s internal mental activity under extreme threat. These phenomena can be reconstructed through an inductive analysis of the narratives of the former hostages.

This study represents the first contribution to the inductive reconstruction of the structure of hostage experiences as a complex subjective process that occurs during the hostage-taking incident. The key components of the experience, including dynamic manifestations and possible interrelationships, are identified and described, expanding our understanding of the nature of human adaptation to extreme violence and providing grounds for further research into the dynamic aspects of the response to crises.

Methods

The study used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005) to construct conceptual models based on inductive text analysis. The content included narrative data from former hostages obtained in open sources – interviews, documentaries, and online diaries. Initial, focused, and theoretical coding were used to identify key categories and their interrelations, as well as double coding to enhance validity. The ethical requirements were met by analyzing only public data without contacting the respondents directly.

To analyze psychological experiences during terrorist attacks, this study used secondary data in the form of first-person narratives of former hostages published in open sources. The decision to rely on this content was determined by ethical and methodological considerations. Direct data collection (e.g., interviews) poses a considerable risk of retraumatization for victims and is often impossible due to the temporal distance of the events (Heaton, 2004; Hinds, 1997). Personal texts, already publicly available, allow the researcher to work with real-life evidence without violating privacy or engaging individuals in re-enacting traumatic experiences (Heaton, 2004).

The use of narratives as empirical materials is based on the accepted notion in qualitative methodology that such texts are not only acceptable but also an important source of data on subjective experience (Wertsch, 2002; Ankersmit, 2005). This position is consistent with cultural and historical traditions, which consider internal mental processes to be mediated by social interaction and formed in speech (Vygotsky, 1983). According to F. Bartlett's concept of memory, remembering is a reconstructive process in which the original experience is reproduced not literally, but through the prism of cultural and personal-semantic schemas (Bartlett, 1932). This position is considered a methodological assumption in this study. Recognizing that texts do not reflect events in their objective sequence, the researcher views them as a representation of the personal processing of traumatic experience. However, when focusing on fragments containing descriptions of states and reactions that arose during hostage-taking, such texts become a possible source of information about the phenomena of experience.

The study used narrative documents from witnesses to hostage-taking incidents, including transcribed interviews, published memoirs, and first-person personal blog entries. Specifically, we chose evidence from victims of two terrorist attacks in Russia – the hostage-taking incidents at the Beslan School (2004) and the Dubrovka Theatre Centre (Nord-Ost, 2002).

To enhance the validity of research and take into account the reconstruction characteristics of memory, only texts meeting the following requirements were included in the analysis:

- a first-person narrative: The text must be presented as personal evidence of a survivor;
- descriptions of events that occurred during the hostage-taking incident (and not after liberation);
- verbalization of one's own states, impressions, and reactions associated with the immediate experience of the hostage-taking incident;
- sufficient specificity and detail of the narrative to allow for the identification of meaningful units of analysis.

Materials were excluded from the analysis if they:

- were retellings of events by third parties (journalists, relatives, researchers);
- contained exclusively post-factum reflection—reflections on lessons, meanings, moral or political conclusions;
- did not allow for a reliable temporal framework of the described experience (e.g., texts with an unclear time frame or abstract presentation);
- did not contain any internal response (for example, they were limited to a brief external presentation of the incident).

The study examined 23 texts, totaling 144 typewritten pages. These included 8 texts relating to the terrorist attack in Beslan, 15 texts relating to the Dubrovka terrorist attack, and 4 texts were video interviews containing verbal and non-verbal markers (e.g., descriptions of intonation, crying, laughter). These interviews did not contain visual materials that could be further analyzed for the phenomenon of experiencing the hostage-taking incident, and were therefore analyzed as textual data included in the total number of documents.

According to biographical information available in the sources, the age of the interviewees and witnesses at the time of the hostage-taking incidents was 18 to 63 years.

In accordance with Russian copyright law and respect for the privacy of victims, direct quotes in this document are limited to materials that are publicly available and only if justified by the research objectives. The analytical section largely uses generalized formulations and typical forms of experience are described using anonymous examples.

The grounded theory method was used in its constructivist version (Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006), according to which theory is viewed as the result of the researcher's meaning-related work in the context of a specific analytical interaction with texts. This approach allowed the reconstruction of experiential phenomena as living subjective experiences that could not be reduced to predetermined explanation models.

The analysis unit during the open coding phase of the study consisted of narrative fragments that contained statements describing the internal state, reactions, and behavior patterns of the hostage at the time of capture. These fragments were subsequently subjected to initial coding and subsequent categorization. Units of similar meaning were grouped into broad categories representing stable modes of response and the content of subjective experience. During subsequent phases of axial and theoretical coding, relationships were established between categories, and the results were related to the concept of experience, allowing for the reconstruction of its structure and identification of features of internal organization. The comparison of codes with the source texts was carried out throughout the analysis, allowing a step-by-step abstraction and the formation of a conceptual framework (Khoroshilov, Mashkov, 2020; Melnikova, Khoroshilov, 2020; Busygina, 2022).

The analysis was conducted manually using a Microsoft Excel-based spreadsheet system. This approach was required both by the moderate volume of material and by the need to constantly correlate the code with the narrative context, which required a high degree of flexibility and control from the researcher.

To enhance reliability, double coding was used. Some materials were independently analyzed by an external expert in the psychology of extreme situations. The codes were compared at the level of broad categories; discrepancies were discussed until a consensus on interpretation was reached. A formal assessment of the consistency coefficient was not carried out, as the constructive approach emphasizes the qualitative interpretation and intersubjective consistency of analytical positions.

The analysis was completed at the theoretical saturation phase, when new data no longer made considerable changes to the composition and structure of categories and confirmed the stability of the proposed conceptual model.

Results

In the qualitative analysis, 401 units of analysis were identified that describe various aspects of the hostage state during the hostage-taking incident. During the focus and theoretical

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understanding phase, these units were divided into three general categories presenting the conditional structure of experience – emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. Within each of these categories, subcategories were identified that clarified the types of responses and the content of subjective experience. In addition, a separate category was created that reflected the manifestations of the mechanisms of identification with the aggressor, similar to Stockholm Syndrome. Table 1 shows all the categories identified.

Table 1

Categories derived from the analysis of hostage behaviors during a terrorist attack and their content

Categories	Subcategories / Content (if no subcategories)
Emotional component	Fear, affect, stress, calm, anger, panic, aggression, despair, emotional numbness, anxiety
Cognitive component	Distorted perception of the incident Attitude to the incident Interaction with hostages
Behavioral component	Interaction with hostage-takers Relationships to the external world Ensuring security Individual coping behavior
Stockholm Syndrome	Empathy and understanding towards the hostage-taker, identification with the aggressor

Emotional component

The analysis of hostage emotional reactions enables us to view them not only as direct affective manifestations, but also as part of the subject's internal process in extreme crisis conditions. According to F. E. Vasilyuk's (1984) concept of experiencing, such states reflect a special form of life activity that occurs when external action is blocked and aims to restore disturbed connections with the life-world and preserve the individual's internal integrity.

Many narratives describe intense states of fear, horror, stupor, and numbness that arise in the context of a sudden collapse of the usual meaning-related structure: "Someone, on the contrary, petrified" (BBC News Russian, 2017, paragraph 11), "Everyone was very frightened", "In the first hours, I was in a state of panic" (Stepanova, 2006, p. 1). These experiences can be understood as the initial stage of experience in an activity-based sense, in which the subject registers a base destruction and initiates a process of internal response (Vasilyuk, 1984).

Acute affective manifestations—crying, screaming, hysterical laughter—can be viewed as ways of spontaneously regulating the affective overload caused by a traumatic event. These phenomena are illustrated by the following examples: "Someone became hysterical", "People panicked and became hysterical" (BBC News Russian, 2017, paragraphs 11, 24), and "Someone started to become hysterical" (Stepanova, 2006, p. 1). According to M. Horowitz's model, such reactions can be attributed to the disorganization stage; they serve as a transition to the cognitive processing of the traumatic experience (Horowitz, 1986). From the perspective of the coping model, they can also be interpreted as emotion-oriented coping strategies to reduce subjective distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Such mechanisms do not contradict the understanding of experience, but can be integrated into its structure as part of an attempt to maintain subjective stability under blocked activity conditions.

In some cases, participants described states of emotional numbness, detachment, or internal "shutdown": "fell into a kind of numbness", "simply and emotionlessly", "just shut down" (Rokhlin et al., 2003, paragraphs 32-33). These states can be correlated with F. E. Vasilyuk's concept of experiencing, in which a critical situation is understood as an impossibility of action and the fulfillment of important needs (Vasilyuk, 1984). In this context, emotional numbness can be considered a primary reaction to this impossibility, which can subsequently develop into a process of internal activity to cope with the critical situation. In parallel, such descriptions have resonance in post-traumatic dissociation theory, where they are considered as an adaptive mechanism for temporary shutdown in extreme threats (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Episodes of anger or aggression towards terrorists or an unspecified external object can be interpreted as an attempt to mobilize and maintain activities against loss of control. In Vasilyuk's conceptual framework, such manifestations can be interpreted as an internal action—a form of resistance to the situation and restoration of the subjective position (Vasilyuk,

1984). Similarly, according to J. Janoff-Bulman, anger in traumatic situations can function as a defense of violated core beliefs and serve as a mechanism for processing powerlessness (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Thus, the emotional component of the experience is not limited to a list of feelings, but encompasses a complex internal dynamic—from shock to attempts at internal ordering and mobilization. These data support the understanding of experience as an activity-based process that restores the subject's connection to oneself and the world (Vasilyuk, 1984). Narratives that contain elements of state transitions require a further study of the dynamic structure of experience, including its phase-based and functional transitions.

Cognitive Component

This component includes the characteristics of perception, attention, memory, thinking, and evaluative judgments reflected in hostage narratives. Its analysis enables us to identify how cognitive processes interact with the emotional background, forming stable or, on the contrary, fragmented internal images of events. In accordance with F. E. Vasilyuk's concept of experience, such internal activity can be interpreted as a form of activity-based treatment of a critical situation that arises in conditions of impossibility of external action and aims to restore the disrupted life-world and preserve the integrity of the subject (Vasilyuk, 1984).

Many victims document episodes of derealization: What happens is described as “unreal”, as in a film. These states can be interpreted as manifestations of dissociation—a defensive reaction that reduces emotional intensity through impaired perception (Van der Kolk, 2014). It is also noted that the attention is restricted to individual sensory elements (sounds, faces, movements) while the rest of the background is ignored. This focus corresponds to the phenomenon of “attentional tunneling” which occurs when perceiving a threat and is associated with the redistribution of cognitive resources to the most significant stimuli (Horowitz, 1986). In the terms of F.E. Vasilyuk, such concentration can be considered as a primary adaptive form of internal activity that allows to remain in the situation by maintaining minimum orientation towards what is happening.

Along with this, narratives often mention distortions of temporal and spatial orientation – a subjective sensation of “stopped” or “stretched” time, a disruption in the sequence of events: “I didn't understand where night was, where day was” (Lokshina, 2002, paragraph 20), “time passed very slowly”, “I fell asleep for about fifteen minutes, but it seemed like I'd slept for several hours” (Stal, 2002, pp. 2-3). These phenomena are consistent with descriptions of chronoperceptual disturbances under traumatic stress conditions (Lifton, 1967) and can be considered as manifestations of the destabilization of the structure of life time. In the concept of F.E. Vasilyuk, this can be correlated with the phase of a “rupture” in the structure of

experience, when the habitual organization of the life-world is disrupted and requires internal reconstruction (Vasilyuk, 1984).

A number of narratives describe cognitive actions to understand what is happening: internal questions, mental scenarios for how events will unfold, forecasts and plans (“We specifically recalled certain everyday details and made plans”; Amelkina, Veligzhanina, Safonova, 2002, paragraph 16). These elements can be interpreted as forms of meaning-making activity, reflecting the subject’s desire to restore coherence and predictability to the world (Park, 2010; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In experience theory, such processes correspond to the “unfolding” phase—active internal work that facilitates overcoming the cognitive gap and restoring the subjective position.

Finally, the dynamics of cognitive assessment of what is happening – from shock to short-term hope, despair to internal mobilization – emphasize the close relationship between cognitive and emotional processes. In the context of experiential theory, these transitions can be interpreted as aspects of the restoration of the life-world and subjective activity interrupted by an extreme situation.

Thus, the cognitive component encompasses not only disturbances in perception, memory, and thinking, but also internal processing elements to integrate critical experience. This enables us to view experience as an active, step-by-step process of meaning-based reconstruction that occurs under the conditions of loss of external action and requires the mobilization of the internal resources of the subject.

The behavioral component includes a variety of actions taken by hostages in the context of a terrorist attack. These actions can be considered as external manifestations of the subject’s internal struggle to overcome a critical situation. In the context of F.E. Vasilyuk’s concept of experience, behavior reflects not only a response to a threat, but also attempts to maintain subjectivity, restore integrity and find support in conditions where previous modes of action are not available.

One of the central behavioral vectors is the desire to ensure physical safety. This includes measures to seek shelter and to comply with terrorist demands. Such manifestations can be interpreted as attempts to minimize the threat and concentrate resources on maintaining life. Despite their outward passivity, these actions can be understood as a strategy of choosing the lesser evil, reflecting adaptive activity under constraints.

In addition, there are individual coping strategies, focused not so much on the external situation as on the internal state. The use of prayer (“then I began to pray, to pray very sincerely”, “we even prayed together” (Lyutykh, Okunev, 2022, paragraphs 37, 39)), fantasizing, mental distraction (“We were always playing something – words, battleship, stupid tic-tac-toe, laughing our heads off” (Rokhlin et al., 2003, paragraph 34)) and other forms of self-soothing

indicate the subject's attempt to maintain internal order, symbolic support, and coherence of consciousness. In F.E. Vasilyuk's terms, such actions can be considered as methods of "experiential work", in which a person seeks new grounds to maintain self-control in a situation that has disrupted his/her usual way of life.

The behavioral component also includes interactions with other hostages, where the desire for support, mutual assistance and joint regulation of emotional tension is evident: "We told our neighbors face to face how the events in the play have unfolded. They supported each other as much as they could" (Kichin, 2002, paragraph 28); "Everyone helped each other in some way" (Lyutykh, Okunev, 2022, paragraphs 37, 39). These behaviors suggest a collective dimension to the experience. Uniting into a minimal "we" can serve as a way of restoring a lost social structure and value-related orientation. Mutual assistance, participation, altruism, as well as ignorance or alienation, become indicators of the varying quality and depth of experiences.

Contact with the captors, although limited, also involves a behavioral load. Some hostages engaged in dialogue, tried to persuade, influence and obtain information, thus restoring at least a symbolic sense of influence on what was happening ("We tried to talk to the female terrorists", "We asked why they, Muslims, were raising their hands..." Stepanova, 2006, p. 2). In some cases, this behavior can be interpreted as a form of maintaining subjectivity, and the individual uses communication as an adaptation tool.

All of these demonstrates that hostage behavior cannot be reduced to a reactive model. It reflects dynamic transitions between the following states: from numbness to action, from submission to internal resistance, from disorganization to the search for new forms of order. These transitions are not always linear and depend on many factors, including personal resources, social environment, and symbolic support. The analysis of the behavioral component allows us to capture not only external forms of adaptation but also profound transformations in the structure of experience.

Therefore, behavior in extreme situations should be regarded as an important layer of experience reflecting both protection and transformation processes. This opens the possibility of studying the dynamic component, which captures changes in responses and methods for maintaining subjectivity under conditions that disrupt the ordinary structure of life.

Stockholm Syndrome. An analysis of the narratives revealed the presence of unique forms of identification with the captor, which can be interpreted as manifestations of a phenomenon known in the literature as 'Stockholm Syndrome'. This phenomenon is context-specific, that is, it develops mainly under conditions of violent capture, prolonged isolation, and life-threatening situations, and is described as a paradoxical form of adaptation to an extreme situation, in which hostages exhibit positive feelings, empathy, and sympathy towards their captors (Favaro, 2000; Namnyak et al., 2008; Kumar, 2022).

In this study, such manifestations were not considered a specific clinical syndrome, but as an independent component as an important part of the experience. These attitudes toward the captor can be interpreted as coping behavior aimed at reducing internal tension and restoring at least partial psychological stability in the face of complete external dependence. This is consistent with F.E. Vasilyuk's idea of experiencing as the subject's internal work to restore the disrupted life-world. Thus, in a situation in which habitual support disappears, a person can try to integrate into a new coordinate system — in this case, into the role structure imposed by the captor.

The materials reveal two directions for such adaptation:

1. The development of sympathy, empathy, and symbolic identification with the captor. This was expressed in the descriptions of compassion, attempts to understand the captor, and regret for the circumstances of their lives. This may also include understanding the motivations of terrorists and actions to establish contacts with them, help them or emotionally involve them. These reactions may represent the subject's attempt to reduce perceived threat by converting the aggressor's figure into a potentially close or justified figure. In the cultural-historical logic of experience, this transformation allows to maintain the internal coherence of experience, even at the expense of a distorted ethical perspective.

2. Negative attitudes towards authorities and the external world. In view of increased vulnerability and limited access to information, some hostages developed pronounced critical or even hostile assessments of security forces' actions. This is considered to be a shift from the immediate source of the threat (captor) to external observers, especially because authorities are often regarded as ineffective and unable to save. This shift plays a protective role, allowing the illusion of control over the situation to be maintained and minimizing the feeling of complete helplessness.

We should emphasize that such manifestations do not occur suddenly. In some cases, a dynamic relationship with the captor was observed, ranging from fear and horror to attempts at contact, empathy or even protection. These transitions emphasize the need to analyze not only the content of experiences, but also their temporal evolution — dynamic changes that can reveal a lot about how the individual copes with a critical situation.

Thus, such phenomena should be considered part of a broader process of seeking ways to maintain internal balance. They are closely related to the other components of the experience identified and can be seen as an indicator of the depth of the crisis facing the individual. Their emergence does not require mere assessment, but a careful and multidimensional analysis, including in the construction of complex models of hostage behavior and experiences.

We should also note separately that physical condition played an important role in the experiences of all hostages, including fatigue, thirst, pain from injuries and uncomfortable

postures. Although we did not identify physical exhaustion as a separate category (it is a constant background, not a mental phenomenon), its influence on the ability to unfold the experience process or, on the contrary, the choice of automatic responses plays an important role.

Discussion

The narrative analysis carried out enabled us to reconstruct the key components of the hostage-taking experience, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and a phenomenon similar to manifestations of Stockholm Syndrome. Each of these components demonstrates not only substantive characteristics but also dynamic changes during the hostage-taking experience. In particular, during the final phases of coding, important dynamic aspects were identified, demonstrating an understanding of the internal process of experiencing hostage-taking as an unfolding mental activity. The results obtained, which reflect these components of the experience, are consistent with the results of the review papers that describe the diversity of reactions of individual and group hostages combined in the emotional, cognitive and social spheres, and also describe possible manifestations of Stockholm Syndrome and some specific characteristics of perception (Alexander & Klein, 2009; 2010). A recent qualitative study using secondary data on the coping mechanisms of people exposed to hostage incidents in Gaza found that intrapersonal and interpersonal coping strategies are used simultaneously and change depending on the context, with maturity, experience, and age influencing the choice of mechanisms (Levkovich et al., 2025). Consequently, the coherence between these conclusions and literature supports the need to consider hostage experience as a dynamic process. Moreover, the analysis of both review papers and empirical studies demonstrates that hostage experience is not only a stage-by-stage process, but also a complex set of interrelated cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and socially significant strategies that change over time.

The cognitive component in the first phases of the experience manifested itself primarily in the form of fragmented and sensory images. Similar cognitive characteristics were described in the study by Alexander and Klein (2009), where hostages reported confusion, disorientation, concentration deficits, and intrusive memories.

Under the influence of emotional and situational stress, cognitive processing of events gradually evolved into a more organized, but often selective, interpretation of events. Attention focused on critically significant stimuli, which can be considered as a manifestation of the adaptive mobilization of cognitive resources under extreme stress conditions.

This transformation of cognitive processes is consistent with the concept of experience as activity (Vasilyuk, 1984), which involves a dynamic redistribution of attention, cognitive assessments, and meaning-related orientations, depending on the level of threat and availability of psychological base.

The emotional component also showed a clear dynamic. In the initial phase, acute stress reactions (shock, panic, and stupor) dominated, while later participants described depression, aggression, desire for humility or a search for inner balance. Similar dynamics of emotional states have been documented in studies on coping strategies among former captives, who often relied on the hope of family reunification or religious faith, which provided meaning to their suffering and reduced distress. In interviews with Israeli hostages, it was the hope of meeting loved ones and faith that served as powerful emotional resources that enabled them to survive captivity (Levkovich et al., 2025). These changes can be interpreted as manifestations of the transition from a phase of affective disorganization to mobilization and the subsequent search for internal resources. Emotional states not only influenced cognitive and behavioral spheres, but also played a regulatory role, shaping experiential phenomena and supporting a vision of the future.

The behavioral component ranged from conformist reactions and avoidance to risky active actions aimed at saving oneself and others. During the hostage-taking incident, changes in behavior patterns were observed, with passive reactions that gave rise to more active reactions or, on the contrary, actions that gave rise to adaptive freezing. Similar behavioral variations are also observed in interpersonal strategies described in other studies: hostages shifted from isolation to mutual assistance and “we-feeling”, found meaning in caring for children, used professional identity as a resource, and built “recursive” relationships with their captors, which allowed them to mitigate threats and maintain group stability (Levkovich et al., 2025). These changes can be considered as successive stages of voluntary and involuntary responses, embedded in the dynamics of the experience as a specific activity aimed at restoring subjective control and meaning-related base.

A phenomenon similar to the manifestations of Stockholm Syndrome deserves special attention. In some cases, it developed alongside the preceding components. Its symptoms (empathy toward the captors, identification, and negativity towards the authorities) also revealed a dynamic nature – from initial fear and hostility to compassion, understanding, gratitude, and sometimes even a willingness to help. This phenomenon can be considered a special form of meaning construction process under conditions of loss of external control, in line with the idea of experience as a process of internal creation or restructuring of the life-world in extreme circumstances.

Therefore, the results of the analysis confirm the possibility of considering the capture experience not as a fixed reaction, but as an unfolding internal process in which each component can change over time, interact with others and contribute to the disorganization or restoration of the subjective position. This allows us to go beyond linear or stage-based models and consider dynamic complexes – stable combinations of cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements that replace each other according to the stage of events and individual

characteristics. A similar idea is evident in review papers emphasizing the multiplicity and variability of hostage reactions (Alexander & Klein, 2009; 2010), as well as in the recent work of Levkovich et al. (2025), which demonstrated that intrapersonal and interpersonal coping strategies operate simultaneously and are transformed depending on the conditions.

These results also emphasize the importance of studying the dynamics of experience – transitions between states, internal temporal unfolding of the reaction, and meanings and base formation during captivity. In the future, it appears useful not only to analyze the experience by its components, but also as a complex process unfolding over time to identify typical dynamic configurations and possible adaptation pathways.

The possibility of analyzing child samples requires special attention. Child hostages, due to their age, cognitive and emotional characteristics, may have different forms of experience.

The limitations of the study include the use of secondary data, the absence of direct contact with the respondents, and an uneven representation of age, gender, and situational variables. However, narrative material has considerable potential to reconstruct subjective experiences under conditions that are not accessible to traditional methods.

Conclusion

This study enabled us to reconstruct the structure of hostage experiences in hostage-taking incidents, based on an analysis of their narratives and a grounded theory approach. Therefore, the following four interrelated components of the experience were identified: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and Stockholm Syndrome. Each of these components includes internal differentiation and is characterized by its own structure, manifestations and relationships with other aspects of the experience.

The results show that people continue to actively engage in internal work even under extreme external coercion and lack of control in order to understand, maintain integrity and adapt to the extreme situation. The experience in this situation is not only situational but also procedural.

We should emphasize that the analysis documented dynamic changes, including transitions between mental states, fluctuations in experience intensity and changes in dominant response patterns. Specifically, the narratives revealed emotional shifts (from shock and panic to short-term hope, from despair to humility), cognitive changes (from a fragmented and distorted perception of events to attempts to comprehend the situation and construct mental scenarios for how events might unfold), and behavioral shifts (from numbness to more active behavior patterns).

These dynamics show that experience is not a static reaction set, but a process sensitive to changes in the conditions of the situation itself. Thus, in some documents, changes in reactions were related to the unfolding of hostage-taking events, changes in the level of threat, interactions

with captors or support from other hostages. At the same time, the variability of the response patterns described also points to the role of individual personality traits such as available psychological resources, coping strategies, and personal strategies for interpreting events. Thus, even a limited description of dynamic transitions indicates the possible importance of situational and individual factors in the development of the experience of extreme situations.

Analysis of dynamic aspects was not the main objective of this study; identified transitions were only recorded in individual observations. Nevertheless, the data obtained show the potential for further research into the temporal unfolding of experience, as well as the possibility of identifying stable dynamic complexes that reflect regular sequences of changes in the structure of hostages' inner lives.

The structure of experience described in this study reflects not only the individual's inner life in a critical situation, but also his/her attitude towards others, the world and themselves. These data can be used to develop psychological interventions, rehabilitation programs and training for professionals working with victims in emergency situations.

Therefore, this study contributes to the understanding of emotional processes in extreme hostage-taking incidents and opens up new perspectives to understand the complexity, multi-layeredness and dynamism of the individual's inner world under such circumstances.

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Received: August 06, 2025

Revision received: August 28, 2025

Accepted: January 12, 2026

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Mariya Olegovna Bulich contributed to the research design, collected and processed data, interpreted the results, wrote the text of the manuscript.

Galina Urтанbekovna Soldatova contributed to the research problem statement, supervised the study, consulted on research methodology, performed the critical review and edited the text of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest Information

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.