



## Sweden's apathetic refugee children (B)

In July 2005 the Swedish Government changed its recommendations to the immigration authorities, and instructed them that all asylum cases should take into account the risk of children suffering chronic damage to their psycho-social development.

Once residency had been granted, the apathetic children began to get better. In mild cases this could happen within days or over a couple of months. With more severe cases recovery could take up to almost a year. But in all cases, residency ultimately meant recovery.

In late 2005 the government declared a general amnesty for all undocumented refugees, and for all who had had their case dismissed. When the national commission in August 2006 reviewed the number of children suffering from the apathetic state they found only 14 remaining cases. In 2007 one report from the Stockholm health board reported that there were only seven remaining cases in Sweden.

Following the rather short, but hectic period during which the epidemic of apathetic children peaked a number of researchers launched studies which shed a bit more light on the issue.

First of all, some further digging into the databases showed that the phenomenon was not completely unheard of within the psychiatric system. Similar conditions and symptoms had first been documented among English girls in the 1990s<sup>1</sup> and later on also in Australia, and had been named "pervasive refusal syndrome". However, these other cases were strongly suspected to be connected to sexual abuse and the numbers were nowhere near the epidemic levels reached in Sweden.

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This case was written from published materials by Associate Professor Karl Lofgren, Victoria University of Wellington, with editorial assistance from Janet Tyson, Australia and New Zealand School of Government. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Lask, B. (1991) Children with pervasive refusal, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 66:866-869.

Second, a study of the blood of some of the children treated in hospital showed altered levels of various steroid hormones, indicating psychological trauma and chronic stress, which returned to normal when the children recovered. This would be impossible to fake.<sup>2</sup>

Nobody has so far been able to explain why the children recovered once the residency for the family was approved, or why the apathetic state phenomenon only seemed to happen in Sweden, although Hacking suggests it could be due to an Imitation and Internalisation model.<sup>3</sup> Whereas most of the children had started to imitate other children with suffering from the condition, they soon had internalised the condition to an extent that it became an integrated element of their mental constitution, a process with similarities to hypnotism or the placebo effect.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Local* (Sweden's news in English) 'Study: apathetic refugee kids are not faking it' 29 April 2012 accessed from <http://www.thelocal.se/20120429/40536>

<sup>3</sup> Hacking, I. (2010) Pathological withdrawal of refugee children seeking asylum in Sweden, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 41: 309-317.