

Recruitment, abuse and psychological control. The exemplary case of Patricia Aguilar

José Miguel Cuevas Barranquero. PhD in Psychology

Patricia Aguilar was a minor from Elche (a town in the South East of Spain), 16 years old, when she had her first contact through the internet with Felix Steven Manrique, who was based in Lima, Peru. Patricia had recently lost her uncle, with whom she had a very good relationship and with whom she shared her taste for esotericism. She lost her uncle to pancreatitis when he was only 29 years old, struggling for 5 months between life and death, a fact that was very emotionally draining and painful for the family. Patricia was left devastated.. She felt great anguish before the idea of the death, and she could not accept that there was nothing after death. It was during that period of extreme vulnerability where she is looking for answers like me teenagers to questions like: "Where are we coming from? Where are we going?", she visits a Facebook group on esotericism and paranormal life. It is there that someone, who initially claims to be a spiritual guide, offers her to interpret some dreams she had been having which made her restless. This is where the first contacts begin.

Felix Steven used multiple identities on the net. Just like in his real life where, among other attributes, he claimed to have an NGO and to be a sociologist, on the net he used multiple nicks, with different identities and with constant reinventions of his character. Gradually he introduced her into the group's doctrine, making her believe that she was with the reincarnation of a great Master, the self-proclaimed "Prince Gurdjieff", who belonged to an important white lodge, which had direct contact with great and elevated Masters: Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu, Ganesha, Kartikeya, Budha, Dharma... In his terrestrial life, Felix said to have contact with great ecclesial and political authorities: the Dalai Lama, great presidents and kings, ... his favorites included Vladimir Putin, the sultan of Brunei - Muda Hassanal Bolkiah, the former Egyptian president, - Hosni Mubarak, or the former Bolivian president -Hugo Chávez. He predicted the death of the King of Spain, *Felipe VI*, to whom, according to his prophecy, he would succeed in the throne. Felix Steven was the highest authority for his "friends", having received at 35 years of age, dozens of prominent positions and honorary titles, describing himself, among other things, as a political, military and religious advisor. All this would be reflected in his videos, which included letters of support and so-called certificates of authenticity of his illustrious figure. He claimed to be a reincarnated person, who had gone through many important lives...

Felix Steven claimed to have had male followers in the past. Today he seemed only interested in women. In fact, when he met Patricia, he was in a relationship with three women: Maryori, Paola and another woman, and was trying to recruit other minors. It is worth mentioning that he already had a history of victims who had suffered the consequences of his delusions and who had received threats from him

The doctrine was syncretic. He claimed to have read thousands of spiritual books including Gnostic, Rosicrucian, Hindu, Kabbalistic, Buddhist, Masonic books, etc. Also the Bible, the Koran or the Talmud. He was also interested, among other things, in natural medicine and astrology. In this doctrinal context, he convinced Patricia that the world was on the verge of a great war that would wipe out a good part of the population, which was corrupted. He, the Ascended Master, had the mission to choose young women; underage girls, who according to him, were still "mouldable" so that he could form a great family and repopulate the world. Thus, in a world that was awash with "black magicians" and witches, they had to enter the great White Lodge, which would allow them to be saved and live with the truth. Their relatives, among other things, were hopeless as, they were already damned. The teachings of the group were a great secret that Patricia could not reveal to anyone, under penalty of death,. In the meantime, they introduced strange rules that would keep her totally occupied.

As per any groomer's text book, Felix Steven generated strategies that contributed to Patricia's isolation and increased dependence, with total control of her behavior: her schedules, her movements, information about her relationships and activities..., Steven imposed duties relentlessly: readings, teachings, writing and editing tasks... to such an extent that it weakened her physically and psychologically. Patricia hardly slept anymore and her life was totally ruled by Félix Steven, who operated from a distance. Everything with the pressure of not being able to be discovered, having to simulate a double identity. His mission of salvation demanded that, once she turned 18, Patricia should be reunited with him, to become part of a larger family and thus begin the mission of repopulating the world.

Unfortunately, Felix Steven managed to persuade and deceive Patricia, who kept her promise to meet with him. After his birthday, which she spent surrounded by all her family and friends - a hidden farewell - Patricia complied with the directives and travelled to Lima,. It is at this point that her family becomes aware of the hell that her daughter was going through.

Patricia's Recruitment Process

First contact with Felix Steven coincides with his uncle's recent death two months before. Patricia, a 16-year-old teenager, surfing the Internet, participates in a Facebook group called "Vida Paranormal" (Paranormal Life). It has been confirmed that Felix Steven participated in hundreds of groups and pages: "solidarity with Syria", "Gamers", "lost animals", "neuroscience", "psychology", "Cosmos", "Buying and selling", "Hollow Earth", "A Course in Miracles", "Electronic Music" or "Emo World", among many other topics. The same day Patricia publishes an experience that disturbed her, Steven, with a false surname (Martínez), contacts her by private "inbox", offering her help. Steven said he was a mystic psychic expert, a master of the occult. He points out that she is a sensitive person and that she has a "gift" that she does not yet control. With the excuse of interpreting a dream experience, he asked her for her personal data: her date of birth, her city and even her telephone number. At that moment Steven starts to act as her spiritual guide, recommending different readings and videos (among others, Gnostic videos) and initiating her in his prophecies. From the beginning he insisted that she should not talk to anyone about him, that she should be especially careful not to say anything to her family. In less than a month, Patricia makes videos through Youtube for Steven, with contents that he dictated to her. He thanked her and reinforced her for her effort. The demands, would increase little by little.

Control and abuse of Patricia

In Patricia Aguilar's case, all coercive persuasion techniques were gradually developed, and Steven ended up performing psychological, physical and sexual abuse on Patricia. He lured her to Peru, where she was starved and endured hardship. She worked tirelessly and had to take on a servile and slave-like role.

Before arriving in the jungle, Patricia had been trapped for many months. On certain occasions she was even punished by locking her up with a padlock, like a day when, exhausted, she tried to escape. While in Lima, she was not allowed to leave home alone, she was always accompanied and had no means of contacting the outside world. In the last few months, pregnant and in an advanced stage of gestation, she was forced to take care of the children of other members. Meanwhile, the rest of the members of the group had to work outside. With barely enough money to cover their most basic needs, Steven was fully dedicated to his "spiritual mission": he spent all day surfing the Internet,

contacting and trying to deceive other women. Food for children and adults could be missing in the house, but the coca leaves or ethyl alcohol could never run out, or ayahuasca when possible. These drugs were also used as a form of manipulation, guiding their decisions with the drinking of such substances. In fact, he also forced minors to take ayahuasca, in order to deepen their visions and prophecies or, in other words, so that they would continue to be subject to his dictates.

Steven's treatment was authoritarian. He was obsessively uncompromising in different areas: cleanliness (all women had to clean themselves with alcohol before any contact), spiritual (rituals over how to write different manuscripts), superstitions related to magical thinking (obsessions with good or bad luck associated with numbers, dates, fruits, etc.), rigid rules of behavior that provoked excessive anger, which sometimes generated intense violence. His narcissistic personality contributed to the fact that his word represented absolute truth and any non-compliance or deviation from his guidelines provoked angry outbursts. Steven develop abusive practices towards minors, from whom he demanded adult-like behaviour. Children and their wives had to reproduce their truth to the letter, as can be seen in the phrases learned from the minors when they were rescued, clearly dictated by an adult. One of the girls, a ten years old, frightened and instructed, repeated different learned phrases when rescued:

"We did not disappear, we fled from the grandparents' house because we were groped".

"There's no Patricia here." "They can't tape us (the police), that's illegal."

He defended and practiced polygamy. He had an insatiable sexual appetite, trying to have sexual relations with the maximum number of women. Different women who passed through the group describe him as a true psychopath: lacking empathy, he victimized himself to satisfy his desires. He was not in the least concerned that his "relatives" would go hungry, felt cold or be put in danger. Steven could simulate empathy or interest, help or be affectionate, although always for a distinct objective, out of interest, seeking extreme submission, exploitation and self-interest. In fact, he put his addictions, his hobbies and his luxuries before the food of his own children. On the Internet he moved like a machiavellian strategist, supplying different identities and rehearsing different strategies that managed to mould and subdue his new followers. As they describe it, Felix Steven went through different groups: Hare Krishna, Gnostic group but he did not adapt

to any of them, since his ego required him to be recognized as a great leader, the great "chosen one".

The situation is worsening. Patricia and minors in danger of death

The economic situation worsened and in addition to that, the Missing Person Alert heightened the paranoia and the eagerness to hide Patricia. They no longer had a house where they could all live together and then, close to the time Patricia gave birth, Steven decides that she and the children should live alone in a very humble village near the Peruvian jungle. Despite their advanced stage of gestation, they had not yet established where and how their daughter would be born. Patricia would end up giving birth to her daughter, Naomi, alone with the other children (aged between 3 and 10 years old). Her screams alerted a neighbor who lived nearby, who came to help. They did not open the door, because the children, taught by Steven, were ordered not to open the door to anyone, thinking that people from outside were a threat, that they would come to harm them or the baby. Finally, this neighbor would be the one who, with a knife, would cut the umbilical cord, tying it with laces and avoiding a tragic end.

After Naomi's birth, in the last few weeks before the rescue, the situation worsened further. Patricia and the children were moved to a farm at an even more remote place. There they lived far from civilization, in the middle of the Peruvian jungle, surrounded by snakes, wild animals and without a telephone or any means to ask for help. She continued working, looking for food, picking wild fruits. They had no electricity or running water. She had no neighbors or human contact there beyond the children she cared for. She lived in a kind of stable, without a bed and without a door. In the last few weeks, before the rescue, she was only visited by Steven, once a week. Patricia begged Steven that they couldn't stay there, to please stay and help them or to get them out of there. The area where he lived was difficult to access, a part of the Peruvian jungle known as the place where the country's drug trafficking operated, a place where the consul, as he said, could not access because of the serious risk involved.

Patricia suffers from a congenital heart disease for which she receives chronic treatment... during her entire stay, she did not receive any type of assistance and of course, she did not receive her medication. Her health when she was rescued was pitiful: she was tired, emaciated, full of mosquito bites, one of which infected her and caused complications. The bite of a type of native mosquito caused wounds that reached to the

bone and the remedies, natural, came only from the mind of Felix Steven. Literally, Patricia not only feared for her life, really, as the policemen who rescued her, Alfonso Capcha and Cristian Huarcaya, stated, "*if we arrive a month later, they would not be alive*".

The Exit

The dismantling of the group came about through the joint collaboration of multiple factors. Patricia has been missing for many months. Many, including some family members, came to fear that the worst of the endings could have happened. The happy ending of this exemplary case cannot make us forget the process: it was a road full of obstacles, difficulties, negatives, questions, incomprehension, crying, fear, uncertainty, ...

The family found itself with a system that not only did not have the resources to deal with this type of case, but also did not understand what was happening while displaying a total inefficiency and inaction: "*Patricia is of legal age, we can't do anything... we have to respect her freedom... There are no laws that can justify an intervention...*". The family did not give up, it argued from the beginning that, as in many other cases, she was being misled, abused and exploited. That her captor had subjected her, that she was not free and that, to top it all, the grooming had been done when she was a minor, in secret and without the consent of her relatives.

Spain does not have specific laws around coercive persuasion, there are no laws or jurisprudence that prosecute groups that exert coercive manipulations and emotional kidnappings. There arent public resources that provide specific help for victims or relatives of coercive cults (with the exception of Marbella City Council, where I have the pleasure to work).

Patricia Aguilar's case became known worldwide for its peculiarities and, above all, for the dogged determination and struggle of her family... the news came out in hundreds of media programs and provoked the proactive participation and empathy of large numbers of Spanish citizens.

Patricia is still under treatment. She is happy, and has a totally normal relationship with her family and daughter. She has resumed her studies, her social relations and her life, right where she left off. She has collaborated courageously with the Spanish and Peruvian judiciary, which has sentenced Steven Manrique to 20 years in prison for a crime

of human trafficking for the purpose of exploitation. The sentence has now been appealed by Steven's lawyers. Steven continues to argue that he did not force anyone, that they were with him of their own free will and that they were of legal age. With regard to the case brought before the Spanish courts, it is still in progress today.