School program for adolescents to prevent cult manipulation; Psychosocial determinants

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1) Introduction and justification of the program

Compared with other public health or social problems, and according to the available data, cultism is not considered one of the most prevalent phenomena in our days (around 0,87% of population in Catalonia or 1% in other international estimates). Nevertheless the risk perception of the situation and their potential impact is usually underestimated. Some misconceptions and a poor information on their main characteristics and their social consequences, prevents politicians and technical responsible of health, security, law, teaching and others to take the appropriate measures and to assign the necessary resources to this matter. Among the different preventive interventions and programs developed on cults, poor methodological strategies have been observed.

AIS, as most of specialised cult organisations, have been offering for many years conferences and seminars, on cults. In this sense, there is large evidence that conferences and theoretical seminars have been demonstrated to be ineffective to prevent health risk factors and to promote health behaviors. For this reason the development of a prevention program on cults was an old unresolved matter in AIS. This situation has been finally faced up with the present proposal

2) Reviewing risk factors for recruitment

The development of an appropriate preventive program on cults, needs to consider evaluate the specific risk factors that make some individuals more vulnerable to cult recruitment. Most of this factors are well known by cult experts and professionals working in that field, but they need to be well explained to prevention specialists. Different classifications about the most common risk factors have been described. They can be summarized in:

a. Global personal risk factors;

§ Age; adolescence and youth
§ Dysfunctional family system (*father absence syndrome*, absence of paternal directions, lack of attention and positive and unconditional affects, poor family communication, using double and contradictory family ties with kids, and couple, conflict among parents (often non recognised)).
§ Personality factors (unsteady, psycho affective immaturity; low self stem, low tolerance to ambiguity, trend to being dependent, loneliness, anxiety, depression, feeling of confusion, being naive (lack of critical thinking), low tolerance to ambiguity, high idealism, unsatisfying sense of live).
§ Difficulties in social adaptation (social dissatisfaction, lack of illusion and social expectancies, trend to revolutionary or extreme solutions, disorientation, trend to boredom)
§ Search of spiritual and religious identity (idealism)
§ Ignorance or unconsciousness on personal vulnerability factors in front of manipulation
§ Desire of perfection and transcendence linked with youth fantasies of omnipotence, disconnection and need of escaping from a disgusting reality. Evading from immediate problems

b. Serious and harmful crisis, beyond the individuals capacity of resistance. Usually related with circumstances such as:

§ Being ill or having been diagnosed of a serious illness
§ Death of a loved one
§ Having a love disappointment
§ Having a work failure
§ Fear to some specific matter or situation
§ Living on stressful situations
§ Tendency to loneliness and isolation

c. Being approached by a recruiter in the appropriate way and at the appropriate moment

d. Cultic message coincident with needs, interests and believe system of the recruited. The effectiveness of the group offer at the first contact will succeed according to the coincidence with needs and expectancies of the recruited, such as:

§ Alternative leisure as a way to establish new friends and relationships
§ Offering comprehension and friendship, specially considering the frequency of familial, emotional academic and working crisis during adolescence and some youth periods
§ Meaning of liability when the contact with the group is established through one familiar or friend of absolute confidence
§ Offer of an alternative social framework different from the family, often understood as limited environment for freedom and communication

e. After the first contacts, the cult message can be interpreted by new members as the answer to open questions about transcendence. In a study performed by a Spanish Sociologist (Canteras 1989), many of the young interviewed, explained:

§ Interest on of knowing and experiencing new philosophies and experiences about transcendent and paranormal facts
§ Perception of deep distance with the discourse of the Catholic church and their unresolved religious feelings and needs

The results of the study also showed big differences between young people belonging to cults and those that didn't. The members presented with a greater level of satisfaction in their lives at the spiritual level. They manifested interest and pleasure for hidden sciences, they considered pacifist, democratic, left-wing and more radical respect to the solution of specific problems. They showed a major associative capacity, declared more conservative about their sexual practices (lower acceptance of homosexuality or sexual freedom, They presented with different personal trouble with family and friend relationships, drug abuse…)

3) Theoretical framework and the election of a psychological model for behavioral change

This proposed preventive educational program is based on the evidence of previous interventions that demonstrate the efficacy of educational programs to reduce vulnerability in front of risk situations. This educational interventions focus on developing knowledge, skills and attitudes (protecting factors) that help young and adolescents to successfully confront this situations, by choosing options of healthy behavior.

Working hypothesis

§   Adolescence and early youth are key periods for the adoption of relational patterns and decision making attitudes. For this reason this groups of population are specially vulnerable to psychological manipulative techniques of cults, group dependencies and other social addictions.

§   Informing about persuasive and coactive social influence and developing skills to confront them, can decrease the vulnerability

§   Approaching psychological manipulation from the perspective of illusionism, can be a useful strategy to illustrate the manipulative process of cults with examples and personal experiences. This approach can also contribute to facilitate the perception of group influences and to offer some ideas to the debate of the influence of environmental factors.

This program has been designed according to a theoretical cognitive social model that considers behavior trend as the main determinant of individuals behavior, and that is determined by the following aspects:

•   Attitudes defined by knowledge's and individual believes (susceptibility or perceived risk, severity or perceived seriousness of the situation, benefits and barriers perceived related to the behavior)

•   Subjective norm; what an individual perceives as thoughts and attitudes of people of importance for oneself (couple, friends, family…)

•   Self effectiveness; individuals perception of feeling capable of succesfully developing a preventive behavior

•   Skills; mainly of social kind necessary to develop the preventive action

By another hand, among an intentional behavior and the final behavior, some difficulties can be that if are wrongly worked with the students can cause that finally the preventive effect is not acquired
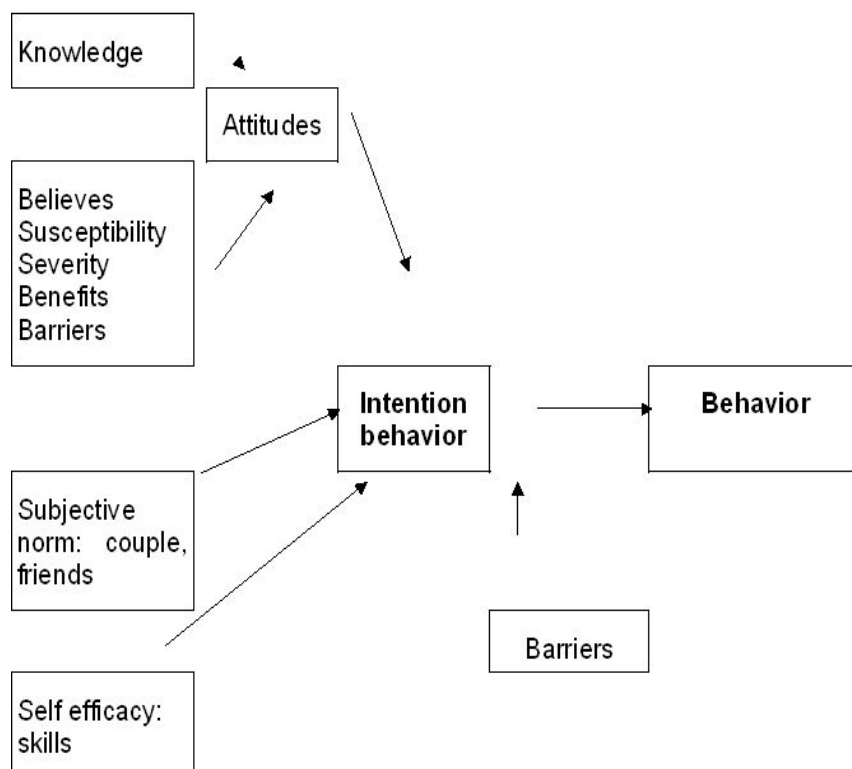
4) Detection of psychosocial determinants of interest for the preventive program

Considering factors, situations and personality characteristics found in the literature, as well as from the analysis of the designed activity, and taking the model of behavioral change (ASE) Attitude Self efficacy as reference, a table has been developed including the necessary psychosocial factors for a preventive program. Essentially this determinants are referred to: knowledge and believes (on cults, psychological manipulation strategies etc…) susceptibility, potential risks of being recruited and skills (resisting group pressure, certainty, critical capacity…)

Psycho social determinants considered in AIS activity according to the ASE psychological change pattern

Determinants	Topics	Aspects
	Attracting young people	ü Introduction of the teaching staff and of the project ü Explaining benefits and advantages of participating
	Impressing them with particular events and situations	- Solar Temple Order - Training perception and capability (cigarette-mind power) - Being aware of the self subliminal manipulative perception
Susceptibility	Collecting personal data	- Answering a questionnaire
(Risk perception, vulnerability)	Revealing deception	- Explanation of previous activity
	All of us are vulnerable some times in our lives	- Crisis, splitting couples, work uncertainty, loneliness, death or missing a loved one
Severity	Consequences of being recruited	- Exploitation , isolation , some times away from family and friends, presenting symptoms, exclusive interest, emotions and activity around the group, loosing freedom and autonomy , addiction
(perception of seriousness)	How retention occurs	- Using techniques to eliminate doubts: stop thinking , repeating sentences, creating fear, betraying, punishing, blaming

Knowledge	Cults	ü False believes: "strange members": wearing, appearance, clandestine, etc.
		ü Identification by activities and acting way : confidence atmosphere and credibility, answering personal expectancies
		ü "Double face": an external one and another for members
		ü Hide information
		ü Leader's objective: reaching power
		ü Giving anything for anything
		ü Selecting members (people considered to be useful for their interests (money, work, influences and expansion)
		ü Expert recruiters
		ü Attractive and funny Initiation rituals (having fun and relaxation used for creating dependence and to relax tension).
		ü They teach how to be disciplined, following rules and giving sense to group's membership
		ü Hierarchical structure, meaning different levels of responsibility
		ü Only the most obedient can progress in the group
		ü Many different patterns of group
		ü Totalitarian and authoritarian structure
	Manipulative techniques	ü Intervening on emotions, thoughts and behaviors
		ü The manipulated acts at the recruiters will: unconsciously and without any consideration to personal interests
		ü Everybody can be manipulated sometimes
		ü Use of emotional techniques (feeling special, loved, well considered), cognitive techniques (new people's classification, curiosity, changes in language, new theories and new world's vision)
		ü Use of fun and relaxation techniques to create dependence and to relax tensions
		ü Use of techniques to eliminate and to avoid doubts
		ü Provoke subtle and undetectable manipulation
		ü Generation of a progressive desire of cult adherence. Creating a need of change on thinks emotions and behavior
Skills	How to act (before Group adscription)	ü Look for information, preferable in specialized organizations
		ü Ask for specific data and information and check its validity

How to identify them	ü Hard to find good critical information ü Systematic use of manipulative techniques ü Double face (false image) ü Hidden information ü Existence of a leader ü Attractive offer but giving anything for anything ü Serious and scientifically rigorous appearance ü Image on public and individual use ü Take the interest generating false expectative (generate curiosity) ü Generate atmosphere of authority and mystery ü They obtain personal data without any informed consent
Other strategies	ü To have assertive answers in front of deception: we do have the right to be informed since the very beginning without enough information a free decision can not be taken ü To think in advance what they do want for their offer ü To be alert in front of any change in the initial offer or conditions or if some secret is revealed ü Don't offer any information on personal tastes, preferences, hobbies
In front a possible recruitment situation	ü Doubt about it ü Not forget about uncomfortable situations ü Before taking any commitment is better to be careful ü Get out of it, leave any risk situation ü Minimize the exposure to their influence ü Avoid giving personal information (if you have real interest there is always a chance to come back) ü Be informed, check the information they have offered, don't agree with the given information ü Don't be satisfied with "unclear or uncompleted" answers ü Look for alternative information
Graduated consent (assertiveness)	ü There are different degrees of assertive answers: Go away saying that you don't want to be manipulated, that you are not interested or that you disagree or dislike them. Say it aloud, to encourage others to do the same as you. Be steady in your position don't feel satisfied with partial or confuse answers
Questions for recruiters	How long have you been a recruiter or how long are you belonging to this organization? Are you intending to recruit me for some organization? Do you have any doubts or any critics to your group? How much time do you invest in task?

Social Influence	Group pressure	There is strong group pressure in the initiating rituals. Action is on your feelings not on your intelligence Be aware that manipulation is often very subtle and hard to be detected
	Rituals	ü Initiating rituals can be funny (being fun and relaxation can be used to generate dependence and to relax tensions) ü Groups teach how to obey, how to follow their rules. They introduce you a feeling of membership to the group ü The hierarchical structure implies different degrees of compromise. Only the most obedient and disciplined reach higher positions

5) Activities for the program and determinants elected

Structure of documentation (material)

Documentation is structured in 6 units including: title, general objectives, specific objectives, time for activity, didactic orientation and procedures

Included materials:

ü Interactive book for students, to be used once they have finished activities with their teacher
ü Booklet for parents
ü Basic information for teachers

Methods

The program presents individual and group activities, with proposals of learning strategies such as the guided practice, predicting situations, case discussion etc…

A minimum of 6 sessions (classes) are recommended for successful development of the proposed units.

General Objective: to exemplify manipulative processes by means of illusionism

Specific Objectives:

- Having direct psychological manipulation experiences
- Perceiving the group pressure
- Improving knowledge in psychological manipulation techniques, cults and personal vulnerability
- Improving self perception on vulnerability in front off psychological manipulation (susceptibility)
- To increase self efficacy to confront psychological manipulation and group pressure

Training skills for succeeding in front of psychological manipulation and group pressure

Topics approached by the program

Unit 1: *'We need people like you'*

Worked determinants: the main topics approached by this unit are knowledge and believes (susceptibility and severity) centred on the experience of the recruiting process.

Contents: how youngsters are attracted, how are they impressed by the group. Being vulnerable, how is the group collecting personal data, revealing deception, consequences of being recruited.

Unit 2: "*Oscar personnel's notebook*"
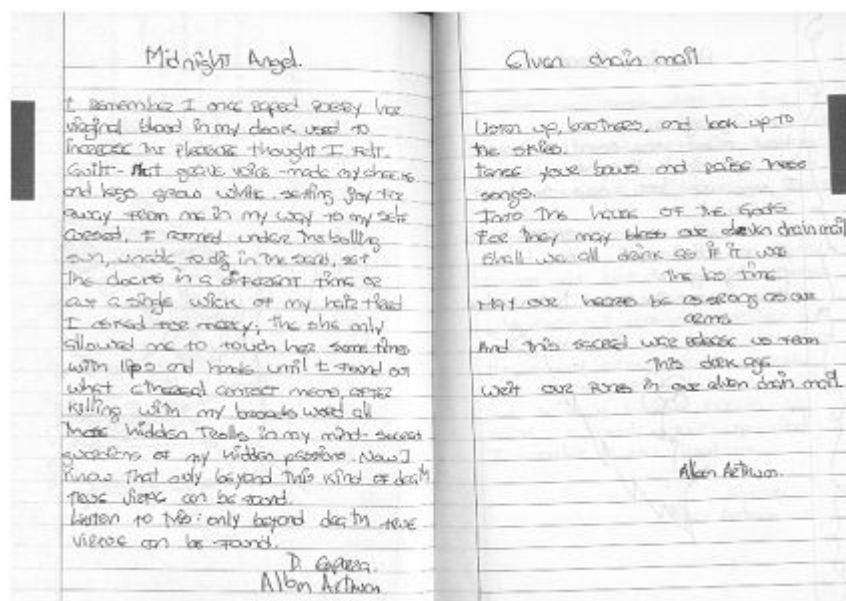
Approached determinants: working essentially knowledge and believes (susceptibility and severity) centred on manipulative techniques and on it's use in cults.

Contents: manipulation techniques:

- § Direct: dominance taking control of the situation, aggression, intimidation, the reason and logics, insistence.
- § Indirect: deception, emotional exploitation, avoidance, trapping, mind control techniques, self destructive acts, triangulation, manipulative reactions in front of changes
- § Mixed: stereotyped roles, techniques for reducing self esteem, guides for intermittent reinforcement, social control techniques, act with unconfident ness, compulsory acts focused on revenge, criticism

Other contents: Cults Identification; recruiters; initiation rituals; hierarchical structure; types of cults; cults structure.

Unit 3: "*I got you* "
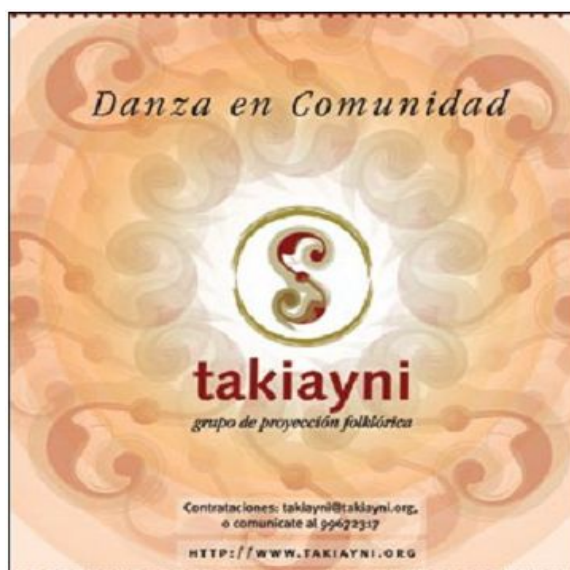
Used Determinants: developing skills to identify coactive groups.
Contents: Characteristics of coactive groups (example: simplistic solutions contradiction between theory and practice; charismatic messianic and dogmatic leader; Offer of apparent personal safety, human support, opportunity of belonging to an elected group; totalitarian structure; use of psychological techniques for recruitment and indoctrination…

Units 4 and 5: *"What must I do?"*

Worked determinants: working skills to confront different manipulative techniques used by coactive groups.
Contents: How to successfully confront and avoid manipulative techniques

Unit 6: "*Where can I go?*"

Worked determinants: Working essentially on skills to look for help when a group is suspected or when we are being submitted to manipulative techniques.
Contents: Searching for resources (internet, public and private institutions etc.); What are they doing?; Where are them?; How to access?.