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# EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS SECTS

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## Abstract

This article explores the psychological factors and causes of youth involvement in religious sects. It describes the results of a pilot study conducted on students and young workers who are exposed to religious movements. From a psychological point of view, there are assumptions about the causes of religious dependence of young people on destructive influences. The purpose of the study was to identify the psychological characteristics of young people involved in religious sects. In a pilot study we have studied such age features of modern Kazakh youth as accentuation of character, perception and satisfaction with life.

*Keywords:* self-perception, groups, accentuation, character

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## 1. Introduction

The youth is one of the groups, which is the most vulnerable to the influence of religious sects. There are a number of reasons for that:

- 1) the period of 'existential vacuum' – people's lack of the crucial values of existence, the loss of social and moral orientations;
- 2) the pass through the main stages of psychosocial development and the attendant crisis;
- 3) the change of the social status and group roles: high school graduation, the beginning of an independent life, imprisonment, the first or the last year of higher education, the loss or change of job, divorce, travelling, moving, illness, the death of close relatives, the change of lifestyle;
- 4) the unfavourable situation in family, which forms the sharp dissatisfaction with one's own existence - this factor is the most typical for the youth;
- 5) the rejection of parents' fate and the reluctance to follow their lifestyle.

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Under the influence of a cult, young people are quickly assimilated into the cult group and become fanatics of the movement, the ideology and activity of which could conflict with their original worldview.

The consequences of sect influence could be as follows: an unhealthy dependence on pseudoreligious organizations and their leaders; the loss of independence, the incapacity to perceive emotional bonds; the distrust of rational thought; the break of family ties, if the family is not loyal to the new ideas; the retreat from the reality because of the enslavement of the mind. Without any doubt, they are all destructive [1].

Due to the activation of sects all over the world and in Kazakhstan particularly, the relevance of this research becomes obvious. Its goals are to experimentally identify the factors, which have an effect on youth involvement in religious sects, and to compose the characteristics of the person, who is the most liable to sect influence.

## **2. Methods**

Students and young workers aged 20-30 years took part in our experimental research. There were two samples of subjects: the control one are students of Almaty universities about 100 people (72 women and 28 men) and the experimental group, 20 girls and 5 boys (sect members of the social movement of self-development of man 'Allya Ayat' ('New World') or 'group Farhat-ata'). The total number of subjects is 125 people. The ethnic compositions were Kazakhs, Russian, Uighur, Ukrainians, Germans and Koreans.

Results of the control group according to a personality test on character accentuation of G. Shmishek are indicated in the Results section.

In order to investigate the conditions involving young people in religious sects the next methods were used: the method of M. Kun and T. McPartland 'Who am I?' [2], a technique of personality differential, adapted by the staff of neuropsychiatric Institute named after V.M. Bekhterev, whose purpose was - the study of specific properties of the individual, his self-awareness, interpersonal relationships [3], a personality test of character accentuation by G. Shmishek and K. Leonhard [4].

The method of M. Kun and T. McPartland was developed in the 50s. It is a simple projective test, the purpose of which - the study of meaningful personal identity characteristics. The question 'Who am I?' Is directly linked to the characteristics of their own perception of the man himself, which is his way of 'I' or self-concept [2].

We were more interested in our work on the second part of the test - the answers to the question 'Who is sectarian?', because they allow you to identify the subjects perception characteristics of the representative image of non-traditional religious orientation.

The information collection is quite simple. Respondents were given a sheet of paper with the headline 'Who am I?' consisting of twenty numbered

lines. They were requested to answer the question: ‘Who am I?’ and record their responses quickly, preferably in the form of nouns in the sequence in which they come to their mind. No need to care about logic or about the importance of the responses.

The second form of the text contains the question “Who is a follower of non-traditional religious organization?” and the instruction: “Please answer the question ‘Who is, in your opinion, a member of the religious sect?’ and write down your responses quickly enough, desirable in the form of nouns in the order in which they come to your mind. No need to care about logic or about the importance of the answers. There are 15 numbered lines below.”

Furthermore, in the end of the forms we asked subjects to evaluate its characteristics as follows.

“Now for every single characteristic vote on the four-digit system:  
‘+’ - ‘plus’ sign is placed, if in general you personally like this feature;  
‘-’ - ‘minus’ sign - if in general you personally do not like this feature;  
‘±’ - sign ‘plus or minus’ - if you like and do not like this feature at the same time;  
‘?’ - a sign of ‘problem’ - if you do not know how to feel about the characteristics, you do not have yet a specific assessment of the considered response.”

### ***2.1. Semantic Differential (perception of ‘sect’ concept)***

The semantic differential (SD) was developed in the mid-50s by Charles Osgood to explore the emotional attitude of people to the different concepts and to determine their meaning. The essence of this method is as follows. Respondents were asked to express their attitude to an object (concept image) on the set of bipolar scales, mostly seven-point, such as: (1) weak – strong, (2) male – female, (3) active – passive, (4) slow – fast and (5) usual – unusual. The last position on the scales described verbal antonyms. The set of scales form the original space scales. The number of gradations on the scale may be less than seven.

It may be noted that the application of the method of semantic differential in psychological research will provide information on the categorical structure of individual or collective consciousness, its semantic ambiguity, and comprehensiveness. This technique can be used:

- 1) as a pilotage to determine the semantic content of the key concepts used in the study (complementarity factor resulting semantic structure and the theoretical scheme phenomenon under study will help to bridge the gap between the theoretical and empirical research plan);
- 2) as the main instrument in the study of public opinion, if the factorial structure of the SD is already worked out in the preliminary studies.

SD method allows us to express the distance between the connotative meanings of concepts in the form of a certain number. In general terms, it allows you to set and solve the following issues:

- 1) the difference in the assessment of the concept of different subjects (or different test groups by averaging ratings within the group);
- 2) assessing the difference in the two (or more) of concepts to the same subjects (or group);
- 3) the difference in the evaluation of the same concept with the same test (or a group) at different times. Changes in values are in particular occurring due to the impact of the mass media, because of the changing social and cultural contexts, as a result of training, and so on.

The mathematics involved in the semantic differential method, reveals the attitude of the person, group of people (by averaging ratings within them) to the different processes and phenomena. It made it possible to combine the qualitative characteristics and quantitative estimates.

It should be noted that the use of SD has its limitations. However, they are not associated with the mathematical apparatus, and a multiplicity of associations caused by the sign, the concept, the parameters of social phenomena and processes in the consciousness and the human psyche [5, 6].

Questionnaire of Shmishek and Leonhard [4, p. 18-33; 7; 8]. This personality test, a questionnaire designed to diagnose the type of accentuation of personality, is an implementation of the typological approach to its study. The test consists of 88 questions where 'yes' or 'no' answers are required. This technique identifies the following 10 types of accentuation of personality:

1. Demonstrative type. It is characterized by an increased ability to displace.
2. Pedantic style. Persons of this type are characterized by high rigidity, inertia of mental processes, inability to oust traumatic experiences.
3. 'Stuck' type. It is characterized by excessive resistance affect.
4. Excitable type. It is characterized by an increased impulsivity, weakening of control over impulses and urges.
5. Hyperthymic type. It is characterized by the increased background mood in combination with optimism and high activity.
6. Dysthymic type. It is characterized by reduced mood, pessimism, fixing the shadow side of life, confusion.
7. Anxious, fearful. It is characterized by the tendency to fear, shyness and timidity.
8. Cyclothymic type. It is characterized by change of hyperthymic and dysthymic phases.
9. Affective-exalted. It is characterized by ease transition from ecstasy state to state of grief.
10. Emotive type. It is characterized by related affective-exalted, but symptoms are not so rough. Persons of this type are particularly impressionable and sensitive.

The maximum rate for each type of accentuation is 24 points. Accentuation is considered a sign above 12 points. The data obtained may be presented as a 'personal profile accentuation'.

The concept of 'accented personalities' by K. Leonhard is the theoretical basis of the questionnaire. All personality traits can be divided into basic and

advanced. The main features are the core of the personality; they determine its development, the processes of adaptation, mental health. Basic features with considerable severity characterize the personality as a whole. In the case of exposure to adverse factors, they can acquire pathological, destroying the structure of personality. Persons who have the basic features pronounced are called accented. Accentuated personality should not be seen as pathological. This is the case of ‘sharpening’ of certain inherent characteristics of each person. According to K. Leonhard, in accented personalities are potentially incorporated as a possible positive social achievements, and social negative charge [9].

K. Leonhard distinguished 10 types of accented personalities that are quite randomly divided into two groups: the accentuation of character (demonstrative, pedantic, stuck, excitable) and accentuation of temperament (hyperthymic, dysthymic, anxious and fearful, cyclothymic, affective-exalted, emotive). The concept K. Leonhard of accented personalities had a noticeable impact on the development of pathological characterological diagnostic questionnaire (PCDQ) [7].

### **3. Results**

According to Table 1, cyclothymic type of accentuation is in the first place in this group of subjects by the frequency of occurrence, the demonstrative is the second, and the affective and exalted is the third. The results of the experimental group may be seen in Table 2.

**Table 1.** Data of accentuation of personality in control group.

<b>Types of accentuation</b>	<b>The control group</b>	<b>The highest scores</b>
Demonstrative	20	20
Pedantic	5	22
‘Stuck’	6	22
Excitable	5	18
Giperthymic	10	24
Dysthymic	5	18
Disturbingly, fearful	5	24
Cyclothymic	25	24
Affective and exalted	15	21
Emotive type	6	24

In the experimental group, dysthymic type of accentuation is on the first place on the frequency of occurrence, the excitable is the second, and the ‘stuck’ is the third. However, the highest scores in the ‘stuck’ type subjects do not exceed 18, i.e. accentuation of the severity of this type is not as high as on the dysthymic (24 b.) and excitable type. On this basis, we believe that people with dysthymic type of accentuation are most susceptible to involvement in a sect. After cyclothymic accentuation most common is the accentuation of demonstrative type. The third in the incidence of accentuation is affective and exalted [9].

**Table 2.** Data of accentuation of personality in experimental group.

Types of accentuation	Experimental group	The highest scores
Demonstrative	2	21
Pedantic	5	20
‘Stuck’	9	18
Excitable	10	22
Giperthymic	2	20
Dysthymic	12	24
Disturbingly, fearful	0	-
Cyclothymic	7	24
Affective and exalted	2	18
Emotive type	0	-

According to the procedure ‘Who am I?’ the answers were divided into categories based on the emotional coloration: positive (good, kind, and so on); neutral (person, student, person, and so on); negative (lazy, aggressive, and so on) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Results of the method ‘Who am I?’ in the control group.

The emotional colouring of categories	Control group (%)		Experimental group (%)	
	The image of I	The image of sectarian	The image of I	The image of sectarian
Positive	58.7	8	26.6	5.1
Neutral	40	19.3	57.2	14.5
Negative	13	72.7	16.2	80.4

**Table 4.** Results of the personal differential in control group.

	Control group (%)		Experimental group (%)	
Scales of Personal differential	Average self-assessment	Average evaluation of sectarian	Average self-assessment	Average evaluation of sectarian
Factor ‘Assessment’	13.94	-1.44	8.2	-2.6
Factor ‘Strength’	10.67	-3.67	10.5	-4.2
Factor ‘Activity’	8.33	1.11	9.3	-15

### 3.1. Personal differential (self-assessment) and personal differential (evaluation of sectarian)

The results obtained with the help of personal differential were analysed by three factors (scales) - ‘Assessment’, ‘Strength’ and ‘Activity’. Since the negative (-) values of the factor correspond to the rejection, the subject being evaluated, it is possible to speak of a low level of attractiveness, which has

‘sectarian’ impression in the eyes of students of control sample. The average assessment of the students themselves and sectarians on personal differential are shown in Table 4.

The results obtained by the semantic differential are clear - the concept of ‘sect’ in the minds of students of the control sample is negative. Average rating is 25.06. Ratings excessively low, with the sign ‘minus’ affectively saturated, are indicating a complete walling consciousness of students from rational understanding the concept of ‘sect’. All data received by the techniques we subjected correlation analysis method of rank correlation ( $r_s$  - Spearman coefficient) using the computer program SPSS 11.5 for Windows [10, 11]. We also have checked the correlation between test of Shmishek and personal differential data (sectarian score) [9] (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Coefficients of Spearman’s rank correlation  $r_s$  between test of Shmishek and semantic differential.

<b>Types accentuation</b>	<b>Semantic differential (sect) (%)</b>
Demonstrative	0.065
Stuck	-0.469 (**)
Pedantic	0.245 (*)
Excitable	0.071
Giperthymic	-0.247 (*)
Dysthymic	-0.120
Disturbingly, fearful	-0.101
Affective and exalted	0.029
Emotive	-0.002
Cyclothymic	0.370 (**)

Note: (\*) - an indicator of the reliability of the correlation at the 0.05 level (i.e. the probability of error is 5%); (\*\*) - an indicator of the reliability of the correlation of 0.01 (i.e. the probability of error is 1%).

#### **4. Discussion**

Based on these techniques, ‘Who am I’, it can be argued that the image of sectarian among youth is negative, the opposition of ‘the image of I’. This indicates the presence of the students’ strong social attitude, reaching to the level of prejudice that may cause a relatively high degree of resistance to the influence of student recruiters-sectarian. The members of the ‘Allya Ayat’ evaluating themselves use mostly positive and neutral emotional characteristics. Attention is drawn to the fact that, in contrast to the subjects of the control group, the experimental sample of respondents most often describe themselves as neutral - 57.2% of all responses, only 26.6% of the answers make positive characteristics, the negative performance is much higher than that of the first students sample - 16.2%. It says that ‘self-image’ of ‘Allya Ayat’ members is more critical than those of the students; this may be an indication of a more rigorous attitude towards themselves and less positive perception of themselves. The self-description is dominated by formal (neutral) characteristics of the image (son,

wife, mistress), the response rate does not exceed the average rates, that is 'self-image' are less differentiated than those of the students. In general, the image of 'I' in the experimental sample is less developed than in the control group. Thus, the personal differential reflects the subjective, emotional and semantic representations of students about themselves and sectarians, as a member of a religious organization. Based on these new empirical data, we see again that the 'image of sectarian' in the student environment is negative, the opposition of 'the image of I'.

Indicators of pedantic accentuation found although weak, but a direct correlation with the data of semantic differential,  $r_{(s)} = 0.245$  (\*). Cyclothymic type forms a strong direct relationship with the results of semantic differential,  $r_{(s)} = 0.370$  (\*\*). This indicates the presence of students with cyclothymic traits such as positive rather than a negative image of the sect. This correlation shows us that the more pronounced the student traits of Cyclothymic type of accentuation, the higher the evaluation of the concept of 'sect'. This means that those students, who are characterized by a change of Giperthymic and Dysthymic states, periodic mood swings and dependency on external events, find something positive in the concept of 'sect'. The perception of the sect at these subjects is unstable and depends on the momentary mood.

Quantitative indicators of 'stuck' type of accentuation are inversely correlated with the results of semantic differential,  $r_{(s)} = -0.469$  (\*\*). Giperthymic type also has a negative relationship with the weak data of semantic differential,  $r_{(s)} = -0.247$  (\*). This suggests that these types of accentuation have more negative than positive image of the sect. Consider the strongest link - between the 'stuck' type of accentuation and data of semantic differential: the more prominent features of the student 'stuck' type of accentuation, the lower its assessment of the concept of 'sect'. Students that are characterized by moderate communicative, tendency to moralizing, suspicion, wariness, distrust of men, sensitivity to grievances and their long experience finding the concept of 'sect' is more negative.

Thus, students with dominant traits of cyclothymic type perceive the term 'sect' as positive. Students, with the predominance of their personal qualities inherent in 'stuck' type of accentuation negatively perceived religious sect. Here the first results are showing the dependence of the perception of the students of the sect of their psychological characteristics.

The results of the correlations (Table 6) suggest that all four types of accentuation selected by us have some kind of connection with the results of personal differential (sectarian score). Demonstrative type has little direct correlation with the factor of 'Assessment'  $r_{(s)} = 0.243$  (\*) and a strong negative correlation with the scale of 'Strength',  $r_{(s)} = -0,398$  (\*\*) and the 'Activity'  $r_{(s)} = -0.338$  (\*\*) of personal differential (sectarian score). This suggests that the more pronounced the student's traits of the demonstrative type of accentuation, the more his appeal for sectarian and sympathy for the person. In general, the demonstrative type perceives sectarians as weak and lacking initiative; the image of sectarians had more negative than positive traits.

**Table 6.** Correlation analysis between test of Shmishek and Personal differential.

Types of accentuation	Personal differential (sectarian score)		
	Factor 'Assessment'	Factor 'Strength'	Factor 'Activity'
Demonstrative	0.243 (*)	-0.398 (**)	-0.338 (**)
Excitable	0.354 (**)	0.203 (*)	0.391 (**)
Dysthymic	-0.152	0.364 (**)	0.387 (**)
Disturbingly, fearful	-0.271 (**)	-0.257 (**)	-0.191

Excitable type has direct connections with all scales of personal differential of sectarian: factor 'Assessment'  $r_{(s)} = 0.354 (**)$ , factor 'Strength'  $r_{(s)} = 0.203 (*)$ , factor 'Activity'  $r_{(s)} = 0.391 (**)$ . This indicates that students with Excitable type of accentuation, perceived image of sectarian positive in all scales of personal differential.

So, we studied the perception of religious sects by youth. It was found that the perception of the 'sect' by students is virtually no different from the perception of it by members of 'Allya Ayat'. This is due to the fact that young people from the 'Allya Ayat' do not consider themselves as cultists and the sect is treated as harmful alien organization. The perception of a religious sect spreads to the perception of sectarian personality. The more negative the subjects perceive the term 'sect', the lower they evaluated the quality of sectarian personality. Conversely, the less negative they relate to the concept of 'sect', the more tolerant they evaluate personal characteristics of sectarian.

The concept of 'sect', and especially 'destructive sects', are perceived by young people as mainly negative. 'Image of the sectarian' is also perceived as negative, contrasted with the positive 'image of I'. Perception of religious sects depends on the type of accentuation, which predominates in the young man. Positive evaluation of the sect, or sectarian is formed in young people of cyclothymic, excitable, dysthymic types of accentuation. The negative assessment is formed in young people of 'stuck', demonstrative, disturbingly-fearful types of accentuation. The experimental group is dominated by the personalities of dysthymic, excitable, and 'stuck' types of accentuation.

## 5. Conclusions

The study led to the following conclusions. Working youth and students as a social group is at risk, as is subject to the involvement in destructive religious organization for the reasons below.

Perception of religious sects depends on the type of accentuation (cyclothymic, excitable, dysthymic types of accentuation). These accentuations can develop as a result of difficult situations and low actualization of person (family problems, severe stress in school, which can cause fluctuations in mental status, poor social background, etc.).

Perception of religious sects depends on the assessment of young people of the meaningfulness of their life. The lower score of meaningfulness of life

connect with the higher evaluation of personality traits of sectarian. (The period of 'existential vacuum' is the lack of people semantic values of life, the loss of moral and social orientation. As a result, the psychosocial development of the change of social status and group roles: high school graduation, the beginning of life outside the family, the first or last year of study in high school, device work or changing jobs, changing lifestyles, the unfavourable situation in the family, generating an acute dissatisfaction with their existence, which is especially characteristic to adolescence. Average level of meaningfulness of life of the members of the 'Allya Ayat' is lower than that of students).

Perception of sectarian identity is closely connected with the perception of a religious sect. Negative perceptions of 'sects' in the semantic differential lead to lower scores in the quality of sectarian identity in personal differential. The higher the person rates the sectarian by factors of personal differential, the higher the evaluation of concept of 'sect' by semantic differential. All this is due to the rejection of fate of parents and the unwillingness to follow their way of life. Young people are characterized by a greater tendency to merge with the group, tolerance for ambiguity and ideological sense. However, young people tend to an instability of attitudes, they are often in a state of emotional stress, feel a sense of loneliness or spiritual dissatisfaction with the acute problem of social identity of the individual. All of these components in one or another degree may characterize students in the period of adaptation to the institution, during the session, during final exams and graduation, as well as during the planning of professional self-determination of the future. Thus, the perception of religious sects depends on the psychological characteristics of the personality of young people. The perception of a religious sect by youth depends on the type of character accentuation and the level of meaningfulness of life.

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