

Danger of Sects and Cults for Children and Youngsters

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Introduction

To the serious threats of our democratic society we number the various pseudo-religious cults, for which in international usage the notion "cults" ¹ has been established. Besides the large pseudo-religious groups acting worldwide, we find today a multitude of "spiritual" offers from the esoteric scene, where finally the gaining of power and influence and financial interests are the goal. An especially alarming development concerns the satanistic cults. It is therefore of great importance to investigate the vulnerability of adolescents for such offers, in order to be able to develop and apply preventive measures.

In the research of development psychology, the religious development up to now hardly has been paid attention to, though especially in the age of adolescence radical reorientation takes place, which may significantly influence the future spiritual life of the concerned persons, as shown for example in the works of Dick, 1982, Fowler, 1991, Goldman, 1964, and Oser, 1988 and 1995.

The attractive power of the cults and their offers for adolescents has several reasons: curiosity, dissatisfaction with the official churches, desire for more love and security, the striving for a life in a community which gives safety and acknowledgement, the desired to be needed, interest for religious questions and much more. For the concerned persons, entering into pseudo-religious movements means a risk in several aspects: As soon as the cult has recruited a new member, subtle psychological methods of mind control are applied to alienate the member from his or her old life and to make him or her working for the cult (compare Zimbardo & Andersen, 1993). In extreme cases, a personality change occurs in the sense of a splitting of the personality into "before" and "after" having joined the cult (Hassan, 1988; Singer & Ofshe, 1990). Not rarely, school or education will be interrupted or the job will be abandoned in order to be able to entirely devote the life for the cult. As the respective associations usually do not assume any liability to care in case of illness or seniority, later on the family or the public has to care for a cult member who came into misery. It is characteristic for young cult members that they strictly refuse to accept the anxiety of their family members with respect to their unsafe future. In case of cults who increasingly use techniques to eliminate the "ego" which is considered to be negative, the danger occurs that after a number of years in the cult, the concerned people are intellectually not able any more to pass any pretentious education or to carry on in corresponding jobs.

Considering the mentioned problems, the investigation of the actual state of concernedness of adolescents by those influences, and of the conditions, which make them vulnerable by cults or cult-like groups, has a high priority.

The empirical investigation shown below in an overview has the goal to collect data about the actual state of children and adolescents as recipients of cult related informations and, on this base, to identify groups or types who are endangered by cults. Further goals were the investigation of cult specific interests, experience and knowledge, in order to provide a base for the development of preventive means. The Bundesländer Lower Austria, Vienna and Burgenland generously supported the investigation.

¹ Translator's remark: The word "Sekte" which was used in the German original has rather the meaning of the English word "cult" and will therefore here be translated by "cult".

Empirical investigation of the endangering of Austrian adolescents by cults: overview about goals, design of the investigation, and results.

Goals of the investigation

- Children and youngsters as recipients of cultic information: Investigation related to interest, experience and knowledge related to cults
- Investigation about actual inventory
- Types of children and youngsters
- Identification of endangered groups of children and youngsters

Course of the investigation

- End of 2001: Start of planning
- Spring of 2002: Pre-investigation
- December 2002: Investigation in Lower Austria
- February 2003: Investigation in Vienna
- June 2003: Investigation in Burgenland

Instruments of investigation

- Questionnaire about the situation in school and at home
- Questionnaire "interest in cults", consisting of three scales "interest in cults", "interest in Satanism" (6 items each) and "interest in occultism and esoterics" (12 items).
- Questionnaire "experience with cults", consisting of 4 scales: "experience with cults", "experience with occultism", "experience with Satanism" and "Experience with occultism" (6 items each).
- Questionnaire "knowledge about cults"

Description of samples

Total sample:

N = 2895 age 14 and 17

Partial samples:

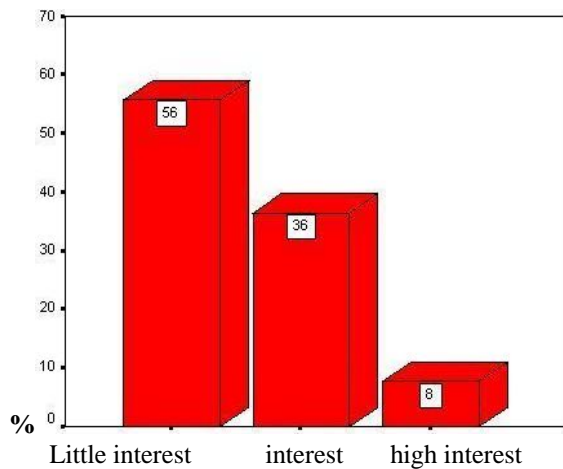
- Vienna: 1178 pupils
- Lower Austria: 1338 pupils
- Burgenland: 379 pupils

Interest in cults:

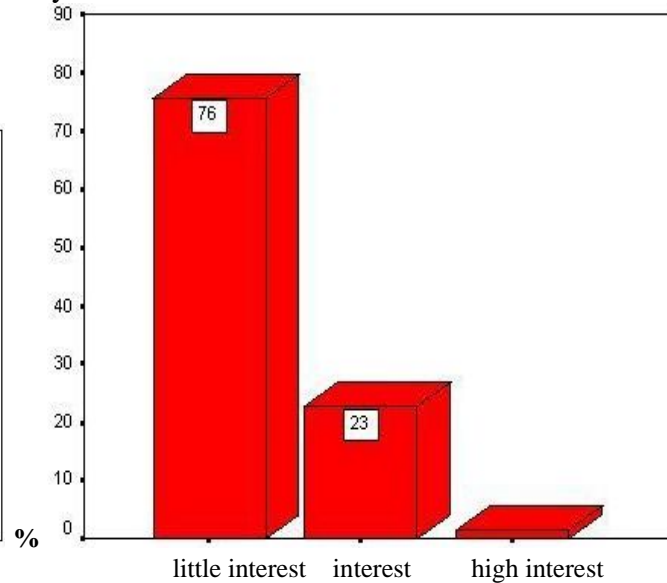
The following diagrams present the interest of pupils at the age of 14 and 17 years in "cults", "esoterics and occultism" and "Satanism". It is remarkable that nearly half of the 14-year-old and a quarter of the 17-year-old pupils have interest in cults. Related to occultism and esoterics, the results are still more remarkable: 56% of the younger and 48% of the older are interested in occultism and esoterics. More than 10% are interested in Satanism.

Interest in cults

14 years

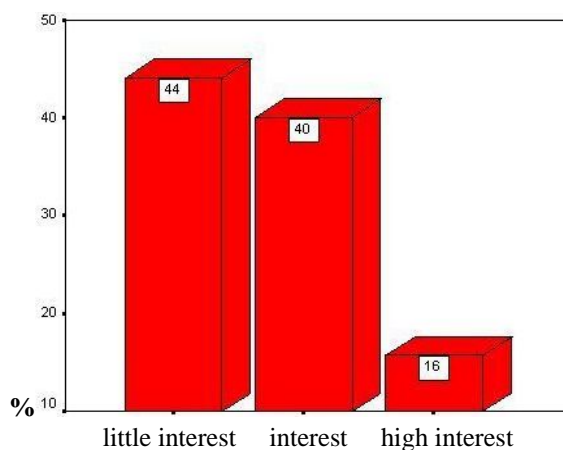


17 years

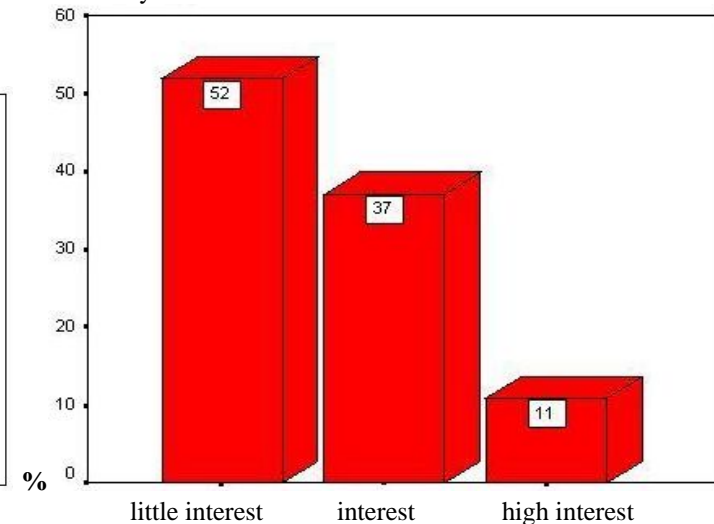


Interest in occultism and esoterics

14 years

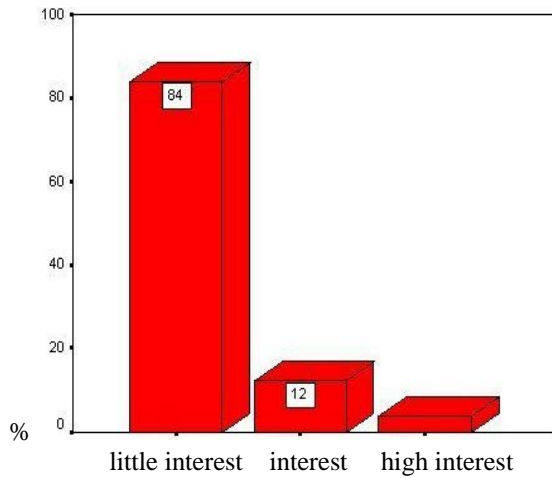


17 years

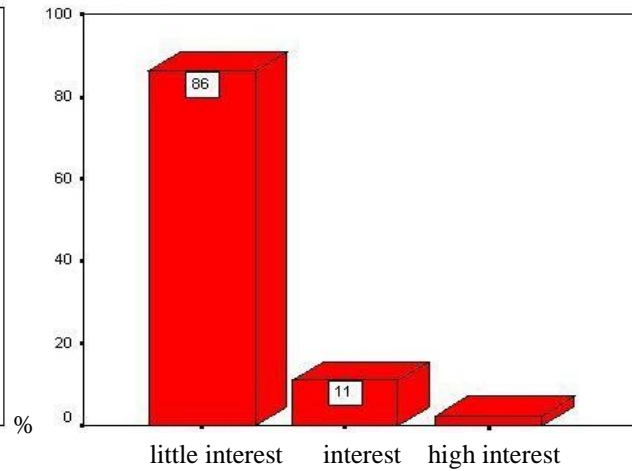


Interest in Satanism

14 years



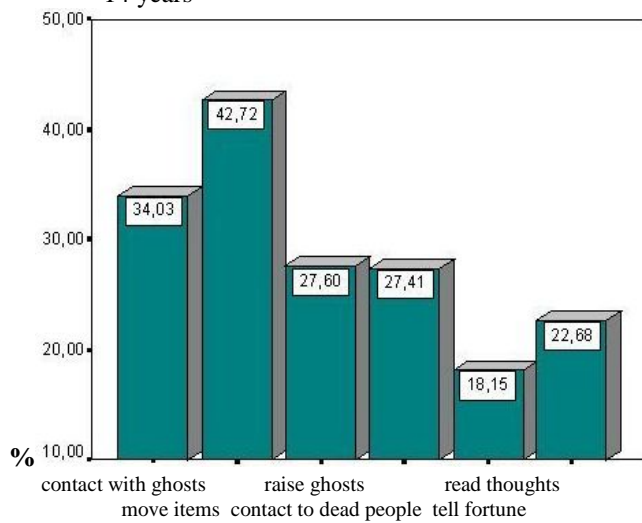
17 years



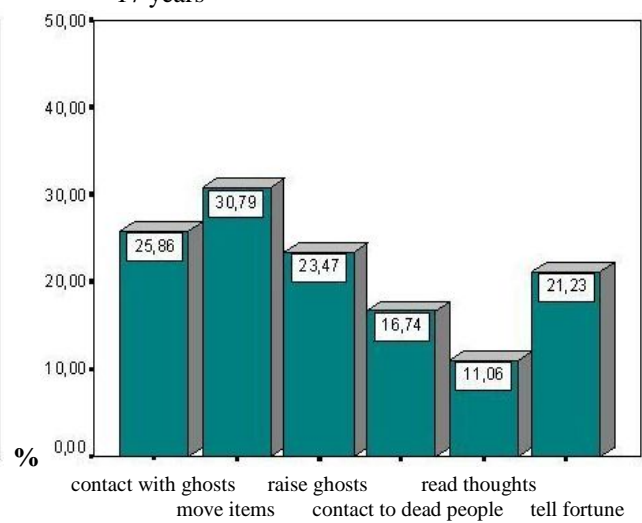
The following diagrams demonstrate how many children and youngsters have already had experience in various cults. Most of the experiences are to be found in occultism and esoterics. 2 - 3% have also experience in Satanism!

Experience with occultism

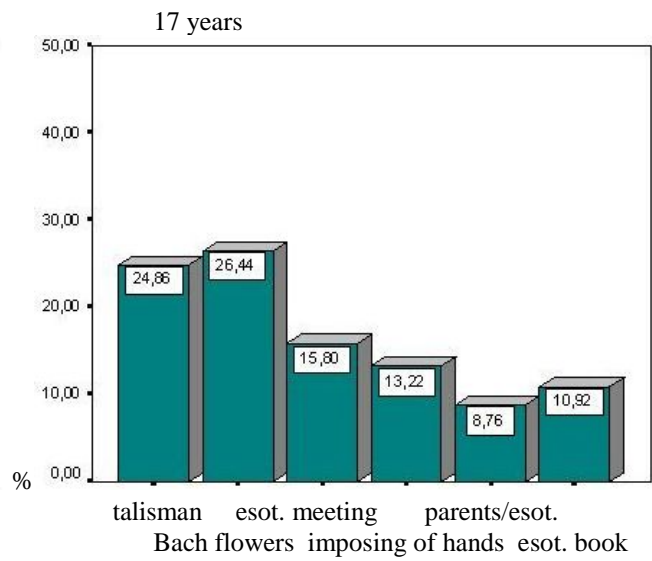
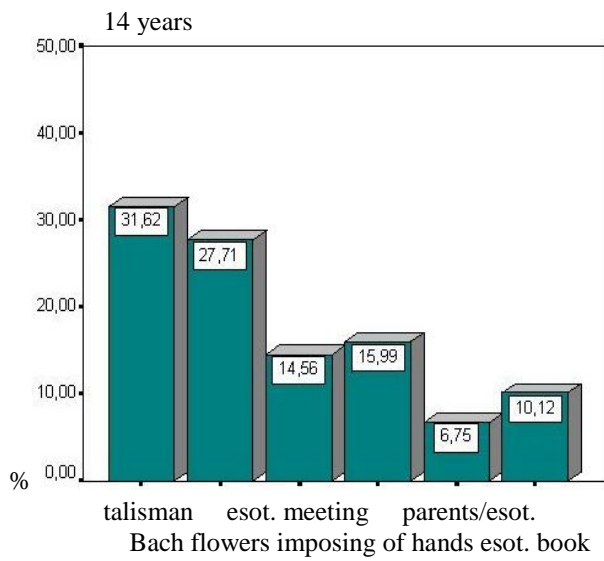
14 years



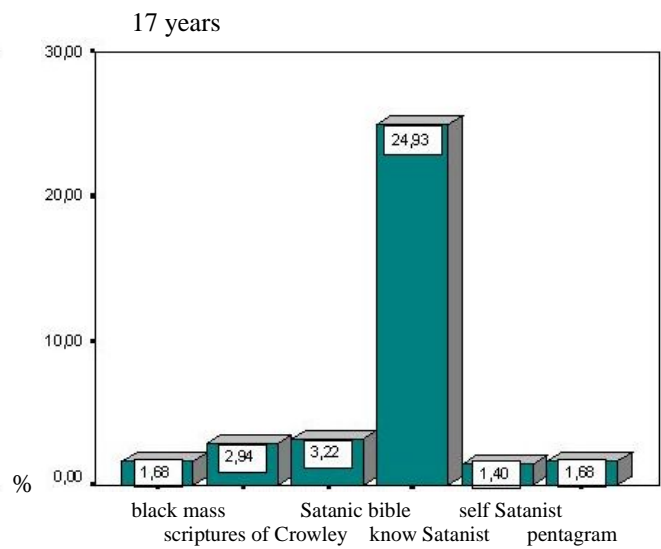
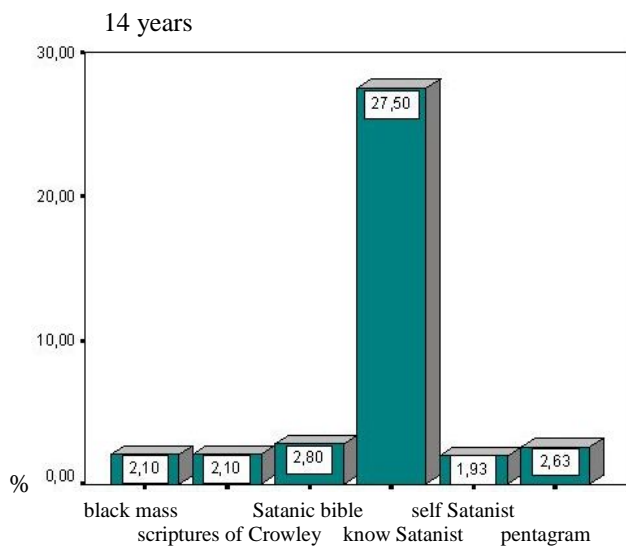
17 years



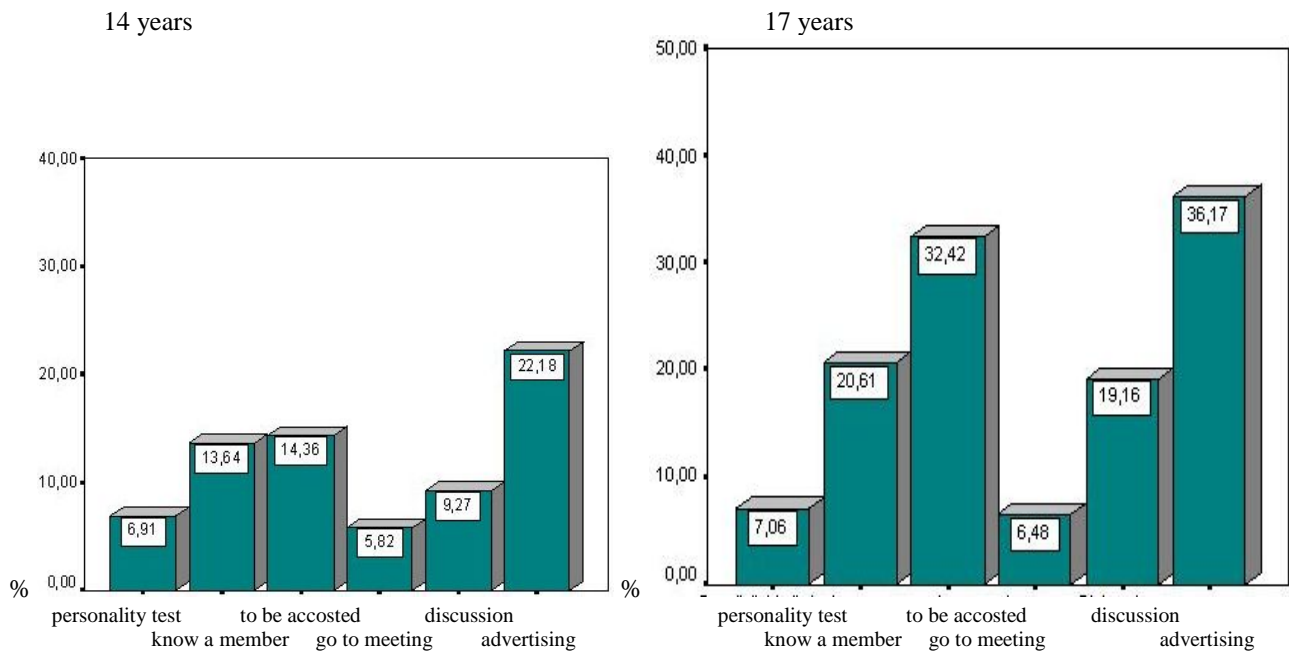
Experience with esoterics



Experience with Satanism

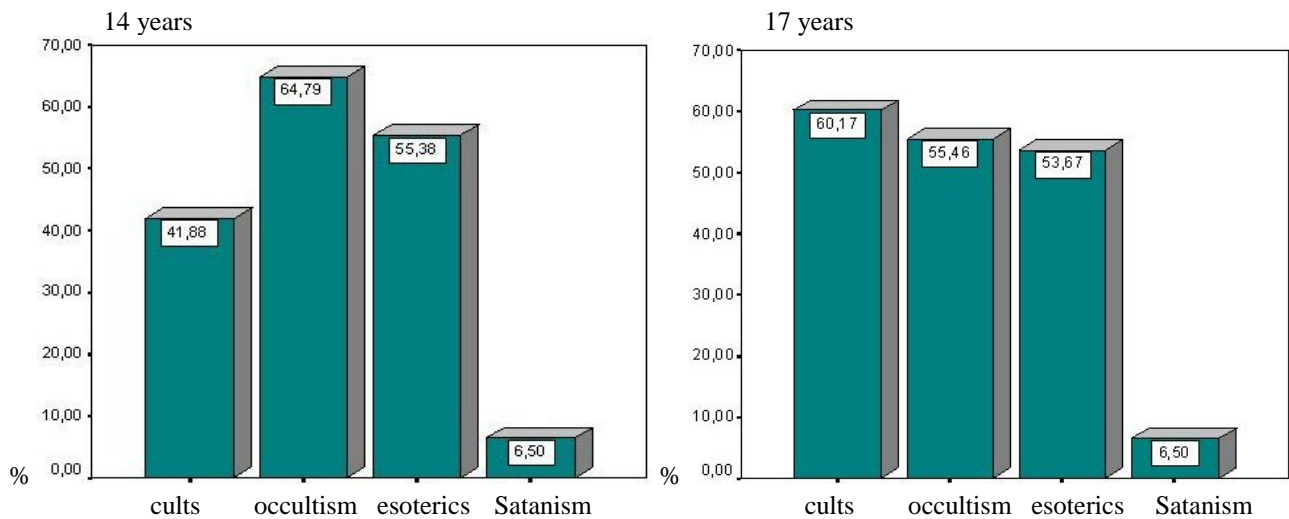


Experience with cults



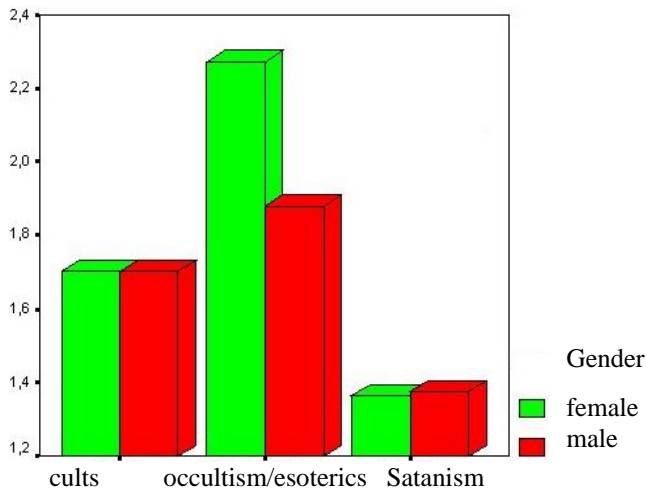
In the diagram below, those persons are presented who have experience at least in one category. As shown, more than 50% have an experience in at least one of the categories cults, occultism and esoterics.

Experience summary

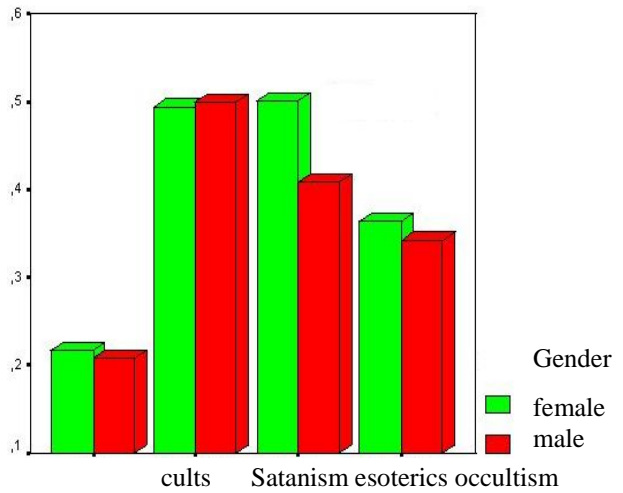


Gender difference in cultic matters:

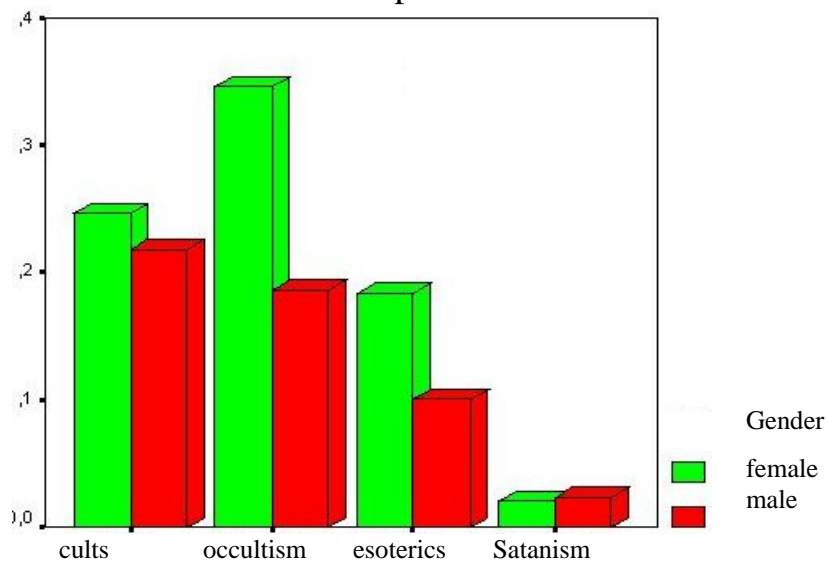
Interest



Knowledge



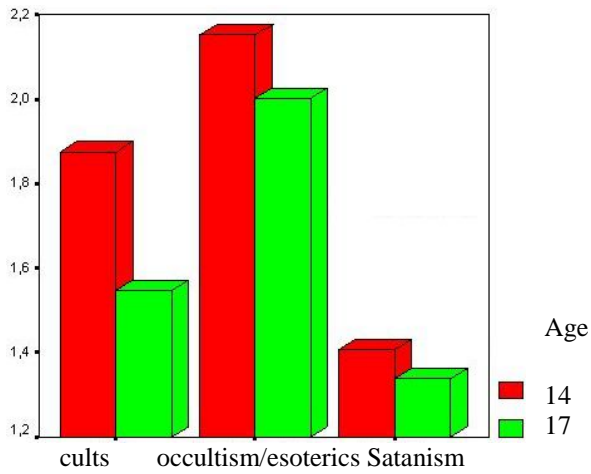
Experience



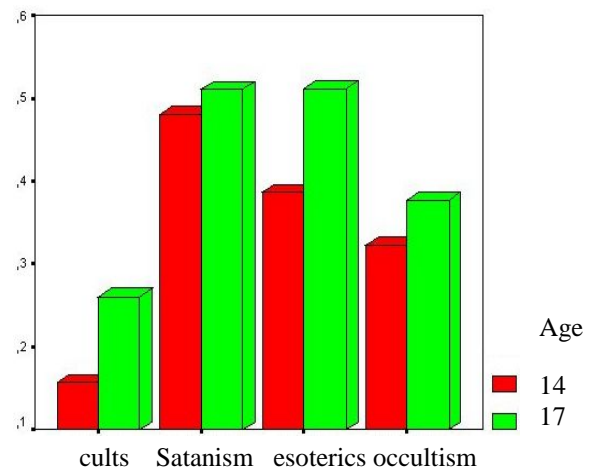
Girls are more frequently interested in occultism and esoterics and have also more experience and more knowledge in those fields. There is no significant gender difference with respect to cults and Satanism.

Difference in age in cultic matters:

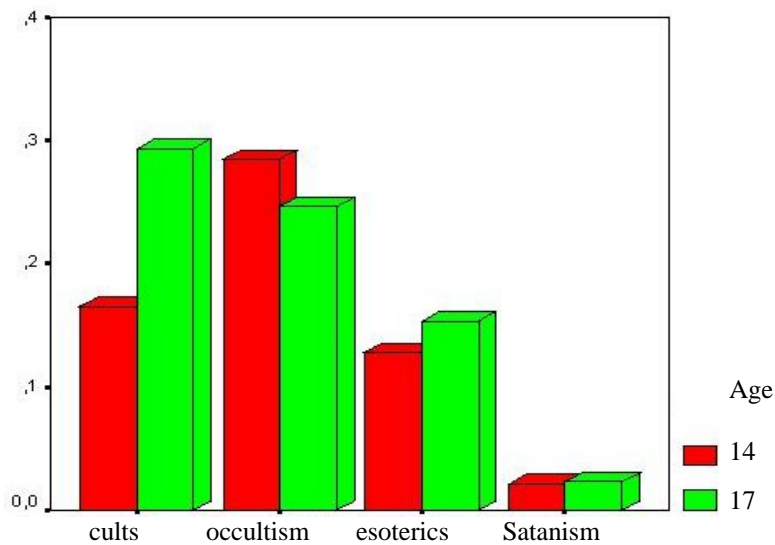
Interest



Knowledge

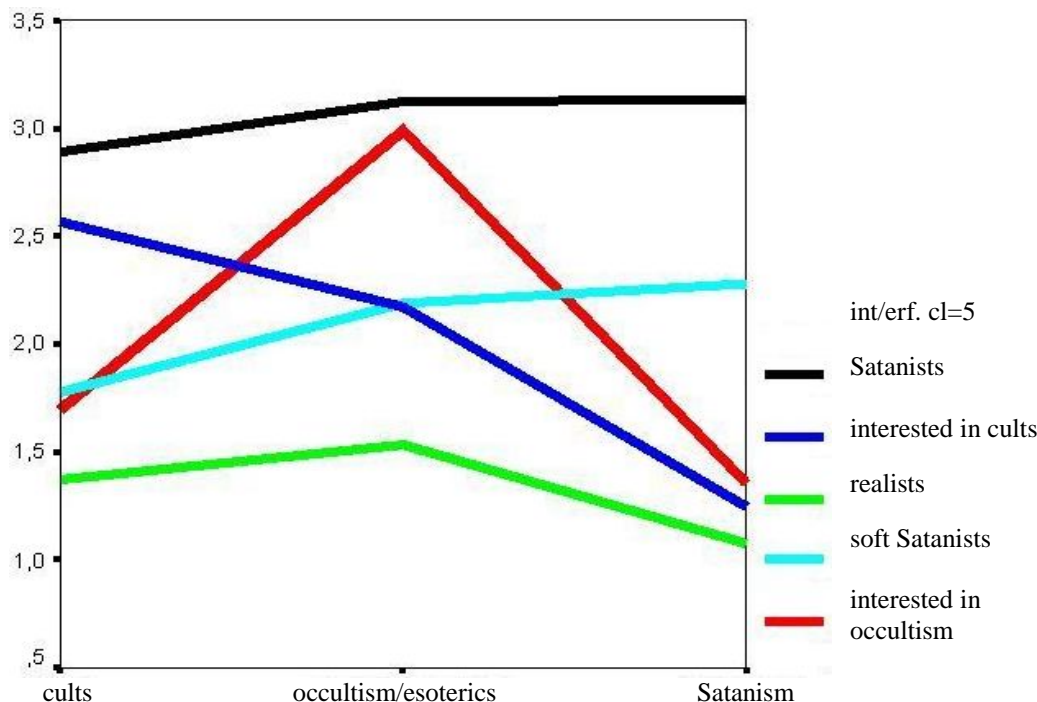


Experience



Looking at the differences in age, it shows that 14 year old pupils have more interest than 17 year old ones in all categories, while the 17 year old ones have significantly more knowledge. The younger ones have more experience in occultism while the older ones have collected more experience related to cults and esoterics. For Satanism, no differences related to age could be found.

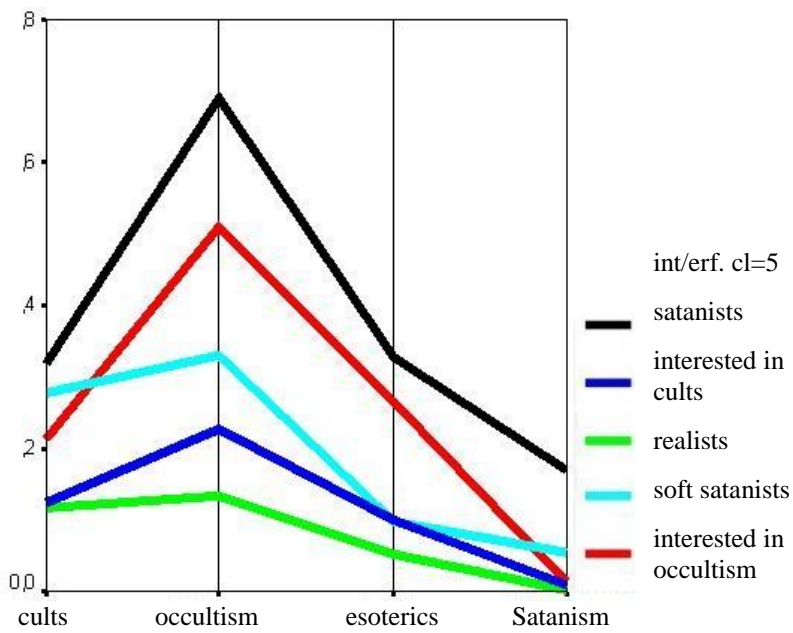
Group differences - Interest in cults



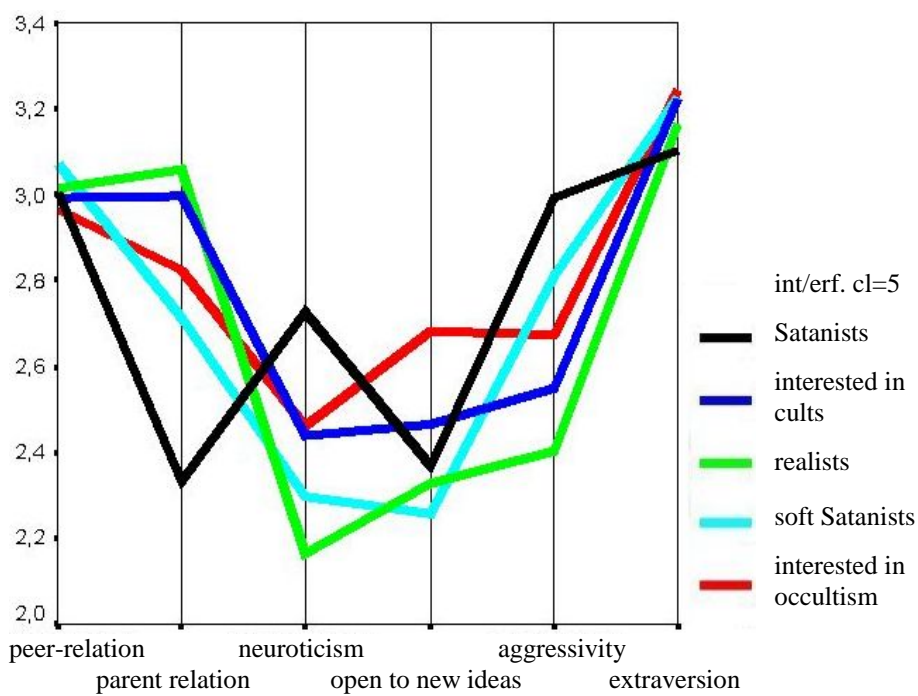
Five groups of children and youngsters could be found who differ in experience, interest and personality.

- **Realists (37,7%).** They hardly show interest in cults, they have little experience in all categories and have little knowledge. Their personality seems to be inconspicuous, overall they are happy with their life, they do not seek change, and they do not smoke and drink only little alcohol.
- **Interested in cults (26,4%).** They show high interest in cults, but they have little experience. They have good relations to the parents, but their neurotic level is higher than that of the realists and soft-Satanists. Their subjective "feeling of life" in some areas is significantly lower than in other groups, but their wish for change is low.
- **Interested in occultism (20,6%).** They have great interest in occultism and esoterics and they also have a lot of experience in these areas. Their openness for new experiences is remarkable which distinguishes them significantly from other groups. Also the wish for changes in various areas of life seems to be more distinct for all ages of this group.
- **Soft-Satanists (10,2%).** They show great interest on Satanism, but little practical experience. Their relation to the parents is worse and their aggressivity is high. There are no noticeable neurotic symptoms. Compared to Satanists, all expressions are lower. Emotions in various situations of life and wishes for change are inconspicuous.
- **Satanists (5,1%).** They show the greatest interest and the most experience in all cultic areas. The largest difference to the other groups is in the area of Satanism. With respect to personal qualities, they have the worst relation to the parents and the highest values of aggression and neuroticism. They feel least happy in nearly all areas of life and want to change much in their life.

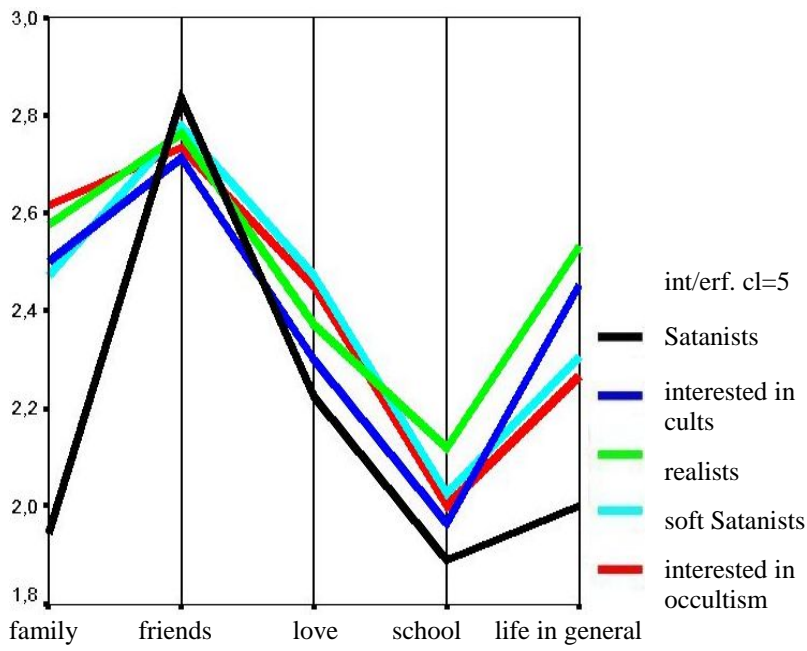
Comparison of groups - experience with cults



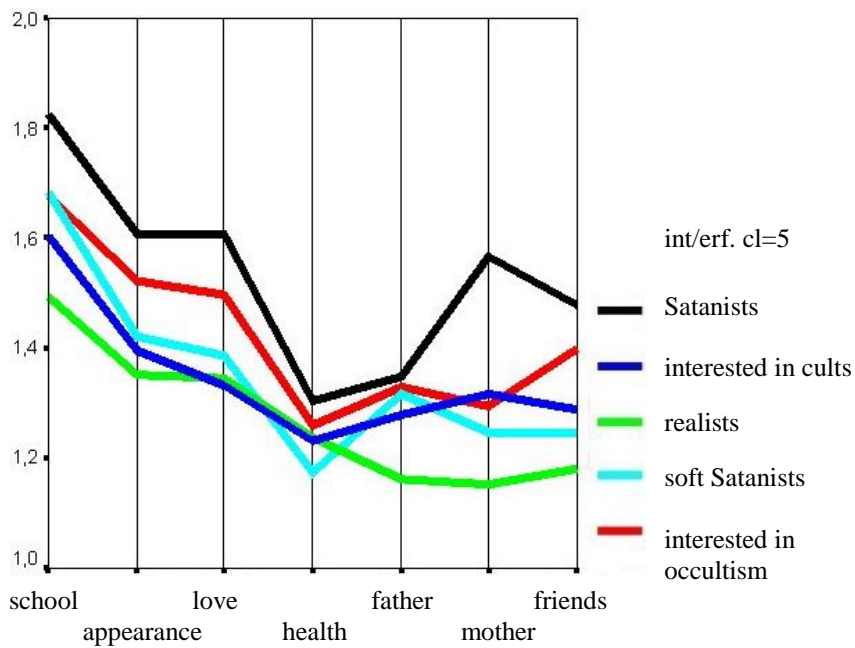
Comparison of groups - personal qualities



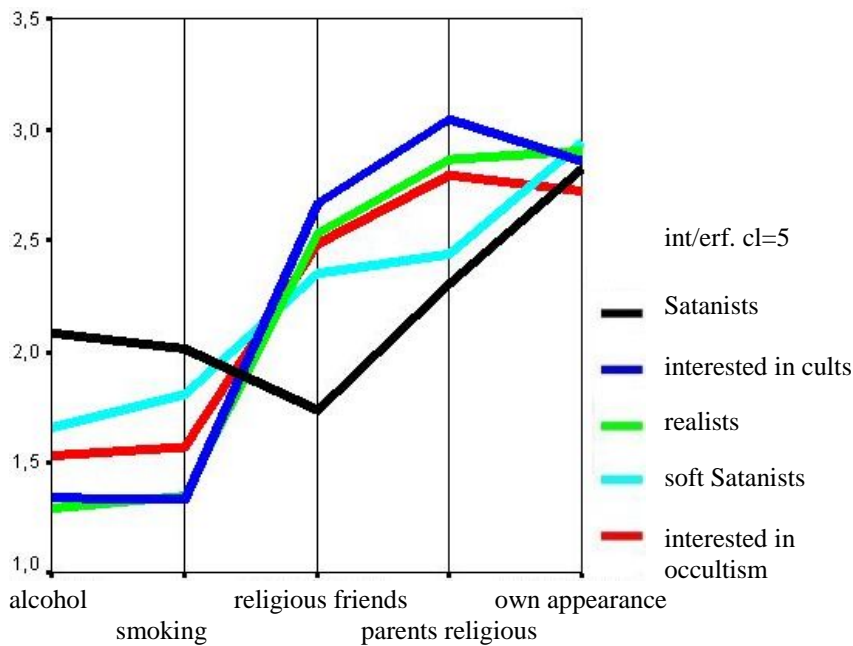
Comparison of groups - assessment of important areas of life



Comparison of groups - wish for change



Comparison of groups - various parameters



Summary:

As the study has shown, the interest in various kinds of alternative spiritual expressions is relatively high. Many youngsters seem to lack the ability to distinguish between serious and problematic offers. If problematic groups manage to make use of the existing high interest of youngsters for their goals, the potential of danger is evident. The responsible people in our state urgently should act accordingly.

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