

# What are the Prominent Characteristics of Polygamous Cults?

*Larry Beall, Ph.D.*

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1. **All control belongs to a central figure.** On the level of the polygamous cult this central figure is generally referred to as “the prophet”.
  - In the polygamous marriage, the central figure is the husband.
  - A child is responsible to his/her father and he in turn is responsible to the prophet.
  - The prophet, through the father, controls:
    - when and to whom their children will marry,
    - the places their child will work and for how long,
    - how much education the children receive and for what purpose,
    - the children’s status in the cult or loss thereof,
    - extra-curricular activities,
    - acceptable foods, and
    - the town and house they will live in.
  - In a polygamous cult, the prophet can take a child’s father or mother away and reassign him or her to new parents if he chooses.
  - He can also determine the rules of the society in which his followers live, and change them at any time, without explanation.
  
2. **Revelation from God dictates the words and acts of the central figure.** This is the basis of the prophet’s power and authority and in a corollary way, the polygamist father’s power and authority over his wives and children.
  - Followers are taught to worship the prophet as a god.
  - No matter what the prophet instructs a person to do, they should obey without question.
  - Even unreasonable and non-sensible directives can be made and are expected to be followed, because they “came from God.”

- The story of the patriarch Abraham and his son Isaac in the Old Testament often is cited to reinforce this control. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac because God commanded it.
- In like manner, a patriarch can dictate to a fourteen year old girl that she is to be his wife because God revealed it. For her to not follow such a mandate would be considered, in this polygamous society, rebellion deserving ostracization as punishment.

**3. Independent thinking and outside information are shunned.** It stands to reason that if characteristics #1 and #2 are correct, the follower should not be expected to think independently or be exposed to outside information, either of which may lead him or her away from the “true path” outlined by the prophet or patriarch.

- The fathers in the polygamous group are figures to respect but the mothers are only to be obeyed if they are in “perfect harmony” with the father.
- A child should never seek information other than what is offered by the leader, and this is to be accepted implicitly.
- In fact, children are not given conditions that require them to think.
- They fulfill their responsibilities to the cult or family, or they answer to someone over them.
- A child is not to be allowed information pertaining to the outside world. No free expression is allowed if it is different than what the leaders teach or the basic recognized group values.

“It is difficult for persons outside the polygamous cult to grasp that today, in this country, such basic freedoms can be, and are, denied. But a moment’s reflection suggests that if such cults are to be preserved, such freedoms cannot exist.”

~ Larry Beall, Ph.D.

**4. Relationships with others outside the cult are prohibited.** No relationships outside the cult are allowed. There are no exceptions to this.

- Children are not allowed to see any family member outside the cult (father, mother, brother, sister, aunt, uncles, grandparent, etc.)

- One example that was shared with the examiner, was of a mother who kept visiting two of her children that had left the cult.
- As punishment, she was sent away by her husband and told that only her own death could atone for the grievous sin she had committed.
- Separation and secrecy are necessary conditions for the cult to keep its members under the control of the leaders and unaware of outside alternatives.
- Information that does not originate with the prophet or family's patriarch, is suspected of being a corruptive and contaminating influence.
- Therefore, any exposure to outside information is prohibited.

5. **Non-constructive attitudes toward education.** As an extension of characteristics #3 and #4 above, within the polygamous cult, education is perceived as contamination. In fact, some types of education can be considered a crime. Following are some attitudes from within polygamous groups regarding education that best exemplify this position:

- Most literature is forbidden.
- All other races, cultures and belief systems have no value; therefore, there is no need to learn about them.
- The only history that matters is the history of the line of men who have held the special authority to act in God's name on Earth.
- The only books that a child should be allowed to read are books with stories that reflect the values and beliefs of the polygamous cult.
- Math beyond the basics is not needed.
- Health is not taught because the body is a forbidden subject and is to be covered up.
- The only education a child needs is the education that results from watching the prophet in order to become just like him.
- As can be seen, the effect of such attitudes toward education is too narrow and confine the thinking of the follower. This ill-equips him or her to survive in mainstream society.

“There is a phrase that they use when someone is tempted to chose a friend over reporting to the leader: “the test of friends.” A corollary teaching is if a child loves the prophet, he will watch for sins in others that they may be reported and there will be no sin among the prophet’s people as a result. The point cannot be over-stated that secrecy (protecting from the outside) and loyalty (protecting the inside) are essential to the maintenance of the group’s identity, solidarity and cohesion.”

~ Larry Beall, Ph.D.

6. **Adaptation to mainstream society is punishing.** If the first five characteristics described to this point were followed, the effects on the follower who had to make his way in society would be crippling.

- But society itself is targeted by the polygamous cult as an evil to be shunned.
- Children are taught to be afraid of the outside world, that society is dangerous in many ways, and the only sanctuary for them is within the community of believers.
- Outside people are wicked, government is a conspiracy that will destroy them, and doctors are evil and will hurt them with their practices.
- Because the world is considered temporary and soon to be destroyed anyway, children are taught there is no need to be involved with it.
- To the extent that children are involved in the world, they will be influenced and contaminated by it and become lesser people than they otherwise could, becoming useless for God’s purposes in the long run.

7. **Gestapo Mentality.** In this society it is necessary to “police” group members to ensure compliance. Even as there is secrecy to prevent outsiders from discovering the ways of the cult there is policing internally to prevent followers from becoming disloyal.

- Children are taught that it is an important duty to report something that is wrong or out of compliance with the prophet’s teachings and instructions on the group level, and the patriarch on the family level.
- Children are to report anyone including parents, brothers, sisters, or friends.

**8. Violence is a necessary strength.** An extension of the control and authoritarianism exercised by the polygamous father is violence.

- It is quite common for mothers who have fled the polygamous relationship to report cases of extreme violence perpetrated on them and their children, approved and sanctioned by the cult leaders.
- The patriarch uses violence to control children and wives.
  - Intuitively, it makes sense within their reality.
  - There are so many children to take care of and such limited resources to get the job done, physical punishment is a direct way to enforce rules and ensure obedience.
- Another aspect of violence within polygamous cults has to do with perception.
  - A violent father is perceived as a strong father whose strength breeds control and authority.
- One of the problems of this mentality is that violence has a way of escalating and children in polygamous families tend to be violent with each other.
- Public displays of violence are not uncommon and are often used as an example of what will happen to other family members who are disobedient.

**9. Emotional expressions are undesirable.** Emotions and their expression are considered signs of weakness and are undesirable.

- A child is taught to keep her emotions inside and not tell anyone about what they feel.
- If children express these undesirable feelings, the feelings will grow and take over.
- Emotions are a sign that you are not on the path to God and are often associated with evil spirits.
  - For example, crying is a “bad spirit” that takes control of a person and it is a sign of weakness to allow this bad spirit to control one’s self.
  - Crying over a disappointment is also considered selfish.
- A nervous breakdown, as experienced within the polygamous cult, occurs when a person invites an evil spirit into their lives and the individual must rid themselves of this spirit.

- Consequently, emotional problems, like most medical problems, are not treated since they see problems resulting from personal weakness or a failure to comply with the patriarchal order requiring repentance.
- One paradox of this belief and attitude has to do with the expression of anger.
- Although anger is an emotion, it is not judged as a weakness when expressed through violence by an authority figure.
- Only those emotions that would suggest weakness or vulnerability fall into the category of being reprehensible.

**10. Personal desires are unwanted.** It follows that the prophet's will is an expression and extension of God's will, and the patriarch's/father's will is that of the prophet.

- Therefore, the will of everyone else in the polygamous community is to be subjected to God, the prophet, and the individual patriarch simultaneously.
- Children are taught to be rid of their personal desires and wishes.
- If these personal desires are not controlled, they will destroy the individual.
- In every aspect of the child's life the will of their leader is paramount.
- If a child is told to do something he or she has no right to refuse or ask questions.

**11. Polygamous cults are a caste system.** The families belonging to a polygamous husband are part of a caste system established by the father. Only he can assign the child's value or the value of the child's mother.

- Likewise, the prophet can assign the value of the patriarchs in the community giving relative community value to his families.
- One's value is established by those over you.
  - Every man has a favorite wife.
  - If a wife gains more favor with her husband she will be treated better than the others and the husband will protect her from the other wives.
  - This is also true for the children.
- Families with more value have nicer homes and are allowed better jobs.
- People in the upper echelons of polygamous cults do very little work and enjoy "blessings" or rewards for their position.

- People on the bottom do the hardest work and are often denied even basic necessities.

“It should be noted here that one of the reasons there is such disparity between the reports I have received from those that fled polygamy as opposed to those who remain in polygamy, could have to do with this caste system. Females who are favored are often in the role of “counselor,” which is a teacher or mentor to younger or “difficult” wives. An analysis of their function demonstrates that their primary purpose is to reinforce and enforce the policies and teachings of the prophet.”

~ Larry Beall, Ph.D.

- As a reward for this devotion the plural wife will receive superior living conditions and better treatment within their group.
- This differential between living standards may explain why some plural wives report only positive aspects of their polygamous experiences.

**12. Attitudes toward women as property/possessions.** Before a woman is married, she has value as property bringing her father influence, power, and prestige within the cult. She is “groomed” for her relationship with the man who will be her husband.

- Her sole purpose is to please her husband by doing what gives him pleasure or satisfaction.
- She has no right to complain about abuse or injustice.
- Within the polygamous cult, a woman is an object.
- The author has been told that “when a woman reaches the age of 40 her husband will replace her with two women who are 20.”
- After a woman is married she has no value other than to produce children and bring income to the family.

## Summary

Central control within the polygamous cult is based on revelation to the prophet. The position given to the father or patriarch, by the prophet, determines the patriarch’s ability to exert his will on the family. The follower is taught to not question or doubt, but to follow and fulfill the desires of the leader. The control of information, educational

parameters, and separation from outsiders are all maintained to prevent contamination of members and keep the belief system of the group intact. Propaganda concerning the evils and dangers of society further insulate the cult members from the outside world. Separation from the outside world and secrecy of the inside world maintain the necessary barrier between the cult and society. Under such conditions the follower in the polygamous cult usually does not acquire the skills necessary to be successful or perhaps even survive in society. Internal violence and policing prevents followers from becoming disloyal or leaving the cult. An important element of this closed society is the absence of emotional expression, personal desires, self-will and identity. A caste-like system keeps individuals in the proper place, all under the governance of the cult leader. Where a woman fits in this system probably helps explain why some women have positive reports of their experience while other reports, like those provided for this paper, have been more negative.<sup>1</sup>

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<https://www.traumaawareness.net/modern-day-polygamy> Accessed: February 14, 2021.