THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN FOSTER CARE

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Given foster youths' experiences of fractured relationships and traumatic life events, religious affiliation could provide social networks with peers and adults, moral directives, and coping strategies. Similarly, religious affiliation could also provide support for foster parents. This is intuitive for Christians in social work. Yet in spite of the fact that faith base organizations are often providers of child welfare services, religion is an understudied factor in child welfare in general and in the foster care system in specific.

There are two main reasons that religion needs to be considered in child welfare. First, both foster children and foster parents claim that religion is important (Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler & Cox, 2007, Dilorenzo & Nix-Early, 2004; Haight, Finet, Bamba, and Helton, 2009; Wilson, 2004). Second, there is also an emerging body of scholarship that indicates that increased religiosity is correlated with improved outcomes for adolescents in the general population. Improved outcomes include decreased psychopathology (Dew, Daniel, Armstrong, Goldston, Triplett, & Koenig, 2008), decreased behavioral problems, including: decreased delinquency, delayed sexual behavior, and lessened substance use (Caputo, 2004; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone & Ruchkin, 2003; Regnerus, 2003); decreased conflict in families (Mahoney, 2005; Pearce & Axinn, 1998); and higher levels of education (Caputo). Additionally, the relationship between religiosity (either parent's or child's) and improved outcomes has been shown to mitigate some of the negative effects faced by disadvantaged youth (Hill, Burdette, Regnerus & Angel, 2008; Office of Health Policy, 2009; Regenerus & Elder, 2003; Johnson, Li, Larson & McCullough, 2000; Sullivan, 2008). Since

foster kids share many of these poor outcomes and have disadvantaged contexts, these studies are particularly relevant. However, there has been very little research around the topic of religion in child welfare.

Additionally, social workers who worked with children stated that religion was rarely if ever addressed in their education (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007). Since child welfare workers do not have training around religious issues, "relevant day-to-day practice remains largely dependent on individual views and attitudes" (Gilligan, 2009, p. 94). In order for child welfare workers to provide culturally sensitive case work, they need to have enough understanding of religious teachings to ask appropriate questions for learning about individual values. There can be critical differences for a case planning strategy that is sensitive to religious values. For example, Muslims are strongly opposed to non-kin adoption and strongly prefer (some would mandate) preserving patriarchal biological connections. Conversely, Buddhists perceive "their 'true family' to be their spiritual family of their teachers and fellow practitioners, rather than their 'blood' family" (Browning and Miller-McLemore, p. 169). Child welfare workers should have a basic understanding of different religious perspectives to inform their practice with families. Specifically, Mahoney (2005) suggests that workers should specifically be able to 1) indentify religiously-based expectations about parenting, and 2) identify religious beliefs that support either adaptive or maladaptive conflict-resolution methods.

Some researchers and educators expressed concern about addressing religious issues because of the separation of church and state. Consequently, it is important to clarify the legal issues. The U.S. Constitution's First Amendment contains two clauses critical to the understanding of the role of religion in foster care. The Free Exercise Clause protects private religious exercise, including parental rights to determine the religion of their children. "Because

a parent's right to influence her or his child's religious upbringing is defined as fundamental, courts have determined that it survives separation and even diminution of overall authority over a child" (Browning & Miller-McLemore, 2009, p. 221). The Establishment Clause limits the government's participation in religion: the government cannot support any religion or show preferences for one religion over another. Foster parents are not agents of the state, but child welfare agency workers are government employees. However, the court has "recognized that it would be impossible for the state to be uninvolved in the religious upbringing of children in its custody" (Corkran, 2005, p. 328).   There is no legal support for ignoring the religious needs of youth in foster care. Indeed since research with adolescents in the general population has shown that religiosity has a positive influence it is imperative that we consider this factor.

Effect of Religiosity on Adolescents in the general population

The literature has focused on three different religious influences on adolescent outcomes: 1) adolescents' own religiosity, 2) their parent's religiosity, and 3) the relationship of the parents' religion to the adolescent's religion (e.g., whether the parents' religion matches or does not match the adolescent's). All three have all been found to affect outcomes (see Figure 1). All three of these pathways have had mechanisms of change (i.e., mediators) proposed. In the figure below, mediators in bold have been empirically tested in published research.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Adolescent religiosity

Many recent studies have found a relationship between increased adolescent religiosity and positive outcomes (i.e., improved school performance); whereas other studies have found an inverse relationship between adolescent religiosity and negative outcomes (i.e., delinquency,

depression, and substance use). In other words, adolescents in the general population who are religiously involved are in general "resource rich" and "risk poor" (Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert & Benson, 2003). There have been recent meta-analyses of the relationship between adolescent religiosity and improved outcomes, in of psychopathology (Dew, et al, 2008), health (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, and Drotar, 2006), and crime (Johnson, et al, 2000).

Some studies have focused on the specific effects of religiosity for high risk adolescents. In these studies, religion is the mediator that buffers the negative effects of poverty, or is a source of resiliency for teens in poverty or those who are exposed to poor neighborhoods and violence. Joshi, Hardy, and Hawkins reviewed the literature around the role of religiosity for low-income youth (Office of Health Policy, 2008). The authors found: "that religiosity is a significant moderating factor between risk factors and negative life events" (p. 4-10). Cook (2000) interviewed churched and unchurched inner city youth and found that churched youth were less stressed and had less psychological problems. Having a worldview (like a religion) provides an individual a "buffer" that "shields the individual from existential anxiety and enables the individual to achieve self-esteem and life satisfaction through the knowledge that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe" (Hackney & Sanders, 2003, p. 51).

Studies have also shown that religious effects are moderated by SES, neighborhood, and exposure to violence.   For example, Johnson and colleagues found that disordered neighborhoods increased crime rates for adolescents but that "the constraining effect of religious involvement on serious crime among black youth is more pronounced in neighborhoods with higher levels of disorder" (Johnson et al, 2000, p.489).   Jang & Johnson (2001) found independent effects of neighborhood disorder and religiosity on drug use (there were also indirect effects that were mediated by social bonding and social learning). Additionally, the

authors found that religiosity buffers the effects of neighborhood and that the effect gets stronger throughout adolescence.   It has been hypothesized that religious and social organizations make up for the loss of social capital for disadvantaged youth by providing a variety of social services and a network of social contacts (Dehjia, DeLeire, Luttmer & Mitchell, 2009*).*

Parent religiosity

Research with adolescents suggests that increased parental religiosity is associated with good health, higher levels of education, and lower levels of substance use by adolescents (Caputo, 2004). Peace and colleagues (2003) found that, even after controlling for risk factors (low SES, minority status, and exposure to violence), parental religious involvement mitigated the development of conduct problems for high-risk urban youth (except under the condition of highest violence). Additionally, children's internalizing and externalizing symptomology as reported by teachers was related to parents' church attendance (Bartowski, Xu & Levin, 2008; Kim, McCullough & Cicchetti, 2009). However, Regenerus (2003) finds that parental religious devotion protects girls more than boys and in fact may increase delinquency among boys, when controlling for other factors.

Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar and Swank, (2001) reviewed the literature on religion in the home. The authors analyzed 48 (including 35 quantitative) studies on parenting, as well as 51 studies on the marital relationship, all of which were published in the late 1980s or 1990s. Overall, they found that greater maternal, paternal, or family religiousness was linked to the adolescent outcomes (i.e., less externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, greater prosocial traits, decreased substance use, decreased depression, and less serious antisocial behavior). Additionally, the authors found that "greater parental religiousness has yet to be

documented to lead to undesirable child outcomes through more strict or punitive parenting practices" (Mahoney et al., p. 584).

Both adolescent religiosity and their parents' religiosity are tied to adolescent outcomes. In the next section will look at the relationship between adolescent religiosity and parental religiosity. When a parent and a child have the same or very similar religions it is called homogeny and when they have very different religions, there is religious heteronomy. Religious homogeny is related to positive adolescent outcomes whereas religious heteronomy is correlated with negative outcomes.

Religious matching between parents and adolescents: heteronomy and homogeny

Research suggests that the religiosity of both adolescents and their parents affect their outcomes and these two relationships are correlated. There are strong and consistent relationships between the religiosity of parents and their children (Pearce & Thorton, 2007). The effect is long term: the mother's religious affiliation and attendance at the time of the birth of her child is related to her child's religious affiliation and attitudes toward religion in young adulthood (Pearce & Thorton). However, there is a portion of youth who do not have religious congruence with their parents.

Religious matching can be a source of support for families. Parents and children spend time together in family-affirming environments, often in activities that promote positive family relationships (Regnerus and Burdette, 2006). Children are channeled into groups and settings that reinforce the parents' efforts at religious socialization (Martin, White & Perlman, 2003). Mahoney and colleagues suggested that religion may provide a cultural resource to reduce conflicts and increase cohesion (2001). Higher religious involvement leads to more network

closure especially if the caregiver and youth participate in religious services together (Smith, 2003a). Pearce and Axinn (1998) measured the mother's religiosity from her child's birth until her child's adulthood and found that mother-child congruence in both religious participation and importance are correlated with higher quality affective relationships between adolescents and their parents (as reported by both the adolescents and their mothers). Increased religiosity improves family relationships and improved family relationships increase religiosity, suggesting bidirectional influence. I have found no studies which have negative effects of religious homogeny. Yet, findings from the literature do indicate a negative effect associated with religious heteronomy (Pearce & Haynie, 2004; Petts & Knoester, 2007; however Caputo, 2004, did not find this effect).

Pearce and Haynie (2004) found that "if a child is very religious and his/her parent is not, there will also be opportunity for disagreement and a lack of closure that will lessen the protective power of that child's own religiosity on his/her delinquency" (p. 1557). Petts and Knoester claim the greater the religious distance the worse the outcomes. They defined religious distance as the magnitude of difference between the religions, so a Lutheran would have less religious distance from an Baptist than from a Buddist or even a Pentecostal. "Given the centrality of child rearing to many religious orientations, clashes between parents and children may take on additional meaning when either party refuses to accept religiously based guidelines" (Mahoney 2005, p. 699).

In summary, there are three paths through which religiosity affects adolescent outcomes: 1) the adolescents' own religion, 2) their parents' religion, and 3) whether or not the adolescents' and parents' religions match. Since religion has been found to be correlated to outcomes for youth in the general population, would it also influence the outcomes of children who are

removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect? In the next section I will present the limited research on the role of religion for foster youth and parents and then discuss policy and practice implications of these findings.

Effect of Religiosity on foster youth outcomes

Foster youth face two simultaneous challenges: 1) the experience of child maltreatment and 2) displacement. Children who have been abused or neglected can have delayed spiritual development, just as they face delays in cognitive or physical development. In addition to experiencing maltreatment, foster youth are also often subject to relationship/community disruptions which also affect their religious development. Parental transmission of religion to offspring is decreased by poor quality of the family relationship, and non-traditional family structure (Myer, 1996). Consequently, the experience of being in foster care requires modification to the previous framework which organized the literature for adolescents in the general population.

[Insert figure 2 here]

The transmission of parental religiosity is lessened both by both maltreatment and removal from the home. The addition of foster parents leads to a more complex model of religious influence on adolescent outcomes. Foster parents' religiosity can directly influence the outcomes of their wards. Heteronomy/Hemogeny between foster parents and foster youth could also affect outcomes. There are two methods of achieving religious homogeny in foster care. First, if foster youth are placed with a family with very similar religious values, the homogeny would be present initially and the child's own religiosity would be supported. However, homogeny could evolve if the foster parents influenced the religiosity of child. Of course, the

strength of the foster parents' influence on the religiosity of the child would depend on a variety of factors, such as the age of the child when they entered care and the length of time in care.

Foster youth religiosity

Maltreated children in foster care are often religious. In fact, foster children are as religious as children in the general population. Jackson et al. (2010) interviewed 188 foster youth (ages 14-17). Ninety-five percent of these youth believed in God and 59% prayed in response to "bad or tragic things happening." In another study, older foster youth were found to have religious involvement similar to the general population, with 37% attending religious services at least once a week and 24% never attending (Scott, Munson, McMillen & Ollie, 2006). DiLorenzo & Nix-Early (2004) gathered information from focus groups with 149 foster care youth (age 14-22) and concluded that "the spiritual lives of these young people are inexorably connected to their need and desire for a permanent family which is often lost after they enter the child welfare system" (p. 7).

However, the frequency of adolescent foster youth religious attendance depends on the type of placement. Scott and colleagues (2006) found that white youth in non-kin foster homes attended religious services more than white youth in kin foster homes. However, the authors found no difference in youth religious attendance across foster placement types for African American youth, which may be due to a ceiling effect. "The relative stability of service attendance and religious practices among African American youth regardless of their placement type again bespeaks the crucial importance of religiousness in the Black community" (Scott, et al, 2006, p.233). Schreiber (2009) also found that foster youth whose foster parents are attending weekly are very likely (83%) to attend weekly.

Religion has been as a resiliency factor for high-risk or maltreated children (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott & Vardy, 2007; Kim, 2008). Gall and colleagues report that church attendance and a relationship with a benevolent God or higher power is related to the resolution of abuse, including less depression. However, it is possible that religiosity functions differently for maltreated children than for children in the general population. Granqvist and colleagues (2007) found that children who were insecurely attached to biological parents found a relationship with God to function in a *compensatory* manner, where God is seen as a sort of "surrogate parent." Conversely, children with 'loving parents' were more likely to follow their parents' religiosity and have gradual religious changes, a finding which the authors called *correspondence* theory.

Foster parent religiosity and religious matching in foster care

Foster parents attend religious services more regularly than people in the general population (Schreiber, 2009). An average of 65% of non-kin foster parents attends religious services on a weekly basis. The national average of weekly church attendance for the general population is 39% (Pew, 2008). There are two reasons suggested for why non-kin foster parents are more religious than the general population. First, they are motivated by faith to become foster parents and, second, recruitment of foster parents often occurs in churches (Howell-Moroney, 2009).

Foster parent religiosity could affect their wards outcomes via several mediators. It is possible that increased religiosity provides social support for the foster parents. Additionally, both social support and coping mechanisms which come from religiosity could decrease foster parent burnout, which could improve placement stability. There have been no quantitative

studies that directly studied foster parents' religiosity. However, in qualitative studies, both kin

and non-kin foster care parents claim that faith is a very important factor for successful fostering

(Buehler, Cox & Cuddeback, 2003; Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler & Cox, 2007).

Along with foster parent religiosity having a direct effect, religious homogeny could also

affect adolescent outcomes. I have found no research on religious matching in foster care.

However, since religion can "sanctify" (or lend religious import to) family life, it typically offers

purposes and processes that have no direct equivalent with secular systems of meaning and

motivation (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006, p. 78). Sanctification provides both sources of conflict

and resources for resolving conflict. When dissimilar religious perspectives exist within families

or foster families, religiousness could exacerbate conflicts.

It is clear that the religiosity of foster children is potentially complicated by having at

least two sets of parents: biological and foster. The effects of both the youths' and the foster

parents' religiosity on youth outcomes needs to be explored. However, even if religiosity if

found to have positive effects, it cannot be mandated legally for individuals. Yet, there are clear

policy implications around religious matching at placement to address issues around religious

homogeny.

Implications for Policy

As described earlier in this paper, research with the general population suggests religious

homogeny is correlated with improved family relations as well as improved behavioral outcomes

for adolescents. If research with foster families has similar findings, the policy implication of

would be that religiosity needs to be one of the factors considered in foster care placements. An

additional benefit of religiously sensitive placement decisions would be that it would eliminate

concerns about proselytizing. This policy change would assume that a child would do better in a home that shares his or her religious perspective: a conservative, evangelical child would be better served in an evangelical foster home, a child with an atheist or secular humanist perspective would find continuity in a non-religious home, and a Muslim child would do best with Muslim foster parents. Preserving the culture of the child in foster care is one of the components of the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR).

However, some religious situations are not in the best interest of the child. For example, if a child has been subject to either religious abuse or abuse by a religious authority, it would be inappropriate to place the child based on preserving their religiosity. For LGBT youth, there should be special care regarding religiosity, since there are some religions that would be hostile to their identities. Future research should clarify what are exceptions to religious matching, but in general maintaining religious connections would be important for personal, familial, and cultural reasons.

Another policy implication is the inclusion of religion as a variable in child welfare research. Even though many private foster care agencies are faith based and foster parents are more religious than the typical American, I have found no quantitative research that addressed how the religiosity of foster parents affects the outcomes of their wards. The field is wide open for research on how religion affects foster parenting. Policy implications would follow quality empirical research.

Implication for Practice

An important reason to address religion in child welfare is that it allows for religious minorities to have a stronger voice. Practioners must do more than tolerate different

religions/cultures. They should recognize "the value of different religions/cultures-that we not only let them survive but acknowledge their worth" (Coward and Cook, 1996, p. 166). Lack of understanding of minority religions has had negative consequences for families. Along with the children of the poor and immigrants, religious minorities are also unnecessarily targeted for child welfare services. For example, DCFS found that one-third of protective custodies of Muslim children had been unnecessary. Jess McDonald, the head of DCFS at the time said "Let me tell you what it [the report] says. It says we do really shitty work in the [Muslim community]." (Puckett, 2008, p. 133). Ignoring religious worldviews often means that religion becomes equated with Christianity (and often with a subset of Christianity, such as Protestant or Fundamentalist) and people assume that Christian religious experiences are normative. This is similar to issues of race decades ago, where "whiteness" was normative.

It is important to value adolescents' religious perspectives, whether they are from majority or minority religions. It is also important to help them continue to grow and develop spiritually. Helping foster children develop spiritually "can provide them with both an anchor to help keep them safe and stable during the storms they experience during and after foster care, as well as a compass to guide them towards a future characterized by stability, hope, and fulfillment of dreams" (DiLorenzo & Nix-Early, 2004, p. 9). For the youth who are recovering from negative spiritual experiences or even abuses under the guise or religiousness, issues around spirituality are especially critical.

Conclusion

Our understanding of family and parenting has been, and continues to be, shaped by our religious beliefs, both as individuals and as a nation. Clearly religion was an important factor during the development of child welfare. However in recent decades, religion's role in child

welfare has been overlooked by researchers and educators, even though religion remains a major cultural influence. There are two primary reasons that we need to pay more attention to the role that religion plays for foster youth. First, both foster children and foster parents claim that religion is important. Second, there is also an emerging body of scholarship that indicates that religiosity is correlated with improved outcomes for adolescents in the general population, especially for youth who are exposed to violence or are from bad neighborhoods. These moderators are often present for foster youth.

Religious affiliation could provide supports for foster youth including social networks with peers and adults, moral directives, and coping strategies. Similarly, religious affiliation could provide support for foster parents. For example, some faith communities have taken on foster care as a "mission," and some organizations intentionally enable faith communities to provide concrete support for foster parents (e.g., Fostering Hope in Wisconsin and Colorado, The CALL in Arkansas, 4Kids of South Florida, and Project 1.27 of Colorado). Finally, the shared worldviews that would come from religious homogeny could help support relationships between youth and their foster parents.

In spite of compelling reasons to address religion in foster care, there are many practical concerns, ethical considerations, and legal issues that must be addressed. In order to consider the role of religion in child welfare, many different disciplines and many different theories dovetail to create a complex (theoretically as well as socially) combination of relationships. However, religion in child welfare is worthy of investigation because, including this often overlooked factor could be a way of improving the outcomes and lives of foster youth.

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Figure 1. The influence of religiosity on adolescent outcomes with mediators proposed and empirically tested.
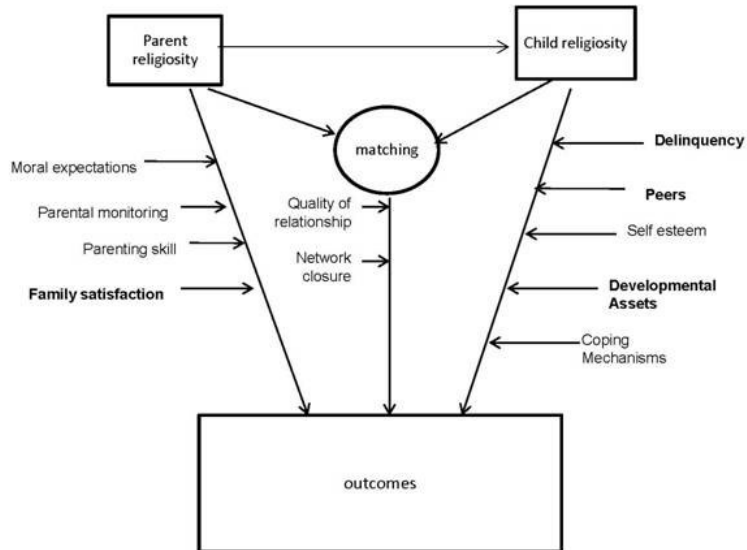
Figure 2. Foster child and foster parent religiosity and their effect on adolescent outcomes with proposed mediators.