



# The Role of Religion in Foster Care

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK



# My context

- MSW with experience in both Mental Health and public schools
- Former foster mother and adoptive mother of 3
- Currently a PhD candidate at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (proposal stage)
- Some theology and religious studies
- Mennonite
- Employed as a research specialist with the Children and Family Research Center



# Presentation goals

- Religion is important and understudied
- Legal issues around religion in foster care
- My framework for understanding religious influences for adolescents in general
- Applying framework to foster youth
- Implications for research, policy, & practice



# Religion is important in child welfare

- Our understanding of family and parenting is shaped by our religion
- Historically child welfare began from religious impulses
- Foster parents and youth believe faith is important
- Many child welfare agencies are faith based
- Religiosity is associated with improved outcomes for general population



# Religion is understudied in child welfare

- Social workers stated that religion was rarely addressed in their education (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007)
- Some child welfare texts make no reference to religion
- Very few published studies on the role of religion in child welfare



# Focus on foster care

- Religion in child welfare includes many topics
  - Religious influence on maltreatment
  - Agency level influences
  - Religiously based treatments for abused/neglected kids
  - The effect of maltreatment on religious development
- My focus is on non-kin foster parent religiosity and religious matching in foster care



# Concerns about addressing religion in foster care

- We can't measure religion
- We can't mandate or change people's religion
  - We can't change race, age or gender either
  - Can do research and teach about religious diversity
- What about separation of church and state?



# First Amendment :

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”*

- The Establishment Clause: The government cannot support or show preferences for any religion
- Free Exercise Clause: The government protects private religious choice and practices
  - Includes parental rights to determine the religion of their children





# Legal issues for foster care

- Foster parents, foster children and biological parents all have religious freedom
- Foster parents are not agents of the state
- 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.



# Effect of religion on adolescent outcomes for general population

- Recent books on religion in adolescence:
  - The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence Roehlkepartian et al. 2006
  - Soul Searching Smith, 2005
- A large number of studies have look at effect of religion on outcomes
- Several meta analyses

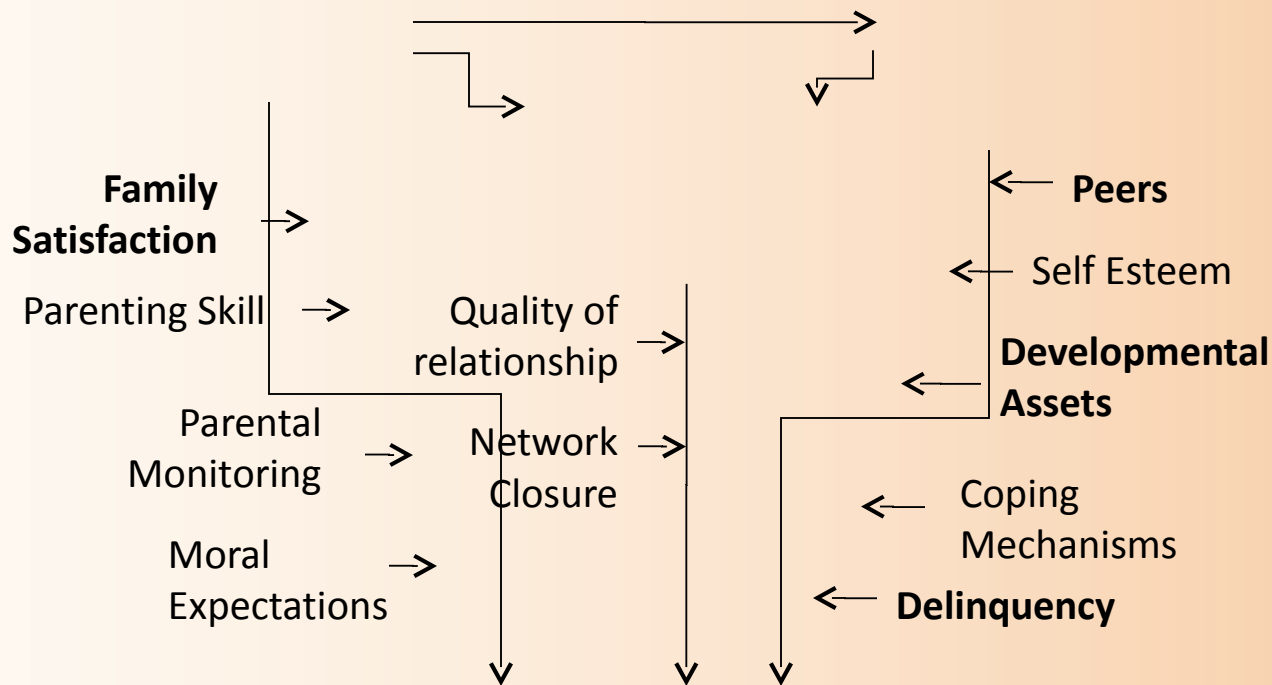


# Three different religious paths affect adolescent outcomes

- Parents' religion
- Adolescents' religion
- Homogeneity



# Influence of Religiosity





# Increased adolescent religiosity improves a variety of outcomes

- Decreased psychopathology Dew, et al., 2008
- Decreased behavioral problems Johnson et al, 2000
  - decreased delinquency
  - delayed sexual behavior
  - lessened substance use
- Decreased family conflict Mahoney, 2005
- Higher levels of education Caputo, 2004
- Improved health Cotton, et al., 2006



# Parent religiosity related to adolescent outcomes

- Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar and Swank, (2001)
  - less externalizing and internalizing behavior problems
  - greater prosocial traits
  - decreased substance use
  - decreased depression
  - less serious antisocial behavior
- Additionally, “greater parental religiousness has yet to be documented to lead to undesirable child outcomes through more strict or punitive parenting practices”  
Mahoney, et al. (2001, p. 584).



# Parent religiosity related to child religiosity

- Religion is inherited Myers, 1996
- A mother's religious affiliation and attendance when her child was born is related to her child's religious affiliation and attitudes toward religion in young adulthood Pearce & Thornton, 2007
- But, not all children share their parents' religion



# Religious homogeneity/heteronomy

- Religious matching can be a source of support for families.
- Bidirectional influence of religiosity and improved family relationships
- No studies found negative effects of religious homogeneity
- There are negative effects of religious heteronomy





# Religion is moderated

- The effects of religion are stronger for youth with low SES, bad neighborhoods and exposure to violence Johnson et al, 2000
- Ceiling effect for advantaged kids
- Race and SES correlations
- Religiosity mitigates some of the negative effects faced by disadvantaged youth Hill, et al., 2008; Office of Health Policy, 2009; Regenerus & Elder, 2003; Sullivan, 2008



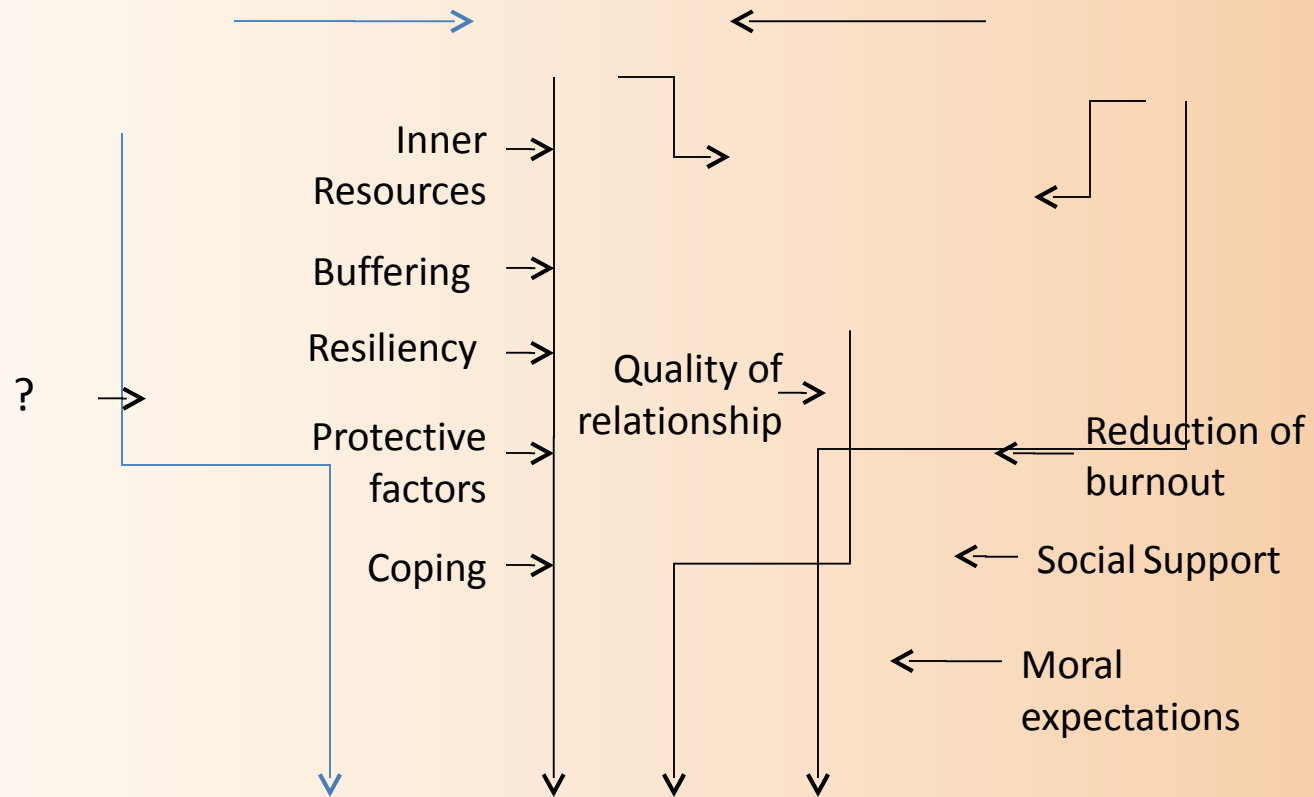
# Role of religion for foster youth

- Religious affiliation could provide foster youth:
  - Social networks with peers and adults
  - Moral directives
  - Coping strategies
- Religious affiliation could provide foster parents:
  - Social support
  - Sanctity of role
- Religious matching could
  - Improve relationship between foster youth and parent(s)



# Foster youth religiosity

- Two challenges for foster youth
  - Maltreatment
  - Displacement
- Both affect parental transmission of religion
- Requires new framework





# Foster youth religiosity

- Religiosity similar to general population
  - Religious beliefs and behaviors Jackson et al. 2010
    - 95 % believe in God
    - 59% pray daily
  - Religious attendance Scott et al. 2006
    - 37% attend weekly
    - 24 % never attend



# Foster youth religiosity effect on outcomes

- Older foster youth study Scott et al., 2006
  - Religious attendance was inversely related to cigarette use and sexual activity
  - Religious beliefs were inversely related to alcohol and cigarette use
- Religion was not a protective factor for sexually abused girls in foster care Edmond et al., 2006
  - Two thirds of sample were from congregant care



# Research on the effect of foster parent religiosity on outcomes

- Qualitative studies Coakley et al, 2007
- No quantitative studies published
- Foster parents are religious -NSCAW
  - 65% of non kin foster parents are attending weekly
  - general population of 39% (Pew, 2009)
  - This varies dramatically based on age and race



# National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being

- Child Protective Services Sample, 1999
- Due to intentional biases in the sampling method, the data presented are weighted





# Foster parent attendance



# Does foster parent religiosity affects foster youths' religiosity?

- We don't know
- Depends on a variety of variables:
  - Age of child
  - Length of time in care
  - Child's religiosity upon entering



# Foster youth's religious attendance



# Religious homogeneity in foster care

- Achieved by foster parents influencing religion of wards
- Achieved by matching at time of placement
  - Not currently the policy in Illinois
- No quantitative studies.



# Implications for policy

- Religious matching at placement
  - Preserving the culture of a child is a component of Child and Family Service Review (CFSR)
  - Need to determine influence on outcomes
  - Develop guidelines or limits
- Need more empirically based research



# Implications for practice

- Better child welfare education on religion
  - Lack of religious training for workers means “...relevant day-to-day practice remains largely dependent on individual views and attitudes” Gilligan, 2009, p. 94.
- Awareness of minority religions



# Summary

- Religion improves adolescent outcomes
- Foster parents and youth are religious
- Foster parents and youth say religion is important
- Many child welfare agencies are religious
- Religion is understudied in child welfare
- Ethical considerations and legal issues must be addressed
- Quality research would impact policy and practice