The Role of Religion in Foster Care

November 13, 2010
Jill Schreiber PhD Candidate
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
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”

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
- Homogeny
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 & Thorton, 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 homogeny 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