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Religious socialization of youth involved in child welfare

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ABSTRACT

Increased religiosity is associated with a variety of improved outcomes, especially for youth in disadvantaged contexts. Although youth involved in child welfare may experience protective effects of religious participation or values, little is known about the impact of maltreatment on religious development. Using the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, a nationally representative study of child welfare involved families, correlates of religious attendance and importance of religion for youth were investigated using weighted logistic regression at two waves 18 months apart. Youth self-reports of religious attendance and their ratings of its importance were associated with religious attendance of their caregivers, whether birth-parents or foster parents. Foster parents were more likely to attend religious services than birth parents. Increases in youth attendance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with high youth religious importance at Wave 1, whereas decreases in attendance were associated with moving between home and foster placements. Increases in religious importance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with religious attendance at Wave 1 and with the youth being Black.
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Child welfare goals of cultural continuity and child well-being often include language about the importance of religious affiliation (not prescriptive of any specific faith or tradition). For example, the *Child and Family Services Review* (CFSR), a Children's Bureau tool for periodic monitoring of state child welfare systems, includes faith as part of the discussion about continuity in foster care and lists one of the goals as "preserving important connections for children in foster care, such as connections to neighborhood, community, faith, family, tribe, school, and friends" (CFSR item 14, Children's Bureau, 2006, p. 56). Additionally, religious affiliation has been shown to be a protective factor for abused youth (Perkins & Jones, 2004). However, religion has rarely been included in child welfare research, and very little is known about how maltreated youth experience religion or if they experience it at all. Maltreated youth who have religious connections may experience them positively (e.g., religious rituals or communities may help them cope with their abuse and neglect) or negatively (e.g., differences in religion may be a source of conflict between parents and youth). A better understanding of the religious experiences of maltreated youth could help child welfare practitioners support the positive aspects of religious participation and affiliation and minimize negative aspects and conflicts about religion.

Religiosity is "an active personal devotion and passionate quest [for meaning] largely within the self-acknowledged framework of a sacred theological community" (DeHaan, Yonker, & Affholter, 2011, p. 193) and encompasses a variety of dimensions such as participation, practice, coping, commitment, and salience (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthan, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006). Religiosity includes external factors, including a connection with a sociocultural-historical system (King & Roeser, 2009; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005), and internal factors (often called *spirituality*), which are associated with an individual,

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personal quest for meaning, happiness, and wisdom (Hill et al., 2000). Although there is distinctiveness between *religion* and *spirituality*, failure to integrate the two may inaccurately reflect each (Good et al., 2011), and a wide range of empirical research supports the considerable overlap between them (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

The primary reason to consider the effect of religiosity in child welfare is the plethora of studies with youth in the general population that have shown that religiosity affects adolescent outcomes. Most researchers have found that religiosity was associated with improved outcomes, including decreased psychopathology (Dew et al., 2008), improved health (Cotton et al., 2006), reduction in crime (Johnson, Li, Larson, & McCullough, 2000; Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Maynard, 2014b), decreased family conflict (Mahoney, 2005), higher levels of education (Caputo, 2004), reduced substance use and violence (Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Hodge, & Perron, 2012), and decreased risky sexual behavior (Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody, & Gibbons, 2011). Religious involvement may contribute toward these improved outcomes by increasing children and youths' access to moral order, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties (Smith, 2003b) or increased self-control (Laird, Marks, & Marrero, 2011). Particularly relevant for child welfare-involved youth is research that has shown that religiosity can support resilience, buffering the negative effects of poverty and poor neighborhoods. In a review of the role of religiosity for low-income youth, Joshi, Hardy, and Hawkins report that "religiosity is a significant moderating factor between risk factors and negative life events" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009, p. 4–10). Youth religious involvement has also moderated the effect of neighborhood disorder on psychological problems (Cook, 2000), criminal involvement for Black youth (Johnson et al., 2000), and drug use (Jang & Johnson, 2001).

Few studies have directly examined the relationship between religiosity and outcomes specifically for youth involved with child welfare. Perkins and Jones (2004) found that religiosity was a predictor of reduced use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, sexual activity, and antisocial behavior, but not suicide or purging, for a large sample of abused youth from Michigan; and Kim (2008) found an association between higher religious importance and reduced internalizing symptomology for a sample of younger maltreated girls. Scott et al. (2006) found that higher scores on religious measures were associated with reduced alcohol and cigarette use and reduced sexual behavior in a regional sample of older youth in foster care, but White et al. (2007) did not find a relationship between religious beliefs and mental health for youth in foster care. The results from these child-welfare samples along with those cited earlier from the general population emphasize that religiosity may be an important factor for youth involved in child welfare. Further research that clarifies the religious experiences of youth in the child welfare system would help provide guidance for social workers, who may be able to support the positive aspects of youths' religiosity in order to maximize benefits and minimize trauma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012). One crucial step toward this goal is to better understand the religiosity of youth involved in child welfare.

Religious socialization of youth

Not all people are religious. How does religiosity develop? *Religious socialization* refers to the influence of social agents (including parents) on an individual's religious beliefs and understandings. One form of social learning theory proposes that religious socialization occurs via *spiritual modeling*, in which youth observe and imitate their spiritual exemplars (models), who may be peers or adults (Ebstyne King, 2003). This suggests that parental religious attendance and attending services with parents should be associated with increased youth religiosity, because both would provide opportunities to model spiritual behaviors. Parents strongly influence their children's religious development (Myers, 1996; Smith & Denton, 2005); and in the general population, youth religiosity is associated with parental religiosity (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004), strong parent–child relationship (Smith & Denton, 2005), marital status (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007), and high family satisfaction (Regnerus et al., 2004). Research has also shown that youth religiosity is strongly positively associated with attachment (Desmond, Morgan, & Kikuchi, 2010) and negatively associated with family disruption (Denton, 2012; Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). *Religious homogeny* occurs when parents and their youth share similar religious experiences. It is common in the general population because many youth are socialized into their parent's religion (Pearce & Thornton, 2007). Families with religious homogeny experience additional sources of support due to shared values, activities, and network closure (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001; Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003; Smith, 2003a). Conversely, youth in families with faith-related differences (*religious heteronomy*) have exhibited increased delinquency (Pearce & Haynie, 2004; Petts & Knoester, 2007) and lower quality parent–child relations (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009).

Understanding how internal and external religiosities develop separately may be important because recent research suggests that either form of religiosity on its own may not provide protective factors as robust as both together. Salas-Wright et al. (2014) found that religious service attendance in and of itself may not be a particularly robust protective factor. Similarly Cheung and Yeung (2011) found private religious involvement to be a stronger protective factor than public religious involvement. However, private religiosity alone may not protect youth from problem behavior (Salas-Wright et al., 2012). In fact, Jang and Franzen (2013) found spirituality that is not combined with religious participation to be a risk factor for crime.

Child welfare-involved youth and religiosity

The religiosity of youth involved in child welfare may differ from youth in the general population because of several factors: (a) demographic characteristics, such as race, that are associated with involvement in religion and child welfare,

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