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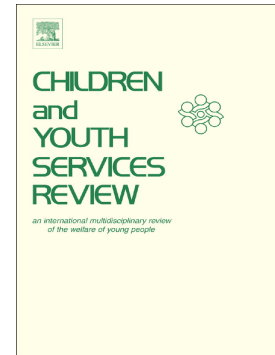
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Intersection of Race and Religion for Youth in Foster Care: Examining Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Religion and race are primary forces affecting both individuals' identities and social relations. Consequently, their impacts on child welfare systems, and the clients of the system, are important to understand. In addition to protections against discrimination on the basis of religion and race, positive affirmations and connection to relevant communities are also needed to achieve client well-being. This analysis examines both historical and contemporary approaches to addressing religion and race in child welfare policy and practice, with a particular focus on adolescent youth. Our primary focus is on Blacks and Christians because these groups have received predominant attention in the literature. We argue that because racial/ethnic and religious identity development are critical to adolescent well-being, race and religion must receive explicit and consistent attention in child welfare practice. Moreover, the importance of religion has often been overlooked, particularly in its intersection with race. Quality practice needs more explicit attention to religion, but this also raises cautions in the current political environment.

Introduction

Around 437,465 children were in foster care across the United States in 2016, and 54 percent of those in care were of color (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Although Black children were 14 percent of the U.S. child population in 2016, they represented 23 percent of foster care children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Black children in care experience disparities in placement, reunification, permanency experiences, and outcomes (Barth, 1997; Harris & Courtney, 2003; KIDS COUNT, 2017); they are also more likely to be in long-term foster care placements (Schmidt-Tieszen & McDonald, 1998). These youth may feel stigmatized by peers and separated from family and their community of origin (Spencer, Swanson, & Harpalani, 2015). All of these experiences are likely to increase their risk of negative developmental outcomes.

Alternatively, enhancing and supporting Black children's racial/ethnic identities may not only buffer the effects of potentially traumatic and negative foster care experiences and promote resilience but also prepare them to cope with the racial discrimination and oppression they are likely to encounter in society (Hayward & Krause, 2015; Spencer et al., 2015). Racial/ethnic identity refers to how beliefs associated with physical characteristics that distinguish groups and lead to social stratification inform how individuals define themselves, their goals and achievements as well as how they interpret and make meaning of interactions with people and contexts (Oyserman & Oliver, 2009). Because youth rarely separate the racial and ethnic components of their identities (Cross & Cross, 2007), we use the term racial/ethnic identity.

Religious identity may also be important to the well-being of youth. Scholars have identified a dearth of research attention to religion in child welfare and have pointed out that for child welfare to be "belief-blind" or "religion-blind" is as mistaken as efforts to be "color-blind" (Schreiber, 2011). Moreover, there may be opportunities to increase resilience of children by

connecting them with their religious communities or opportunities to practice their faith. For example, religious involvement among adolescents in foster care has been associated with reducing substance use, internalizing mental health symptoms, and antisocial behavior (see review in Schreiber & Culbertson, 2014). The possibility of these positive effects have been noted by the medical community as well. Pediatricians have recognized the potential of spirituality and religion to promote healing for the physical and emotional well-being of young people (Barnes, Plotnikoff, Fox, & Pendleton, 2000).

Our aim in this paper is to examine the intersection of race and religion in child welfare, with a particular emphasis on Black youth in foster care. To do so, we examine the historical context of race and religion as it relates to child welfare. We then utilize the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and resilience to hone in on the specific experiences of Black youth in foster care.

Intersectionality considers how an individual's multiple identities interact to shape their experiences, and how societal and macro-level processes and forces such as discrimination and oppression associated with each identity converge to influence individuals' lives (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990). An examination of racial identity in isolation, for example, ignores the heterogeneity of experiences within that racial group which may be related to the multiple identities significant to individuals and/or imposed upon them by society (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990). Research on the experiences of Black children in the child welfare system primarily ignores the strengths, challenges and processes associated with other dimensions of their identity in addition to race (Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015). There may be benefits to examining the intersection of religion and race/ethnicity because they are both critical forces in identity development and social relations, and each have the potential for establishing connections within

families and communities. Additionally, there are clear areas of intersecting influence since religion, primarily Christianity, has been a major focus in the lives of African Americans¹ (Taylor et al., 1996).

Resilience is a central concept relevant to the lives of young people with foster care experience, and refers to the ability to achieve positive outcomes despite suffering from adverse life conditions (Masten, 2001). Young people in foster care have nearly always suffered some forms of adversity related to the circumstances that brought them into care and their separation from their family. Additional forms of adversity can be suffered while in care related to instability in placements and continued separation from family (Dozier & Rutter, 2008). Despite these challenges, some youth are able to achieve success and thrive in adulthood (Hass & Graydon, 2009). Extensive research and practice efforts have aimed to understand the factors that increase foster youths' resilience in the face of adversity and to intervene in ways that promote resiliency. Strengthened identity development may provide one avenue to do so (White, O'Brien, Jackson, et al., 2008).

Both policy and practice are relevant to supporting youths' development. To address identity development and reduce threats related to disproportionality, child welfare policies have been enacted to protect against the disruption of family, community, and cultural ties. In practice, some non-profit organizations serving vulnerable youth in foster care have a particular mission to provide race-centered or faith-based programming. These programmatic and organizational supports may be particularly relevant to this population. Additionally, culturally competent practice is needed to support youths' development by engaging with youth in ways that value and support their intersecting identities of race/ethnicity and religion (along with other

¹ In this paper, we refer to the term 'Black' as a racial group and African American as an ethnic group. However in the literature, Black and African-American are conflated and it is difficult to determine whether the authors are referring to race or ethnicity. We will use the term supplied by the author(s) when reviewing or citing literature.

identities). A premise of the paper is that it is important to take religion into account in many of the same ways that attention to race/ethnicity is necessary, but there are multiple cautions to be learned from history. This paper is structured as follows: a brief historical policy review related to religion and race, contemporary attention to religion and race, foster care experiences and supports for Black youth, and concluding discussion with implications for practice.

Historical Policy Review: Race and Religion

Prior to the development of modern child welfare systems, private faith-based entities provided a fundamental role in the care of children. In the 1700s, free Black children were placed in almshouses or indentured and received harsh treatment (Hogan & Siu, 1988). The first orphan “asylum” was established in 1727 by an Ursuline convent in New Orleans. Orphan asylums became the primary model of assistance; the number of orphanages increased dramatically in the 1800s (McGowan, 2014). The majority were private and most were religious. Notably, most children in orphanages were not orphans, but came from poor families who could not care for them. African American children and youth were explicitly excluded from most of the private orphanages established prior to the Civil War. The few orphanages serving Black children were inferior and overcrowded (Schreiber, 2011).

In the latter part of the 1800s, “placing out”, the forerunner of foster care, became the preferred alternative to orphanages. Most famous were the “orphan trains”, established in 1853 by the Reverend Charles Loring Brace who founded the Children’s Aid Society of New York. Concerned with the large number of street children in New York, the goal was to transplant children to better environments in the West where they could live with “good” Protestant farming families. Between 1854 and 1929, more than 100,000 children were sent to new homes in rural America (Schreiber, 2011). McGowan (2014) also reports the establishment of

Children's Home Societies, which were statewide child-placing agencies under Protestant auspices that aimed to provide foster homes for dependent children. Significant concerns were raised about this approach, particularly in regard to bias against Catholic immigrant families. Creagh (2012) describes a Catholic adaptation to the orphan trains noting the efforts of minority ethnic and religious communities to maintain their cultural distinctiveness through child welfare work. According to Creagh, reflecting the anti-Papist, anti-Italian, anti-Slavic biases of his day, Brace sent those with northern and western European heritage to Protestant homes and refused to place out those of Mediterranean or Eastern-European backgrounds. Furthermore, Black children were excluded from this developing foster care system (Hogan & Siu, 1988). Along with segregation by race, both orphanage care and placing out promoted the deliberate severing of children's ties to parents deemed unsuitable by authorities. Racial, religious, and class bias were foundational forces to these approaches resulting in numerous incidents that were the antithesis of best interests of the child (e.g., Gordon, 1994).

Efforts of reformers led to developments in the Progressive Era in the early 1900s toward more humane and supportive care. At this time, a key report of the National Council on Charities and Corrections noted the importance of the preservation of the home whenever possible; this has since become a central tenet of child welfare practice. When not possible, placing out was considered appropriate but only after careful investigation and with supervision. These Progressive Era reforms generally did not include a focus on Black children and their families and they continued to be excluded from White institutions (Hogan & Siu, 1988). Separate systems were developed within Black communities, often directly linked with the social service role of the Black churches. By 1930, there was a general expectation that Black children were entitled to the same standards of care as White children and that they should generally be served

through the existing child welfare system (McGowan, 1984). Religious charities, which were primarily responsible for placing children in orphanages after World War II, continued to racially discriminate and refused to place Black children (Roberts, 2002). However, there was an increase in the inclusion of Black children in White child welfare systems (Hogan & Siu, 1988). Although this had benefits, it negatively impacted the potential of Black leadership developing a child welfare system that may have been more beneficial to Black children and families (Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1972; Roberts, 2002). The modern child welfare system emerged as a major public institution during the 1950s. The major federally-funded programs that support State and Tribal child welfare services were authorized under Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Social Security Act. With opportunities to receive federal funding, public child protection agencies at the state level took increasing responsibility for service delivery with a decreasing role for the private sector.

The intersection of race and religion also influenced the relationship between public and private agencies and resulted in negative consequences for children. Bernstein (2010), for example, provides extensive detail of child welfare in New York City from 1972 to 2000, primarily through documenting the *Wilder* lawsuit. This class action suit charged the City with violating the Constitution, including the First Amendment – separation of church and state – which resulted in a child care system “permeated by religious and racial discrimination” (p.44). At the time the case was filed, child welfare services were dominated by Catholic and Jewish agencies who received contracts from the city while discriminating against non-white children, primarily Black and Protestant. Children represented by the class action often could not get placed at agencies that might have better served their needs.

Child welfare services in New York City were not alone in their discriminatory practices. With regard to race, in the 1970s, child welfare advocates called attention to discrimination against Black children in the child welfare system (Hogan & Siu, 1988). In the 1980s, Black children were overrepresented in the child welfare system, a situation that continues today (Hogan & Siu, 1988; Padilla, Vargas, & Chavez, 2010). Black children languishing in foster care without opportunities for adoption became a central focus. In 1994, The Multiethnic Placement Act aimed to decrease the length of time that children wait to be adopted; prevent discrimination on the basis of the race, color, or national origin; and facilitate the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive parents who can meet the distinctive needs of children awaiting placement. The legislation was in partial response to practice efforts that aimed to secure placements and adoptive homes with families of the same race as the child. Same-race matching was considered important for identity development and sustainment of cultural heritage, but the importance of these practices became problematic when a sufficient number of homes did not exist (particularly for African American children) and led to long stays in foster care. The Multiethnic Placement Act, therefore, specifically prohibited “delaying, denying, or otherwise discriminating” when making foster care and adoptive placement decisions. Consequent efforts to maintain racial and cultural ties have operated within this legal restriction, by, for example, developing aggressive efforts to secure additional foster and adoptive families of color.

Contemporary child welfare services are largely secular and publicly funded. Religious-oriented social service agencies (e.g., Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, etc.) are key players through subcontracts for various services. Accepting government funding, agencies cannot discriminate against clients on the basis of religion nor use government funding for strictly religious activities. While several scholars describe the importance of faith-based services

(e.g., Garland & Chamec-Case, 2005), caution is also warranted. The lessons of history, including *Wilder* are profound. Further, the documented abuse that has occurred at the hands of religious personnel and within religious institutions (Dale & Alpert, 2007; Wolfe, Francis, & Straatman, 2006), discrimination against LGBTQ youth (Mallon, 1998) and LGBTQ foster and adoptive parents (Kenyon, Chong, Enkoff-Sage, Hill, et al., 2003), and prohibitions on access to family planning services and discussion of these issues (Dworsky, 2018) all remain contemporary concerns when faith-based organizations are engaged in child welfare services.

While legislation provides the policy framework for child welfare, in practice, a range of family support, family preservation, and youth development programs has aimed to effectively address race/ethnicity, religion, and, more broadly, culture. The expansion of guardianship, and financial stipends for this option, provides a good example. Kin placements had been increasingly recognized as a potential permanency option particularly appropriate for young people who have been in foster care a long time. Guardianship arrangements have been recognized as serving the needs of the African American community, in particular, in part due to its recognition of the importance of kinship and fictive kin (Leashore, 1985; Jimenez, 2006).

More generally, scholarship on Black families and the child welfare system, has suggested that the concept of legal contract – unitary responsibility – that undergirds child welfare may not fit well with the history and culture of African American families (Jimenez, 2006). As Jimenez notes, the tradition of kin and community responsibility is situated within West African culture and developed in the United States as a way of protecting families bonds devastated by slavery and during post-slavery migration to the north for employment. Within the church community, non-familial adults provided support and caring to Black youth, and these relationships may increase developmental assets and help youth thrive (Gooden & McMahon,

2016). Thus, informal adoption of children, and a voluntary agency response, often involving churches, were the mechanisms of addressing child welfare needs. These responses are culturally embedded and suggest practices for better serving Black families in child welfare systems might include more flexibility regarding informal adoption and guardianship, the need to support kinship caregivers, and the use of family- and community-based care in which churches play a central role.

Contemporary Attention to Race and Religion: Disproportionality, Socialization, and Community Partnerships

Disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation of children and youth from some racial and ethnic groups in the foster care population compared with their percentage in the general population. At the national level, this includes Black and Native American children (and their families). McRoy (2014) provided a comprehensive account of disproportionality issues for African-American children, in part noting that disproportionality issues are observed at each stage of child welfare system involvement: higher rates of maltreatment investigation, higher rates of case substantiation, greater likelihood of removal from home, longer stays in care, decreased likelihood of returning home or being adopted, and greater likelihood of aging out of care.

There are multiple reasons for the observation of disproportionality. These families have greater visibility in systems that are likely to report, are more likely to encounter racism and bias in reporting and other service decisions (for example, removal from the home), and have limited access to community and culturally appropriate resources (McRoy, 2014; Roberts, 2002). Focusing specifically on Black disproportionality, Boyd (2014) presented a comprehensive conceptual framework that encompasses numerous explanatory factors. Major pathways leading

to disproportionality include: disproportionate need (e.g., poverty), human decision-making (e.g., bias), agency-system factors (e.g., quality of services), placement dynamics (e.g., barriers to adoption), and policy provisions (e.g., federal legislation targeting children of color).

Although youth transitioning out of care has not been a major focus of disproportionality research, Avery (2010) suggested that the transition to independence may be especially difficult for members of racial and ethnic minority groups. For these youths, “a sense of membership in an ethnic racial, or cultural group is an underlying issue that pervades and influences progress toward adulthood” (p.403). Black youth frequently experience differential treatment, social inequities and restricted access to resources because of their racial status; for example, discrimination in employment opportunities and interactions with law enforcement are two notable areas in which youth of color face continual challenges. As a result, they often experience double-consciousness in which they are constantly negotiating their sense of self in relations to society’s perception of their identity (Du Bois, 1903). Furthermore, racially discriminatory experiences and related psychological distress increase the risk of Black youth engaging in risky behaviors, abusing substances, and developing mental health issues (e.g., Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008).

Black youths’ racial identities and the way they cope with racial discrimination are significantly influenced by families, peers and communities engaging in ethnic-racial socialization. Ethnic-racial socialization refers to behaviors and practices that communicate race- and ethnic-related information to youth (Hughes, Watford, & Del Toro, 2016). According to Hughes et al. (2016), ethnic-racial socialization “shapes the meaning adolescents ascribe to their ethnic-racial group membership, adolescents’ expectations about experiences they may have as group members, their knowledge of the history and values associated with being a group

member, their sense of group belonging and pride, and their beliefs about how others view and treat various groups” (p.9). The positive effects of parental-transmitted ethnic-racial socialization on youths’ development include higher esteem, academic success, fewer behavioral problems and fewer depressive symptoms (see review in Hughes et al., 2016). Because of the Multiethnic Placement Act, and the ongoing shortage of foster homes, if Black youth are not placed in kinship care, they are placed with an available foster family. Therefore, their foster families may be racially different, and may be unlikely to engage in ethnic-racial socialization. Furthermore, these families may want to provide ethnic-racial socialization but may not feel competent enough to engage in these practices.

In the U.S., disproportionality nearly always refers to racial disproportionality. Although religion and other factors also have profound influences (as noted in the historical review above), race has been, and remains, the prominent cleavage in American society. Notably, this is not always the case in other countries, where religious difference can dominate (e.g., Collins & Pinkerton, 2018). This polarizing force of religion might be rising as well in the U.S. due to increasing incidents of anti-Semitism, public hostility to Muslims (which is a religious identity Blacks may have) and immigrants (who may bring various religious traditions), and an environment that has elevated religion as a political force while lacking its ethical core.

Faith communities have been identified as a critical resource partner with the child welfare system (Howell-Moroney, 2009). More broadly than child welfare, faith communities can be a strong moral force and at the forefront of compassionate action, particularly when formal governments systems are slow to respond to social issues (Collins & Garlington, 2018). Cipriani et al. (n.d.) identified some of the qualities a faith community can bring: (a) People within a congregation share the same belief system and value and their shared faith experience

can provide comfort and support to families in times of crisis; (b) congregations provide an extended family network which foster and adoptive families often need, especially when they are raising children with serious problems; (c) children in the child welfare system need to feel a sense of belonging and connection which they can find with a family member or as part of a congregation; (d) families recruited through their religious institutions often come to see foster care and adoption as a way of living out their faith and; (e) adoptive families sometimes need crisis-intervention services. A church, synagogue, or other religious community, can provide a safe, familiar setting for counseling and other professional services, thereby increasing the likelihood that families will seek out the help they need. Orr, Dyrness, and Spoto (2004) offered similar points but also included additional “value-added” roles of faith communities: they offer mentoring relationships to families, youth and children who are at risk; they participate in regional/city/neighborhood coalitions that try to assure a continuum of care for at-risk families and children; and they put pressure on public agencies and legislative bodies to humanize foster and adoptive strategies that are experienced as unjust. Garland and Chamiec-Case (2005) identified the distinctive contributions the agencies make; faith-based child and family welfare services: (a) have a history of supporting society’s most vulnerable children and families; (b) have ready access to a wide range of resources through connections to congregations; (c) faithfully promote society’s most enduring values; (d) offer services that are strengthened and reinforced by their religious beliefs and values; and (e) are committed to nurturing the spiritual growth/development and religious expression of children in their care.

Overall, many scholars and practitioners share these views that religious communities are a critical partner for effectively serving families and children, particularly when the needs are overwhelming to public agencies. Public agencies can, and do, collaborate with faith-based

organizations to provide a range of supportive services that may provide a cultural fit for families. With evidence that religion is a central part of the lives of many Black Americans (e.g., higher rates of religiosity, belonging to church, Bible reading [Taylor et al., 1996]), McRoy and Griffin (2015) articulate the need for incorporating community faith groups and churches as resources for family development, foster care, and adoption. This includes increased efforts to reach out to African American churches and ministers in order to enlist support and family resources for children in the system.

Faith communities' role in recruitment of foster and adoptive parents has been particularly noted (e.g., Barbell & Sheikh, 2000). When children are being placed permanently, kinship care is considered positively in part because the caregivers have a cultural and ethnic background similar to that of the child (Rufa & Fowler, 2016), yet in nonpermanent placements, cultural needs are seldom considered. Schatz and Horejsi (1996) noted that religion often is not mentioned during the home study and licensing process of foster parents. Again, due to a chronic dearth of foster homes, placements are frequently determined by availability. One study examined how exposure to faith-based recruitment programs affected awareness and intention to foster/adopt among families in local churches (Howell-Moroney, 2013). Results indicated success in building awareness about the need for foster/adoptive parents and the biblical mandate to serve as caregivers, as well as expressed intent to seriously consider fostering or adopting.

Focusing on Youth in Care

Identity development is a core task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and youth seek to develop new relationships as their identities further develop. Disrupted attachments in the life course can seriously impede the ability to form long-lasting connections that can later be detrimental to a youth's ability to cultivate positive relationships (Bowlby, 1983). The problems

can also affect relationships in later roles and can negatively influence a variety of outcomes. For youth in foster care, frequent moves among homes of biological relatives, foster homes, and group care settings result in instability that can disrupt healthy development (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Disruptions in racial/ethnic and religious communities, as we noted, can exacerbate these later difficulties in the life course.

Social supports that facilitate strong connection and identity development related to race/ethnicity and religion may contribute to the resilience of youth. In this section, we focus on racial/ethnic and religious identity development for youth in foster care. Notably, families and communities are central in promoting identity, consequently, positive identity development may be hindered for youth in foster care, when relationships with families are strained or broken.

Racial/ethnic identity. Phinney (1992) posited that ethnic identity has four components – self-identification, ethnic behaviors and practices, affirmation and belonging, and ethnic identity achievement. *Self-identification* refers to the ethnic identity an individual uses to describe oneself and this label is a necessary precursor to ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992). *Ethnic behaviors and practices* include use of language, involvement in social activities related to ethnicity and participation in cultural traditions (Phinney, 1992). Ethnic pride and wanting to change one's ethnic identity are examples of feelings related to *affirmation and belonging*. Lastly, *ethnic identity achievement* describes the fluid process of ethnic identity in which an exploration of the meaning of one's ethnicity results in a secure sense of self (Phinney, 1992, p. 160). These four components of ethnic identity are informed by how Black youth make meaning and interpret processes and experiences such as racial discrimination (García Coll et al., 1996).

In terms of foster care youth, Schwartz (2007) found that African American youth in non-kinship foster homes were more likely than those in kinship care to explore their ethnic identity

yet they were less likely to receive socialization from caregivers or non-familial adults. Many of these youth still viewed their biological parents as important ethnic-racial socialization agents and were less likely to view socialization as a responsibility of the Black community (Schwartz, 2007). Foster caregivers who did provide support around ethnic identity predominantly focused on historical issues instead of current ones (Schwartz, 2007). Overall, Black youth in non-kinship care perceived their identity in a less positive light compared to those in kinship care. In another study, White (2008) found that 68 percent of Black youth felt it was important for them to have foster parents whose race/ethnicity was the same as theirs. Black youth and other youth of color shared how difficult it was to maintain their ethnic identity when going to multiple placements where foster families were of a different race/ethnicity. Lastly, Jewell et al. (2010) found that Black youth in transracial out of home placements had more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems compared to Black children placed with same race families and White children in transracial placements may suggest the importance of race/ethnicity identity socialization for the mental health of Black youths in care.

Child welfare agencies may now be more aware of the importance of supporting racial/ethnic identity among youth of color and have focused on recruiting more foster families of color and relying more on kinship care (Schwartz, 2007). Black children are more likely to be placed in kinship care than other racial groups because of cultural assumptions, which were discussed earlier in this paper, and families' willingness to serve in this role (Rufa & Fowler, 2016). However, children in kinship care tend to have lower rates of reunification and adoption than those in nonrelated foster care; this is especially true for Black children (see review in Bell & Romano, 2017). Child welfare systems should ensure that kinship families receive the support

they need and investigate the factors related to lower rates of reunification and adoption among Black children.

More supports and policies focused on racial/ethnic identity development may be needed in addition to recruitment and kinship care. Literature on transcultural placements, which primarily focuses on the concerns and experiences of the foster families, implies that when foster families are receptive to the specific racial/ethnic needs of foster youth of color, youth are more likely to thrive (see review in Coakley & Gruber, 2015). Therefore, foster families need to be culturally receptive and responsive. Screening foster families for these characteristics may increase the chances that Black youth receive the socialization needed in their placements, whether or not families are a racial/ethnic match (Coakley & Gruber, 2015).

Ascribed identity refers to the labels that others may give youth based on their physical features (Pinderhughes, Scott, & Matthews, in press). Child welfare professionals may make assumptions about what being Black means or entails, and provide support based on these assumptions. However, Black youth vary in how they make meaning of and interpret their experiences and therefore, Black youths' racial/ethnic identities may vary in beliefs, values and practices (Dupree, Spencer, & Spencer, 2015; Rogoff, 2003). Their perceived identities may shift since identities are fluid as youth develop (Pinderhughes et al., in press). Furthermore, the influence of youths' intersecting identities such as gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and religion on their racial/ethnic identity may differ among Black youth (Pinderhughes et al., in press). How a Black bisexual male perceives his racial/ethnic identity may differ from a Black girl from an African nation. These differences may not be obvious to others. Therefore, Black youths' perceived identities may differ from what their ascribed identities. Pinderhughes et al. (in press) argues that child welfare agencies rely on youths' of color ascribed identity, which may

have a negative impact on them. To prevent this unintended consequence, agencies should provide resources and trainings that would not only enable child welfare professionals to serve as racial/ethnic socialization agents for Black youth, but also ensure that professionals are engaging youth in conversations and learning about their perceived racial/ethnic identity.

Religious identity. Development of religious identity refers to the “process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and/or practices” (Balkin, Schlosser, & Levitt, 2009, p.420). Most young people develop their religious identity within the context of their family life; consequently the disruptions associated with foster care may interfere with this process. Schreiber and Culbertson (2014) examined religious socialization of youth involved in child welfare. They note the importance of religious affiliation is embedded within child welfare goals related to cultural continuity but that “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” (p. 1208). Jackson et al. (2010) similarly noted that few studies on religion or spirituality have been conducted among adolescents in foster care. In their study of spirituality they found 95 percent of foster youth reported they believed in God (with no significant racial/ethnic differences). Other findings included: 42 percent reported occasionally feeling distant from God; 23 percent said they frequently or always felt distant from God; 34 percent found it hard to believe a God exists with all the pain and suffering in the world; 45 percent said they, at times, felt angry with God; and 8 percent reported that they did not feel loved by God. Some youth in the study were also found to have active spiritual lives (about 44 percent participated in activities they consider spiritual once a week or more). The study authors concluded, “... it is clear that many young people who have experienced significant trauma derive strength and support for healing in their spiritual beliefs, spiritual practices and spiritual

communities” (p.144). In another study of the spirituality of foster youth, Tokarski (2016) examined spiritual themes among youth aging out of foster care. In this study, young people did use spiritual themes as they made meaning out of foster care and aging out and the themes were often implicit. Noting that spiritual meanings can be beneficial or detrimental (or both) and may have influence in the later life course, Tokarski suggested that workers should explore these meanings with youth during the transition process.

Although there is limited research on the impact of religiosity on behavioral outcomes for foster youth, one study (Scott, Munson, McMillen, & Ollie, 2006) found religious service attendance was associated with reduced odds of youth’s recent engagement in sexual behavior and current use, and that greater religious beliefs were associated with a reduction in odds of youth’s use of alcohol in the past six months and current use of cigarettes. The consideration of religious involvement as a positive influence and resource that may reduce unhealthy risk behaviors among older youth in foster care is discussed. Linkages between religiosity and reduced risk behaviors have been identified in more general populations of youth; religious affiliation has been found to be a protective factor for youth in regard to outcomes such as reduced substance use and violence (e.g., Salas-Wright, Vaughn, Hodge, & Perron, 2012).

Such findings support the view that greater attention to religion in practice may contribute to better outcomes for some foster care youth. Yet, as Schreiber and Culbertson (2014) note, there are many ways in which religiosity of child welfare involved youth may differ from the general population: (a) demographic characteristics such as race that are associated with involvement in religion and child welfare (i.e., African American youth are disproportionately involved in child welfare and more likely to attend religious services,) potentially increasing religiosity among child welfare involved youth, (b) the disruptive experience of maltreatment

may affect spiritual development, for example, through a delayed emotional capacity to develop spirituality or to question the goodness of God, and (c) possible placement in foster care and the subsequent religious influence of foster parents. Youth removed from families also experience relationship and community disruption, which could affect their religious development. These findings do suggest generalizations about religiosity of foster youth are risky and that individualized assessments are needed.

As noted earlier, attention to religious and cultural assessments in foster care placements is not common (Schatz & Horejsi, 1996). It is not clear that same-religion placement is necessary, but lack of understanding of a youth's faith may be problematic (Schreiber, 2010). It is unknown the extent to which foster homes support youth in their religious identity. Jackson et al. (2010) noted that "in light of their spiritual goals, it is encouraging that almost half of the youth participated in weekly spirituality-related activities, despite being in foster care. This may indicate that the foster parents of these youth are supportive of their spiritual practices" (p.114).

In addition to foster homes, youth can receive a wide variety of child welfare services (group care, mentoring, counseling), and there is little understanding of the extent to which these services incorporate faith-based approaches and the circumstances in which such approaches are particularly necessary. Wilson (2005) provides examples of such services, noting that "spiritually competent" agencies recognize spirituality as an important component of a holistic therapeutic approach, and deliver their spiritual programs in conformance with widely accepted standards of clinical care and the principles of youth development. Also important, is the potential sustainability of faith-based entities in the lives of youth. In one study, youth transitioning from foster care were asked whether any programs, groups, organizations, or other settings provided them with support or assistance (Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010). Religious organizations were

most frequently mentioned. An advantage of an organizational approach to support is the existing infrastructure in place; receiving support, in whatever form, from an organization may have greater stability because it is not dependent on a specific individual.

Other Races and Religions

Most of the literature directly references Christianity as the religion of focus. References to Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and other religions are highly limited (exceptions include Rotabi, Bromfield, Lee & Sarahn, 2017). Yet, it is likely that religious identity is important to families and youths from these faith traditions as well; perhaps religious identity is even more important to these groups because of their status as minority religions in the U.S. Connections to these faiths and their congregations and religious leaders may be a source of multiple forms of support and assistance. Yet, there is scant attention to these faiths in the child welfare literature.

Because of ICWA, there is a fairly substantial body of literature on policy and practice of child welfare with Native Americans (e.g., Bussey & Lucero, 2013). Within the Native American population, race, religion, and culture are highly intersectional. Despite the unique experience of Native Americans within the child welfare system, there seems to be a gap, as well, regarding spiritual competency. Brown, Mehta, Skrodzki, Gerrits, and Ivanova (2013) conducted a study among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit foster parents in Canada. Noting in their literature review that there is very little about Aboriginal foster parents, in general, and none specifically about spirituality among Aboriginal foster parents. Most of the literature reviewed was similar to that provided in this article. They concluded that "... the ways spirituality have been described in the foster research overlap with experiences of Aboriginal foster parents in several important ways. The role of cultural practices – including beliefs, values, and ways of communicating about them

and living them daily – are needed by foster parents to care for foster children, and to foster parents themselves for their personal health and wellness as well as success in fostering.” (p.81)

Discussion and Implications

Issues of race/ethnicity and religion have been fundamental to policy and practice of child welfare predating the development of a formal child welfare response. A historical perspective demonstrates how racial discrimination and sectarianism influenced child welfare services and practices. These include deliberate attempts to break family ties, segregation in regard to placements, inequity in service provision, and lack of culturally appropriate supports and interventions. Extensive data on racial disproportionality indicate contemporary challenges facing youth of color in care, especially Black youth, and their consequent need for the family and community socialization. There are limited data available about religious identity and religiosity in child welfare, but there is some concern that religious identity is not addressed regularly by child welfare systems. Because religion is often a core component of identity this is problematic.

The first imperative in addressing race/ethnicity and religion is to continue a focus on ensuring the effective implementation of non-discriminatory policies. At the same time, child welfare practice might utilize the powers of race/ethnicity and religion, and their intersectionality, to promote development and healing. Given the potential risks associated with a religion-focused approach, great care is needed. Substantially more research is necessary to understand the role of religion in the lives of foster youth and their families, to develop mechanisms of connecting to faith communities and practices in ways that are helpful, and to understand the best ways in which professional child welfare can collaborate with religious

organizations to best serve families. Because religion is so often highly politicized, empirical research and rigorous program evaluation are sorely needed.

Youth in child welfare systems can face critical challenges that threaten the development of racial/ethnic and religious identities. Consequently, efforts are needed protect these identities and foster connections to racial/ethnic and religious communities. There certainly are some efforts to do so, but they tend to be local and idiosyncratic. Additional attention in these areas would add potential tools in efforts to improve the key outcomes of safety, permanence, and well-being of children, youth, and families. Authentic connections regarding race/ethnicity and religion may provide safety by protecting against discriminatory actions. Individuals and communities that offer the cultural connections inclusive of race and religion can promote a sense of relational permanency. Because race/ethnicity and religion influences youths' development, policies, institutions, programs, and individuals that promote the growth of positive racial/ethnic and religious identities (and that suppress the denial of these identities) are levers of change that may contribute to youth well-being.

Prior to placing a youth, child welfare agencies should provide foster families, including kin, with training discussing the influence of race/ethnicity and religion on child development, discrimination, differing cultural beliefs and values, and potential socialization resources. As stated earlier, agencies should determine families' religious beliefs and ethnic-racial socialization approaches prior to placement. Caseworkers should be trained to ask youth about issues of race and religion during the first meeting as well as how to check in with youth while in care about these issues. Once a youth of color is placed, families should be provided with several seminars in which the youth, caseworker and family can discuss youths' cultural beliefs, values and experiences related to race/ethnicity and religion, potential needs and resources. Those resources

could include culturally-based community agencies and religious organizations. Certain religious organizations may already exist to specifically reach out to families with difficulty, troubled youth, or abused spouses more generally as well as to help youth in care and their families. For congregations and agencies interested in addressing the needs of youth in care, child welfare agencies should provide trainings and workshops similar to those offered to foster families. Lastly, pairing a youth of color with a mentor from a similar racial/ethnic background and/or religious background may provide another positive relationship in which youth can receive support around race/ethnicity and religion.

We offer a few additional conclusions. First, we noted that Christianity has received the majority of attention in the literature. This suggests an obvious need to broaden knowledge and practice expertise regarding other religious traditions. It may also be particularly relevant to practice with immigrants and refugees, who often bring a variety of religious traditions with which agencies/programs may be ill-equipped to address. With increased religious competence, practice might be highly beneficial to cultural adjustment, family strength, and youth well-being.

Second, this paper has focused specifically on race/ethnicity and religion as critical factors of identity of youth (and families). Literature on racial/ethnic youth other than Black youth in foster care needs to be significantly expanded. Other aspects of identity also warrant specific attention. Youth with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, and immigrant youth are other youth populations in which a sense of positive identity is crucial to well-being, for which support for identity from the child welfare system is needed, and for which this support is too frequently lacking. Pinderhughes, Scott, and Matthews (in press) have recently called attention to how these (and other) identities intersect with race for children in care.

Third, we acknowledge the US-focused perspective of this article. Comparative analysis with other countries would likely identify similar types of oppression and discriminatory systems, although the specific histories of each country would influence the manifestation of oppression. Forces of racism exist in most countries of the world, although they may be exhibited in differing ways. Aboriginal peoples in Australia (Hutt & Clarke, 2012) as well as Canada, New Zealand, and other countries have been frequently ill-served by child welfare systems. In many European countries, the Roma and Travelling communities bear the brunt of societal discriminatory treatment that is also observed within systems of child protection (Allen, 2016). Thus, while the specifics we have described in this paper will be unique to the U.S., the larger lessons about race/ethnicity and religion within child welfare policy and practice, may be transferable to many other countries.

Finally, we have noted that federal policies have addressed race to a limited extent, primarily in regard to the Native American population. Attention to racial disproportionality has led to some practice efforts to resolve these challenging problems. Attention to religion has not been recognized in policy, although to some extent, it has been addressed in practice. There are cautions to be learned from both the early history of child welfare when religion was a dominant force and our more recent experiences with addressing race within child welfare. Moreover, our perspective on the importance of religion is not an argument in line with contemporary neo-conservatism that supports movement “back” to religion and minimization of government social welfare systems. Although we have argued the importance of religion and greater attention to religious identity in child welfare practice, we fully acknowledge and call attention to, the multiple ways in which religion can be used in highly harmful ways. Currently, nine states have acted to pass legislation allowing faith-based foster care providers to discriminate against same

sex couples or unmarried individuals (Kelly 2018). In the U.S. Congress, The Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act of 2018 has been introduced which would allow U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to penalize states (by reducing child welfare funding) that acts against a child welfare service provider that declined “to provide, facilitate or refer for a child welfare service that conflicts with ... the provider’s sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions” (Kelly, 2018). Scholars of child welfare policy and practice need to pay close attention to these developments to halt discriminatory intent and forestall harm to children.

Conclusion

The importance of race/ethnicity and religion is central to the human condition and we have outlined several ways in which race/ethnicity and religion are important to the identity of youth (and families) involved in child welfare and identified various mechanisms (policy, program, intervention) that can thwart or bolster a sense of racial and/or religious identity. Both non-discriminatory policy approaches and affirming practices are needed. These are not easy issues to address and our long history of poor treatment regarding race/ethnicity and religion documents considerable error. Transparency on these issues in policy and practice is needed to prevent further harm. There is often great creativity at the local level regarding affirming practices focused on race/ethnicity and religion. More sharing of effective practices, and scaling up when appropriate, is needed.

Declarations of interest

None

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Highlights:

Intersection of race/ethnicity and religion is critical in child welfare

Policy history identifies substantial problems in addressing race/ethnicity and religion

Practice strategies aim to support youth racial/ethnic and religious identities

Community based interventions focusing on race/ethnicity and religion are importance

Rigorous research is needed to develop appropriate strategies and interventions