Attachment theory and change processes in foster care

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ABSTRACT

Despite wide acceptance in the multifaceted field of child care policy and practice, attachment theory has found limited use in examining empirically the circumstances and conditions of special populations of children. This inquiry addresses this limitation by elaborating attachment theory as a foundation for contemporary foster care practice and policy. We focus on how caregiving contexts and the nature of their change selects certain characteristics and behaviors as relevant in explaining a child's risk of placement change in, or exit from, foster care. We use data on a population of 3448 foster children over a 21-year period to test arguments that children's strategies for dealing with change can be both resistant and adaptive, and that self-perpetuating patterns of attachment can contribute to increasing rates of change in children's lives. Results strongly support attachment theory as a transactional theory of change. Placement change not only influences the hazard of exit in the manner predicted but also engenders a "liability of change," with early change influencing the likelihood of future change independent of contextual and child characteristics. From the perspective of this inquiry, future research that omits information on the history and timing of significant changes in children's lives will be limited in its capacity to explain their current circumstances.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose

The relevance of insights from John Bowlby's attachment theory (AT) to child care policy and practice are so widely accepted that the need for confirmation through empirical testing and analysis is only cursorily acknowledged. Significantly, such acceptance has helped promote two complimentary limitations (Rutter & O'Connor, 1999). One is a tendency to apply the principles of AT across differing populations of children without qualification. The complement is its limited use in examining the circumstances and conditions of special populations of children by elaborating relevant aspects of the theory in terms specific to such populations.

This inquiry seeks to address these limitations by exploring AT as a foundation for contemporary foster care practice and policy. We focus mainly on how caregiving contexts and the nature of their change selects certain characteristics and behaviors as relevant in explaining a child's risk of placement change in, or exit from, foster care. Within this framework, we seek to determine, empirically not cursorily, whether AT can deepen understanding of the transactional nature of contemporary foster care dynamics. To this end, we review recent work in the research tradition of AT and in foster care; posit several

hypotheses designed to test AT's efficacy as an interpretive lens for foster care dynamics; and then explore in detail the results and their implications.

1.2. Background

In foster care practice, Bowlby's insights undergird a strong professional consensus regarding the importance of matching foster home strengths and capabilities with child need and pursuing quick-as-viable family reunification (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & DePanfilis, 2009; Steinhauer, 1991). Both practices are regarded as important in minimizing potentially negative effects of relationship disruption on children (Rutter & O'Connor, 1999). Failing reunification, the consensus calls for creating conditions that AT predicts are crucial to a child's healthy psycho-social development, stable and secure social bonds with significant adult caregivers (Bowlby, 1988; D'Andrade, 2005; Steinhauer, 1991).

In practice, foster care dynamics seldom yield conditions empirically consistent with the implications of AT principles. Indeed, evidence of constant-to-increasing duration times to foster care exit or family reunification indicate that the potentially negative effects for children of relationship disruption are not sufficiently minimized (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010; Children's Bureau, 2010). Findings also point to extended duration in care without movement to permanency, and of comparatively frequent placement changes. Both support an expectation of proportionately higher numbers of children with behavior problems (Children's Bureau, 2010).

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Motivated by these stubborn realities, researchers are working to identify relevant causal factors and conditions; recent studies show that such factors as age and nature of placement setting can predict both duration to exit and risk of placement change (Akin, 2011; Connell et al., 2006; van Santen, 2010). Researchers thus suggest that, if the effects of such factors can be mitigated, greater stability and more continuity in child-caregiver relationships will result, thereby producing more positive outcomes for children (Connell et al., 2006; Pecora et al., 2009; Rutter & O'Connor, 1999).

The research reported in this paper builds on and contributes to this literature. However, our emphasis is not solely on examining relationships between rates of placement change or exit and child characteristics. We are also concerned with the fact that relationships between child characteristics and rates of change and exit affect variation in the prevalence of child characteristics themselves. That is, while current research treats child-specific variables like age as influencing rates of change and exit, distributions of such characteristics in observed populations also reflect effects of earlier changes in rates of change or exit (Swan & Sylvester, 2006).

Thus, it is vital to understand how child characteristics influence risk of placement change or exit as they interact with the caregiving contexts in which foster children are embedded. Accordingly, this study focuses less on how particular characteristics affect a child's propensity to exit care or sustain placement change. Rather it generates and tests hypotheses about dynamic transactional processes underlying how caregiving contexts select certain characteristics and behaviors (including the process of change itself) as important in explaining a child's risk of change or exit.

1.3. Views of the child in attachment theory

As a "general theory" or "research tradition" (Laudan, 1977), AT has spawned a range of specific and sometimes conflicting ideas about how to answer questions and solve problems in the intersecting domains of child development and behavior.

One set of conflicting assumptions—those regarding children and change—are particularly important to this investigation. Some represent children as malleable, able to adapt to the requirements of change, given a supportive contemporaneous environment (Lewis, 2001). Others understand them as inflexible, based on arguments that attachment patterns tend to be self-perpetuating and change resistant regardless of context (Thompson & Raikes, 2003). The first view implies the viability of studying children's behavior using cross-sectional designs and static forms of analysis. The second emphasizes children's development histories and affirms longitudinal designs and dynamic forms of analysis. Following others (Bowlby, 1969; MacKenzie & McDonough, 2009; Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990), we construe these views as complimentary and adopt Bowlby's internal working model concept as an organizing assumption (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Thus, we take into account both development history and current circumstance.

An internal working model—a relational network of internalized knowledge constructed on the basis of attachment experiences—encapsulates a child's expectations of external reality and its role in that reality. The child uses its internal working model to anticipate and evaluate probable outcomes of purposive relationships, establishing the security needed to form relationships. In time, cognitive repertoires associated with internal working models are routinized (Bowlby, 1973; Crick & Dodge, 1994), and the child requires less conscious deliberation to invoke the working model. Thus the child manages relationships more stably and efficiently.

From the internal working model perspective, children approach new situations not as blank slates but with "…certain preconceptions, behavioral biases, and interpretive tendencies" (Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999, p. 5) and tend to interpret current environmental cues in a manner consistent with past interpretations (Dodge, Pettit, Mcclaskey, & Brown, 1986). They also elicit reactions from the environment consistent

with maintaining, rather than changing, existing behavioral repertoires (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton & Waters, 1985; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Sroufe et al., 1999). This implies differential survival rates for children's relationships with caregivers. On one hand, failure to adapt by either or both parties could result in termination of a relationship (Fichman & Levinthal, 1991). On the other, unilateral or mutual adjustments could increase chances of relationship success. This leads to the expectation that patterns of behavior evinced by children in dealing with contexts of relationship change will reflect both resistant and adaptive tendencies and that, in fact, self-perpetuating patterns of attachment can actually contribute to increased rates of relationship change in children's lives.

In this paper, we use the working model approach to children and change to derive seven hypotheses particularized to children in foster care: the first three addresses how placement change affects risk of exit from foster care; the remaining four consider the effects of change itself on subsequent rates of placement change, independent of the effects of contextual and child characteristics. While the working model idea is owed to Bowlby, we expand its scope by incorporating aspects of representational theory, theory of mind, transactional theory, and organizational ecology. The result is a broader conception of children's working models which, combined with our analysis, affirms the importance of conditioning interpretations of AT to the conditions and circumstances of special populations of children.

2. Hypotheses

2.1. Placement change and risk of exit

Recent research on internal working models identified and described their internal components, or *schemas* (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Bretherton & Waters, 1985; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). These sequentially ordered structures contain information about how one interacts with specific others, under certain conditions and in specific situations, to achieve particular ends (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Schemas define a child's knowledge of relationships and the actions and outcomes associated with the effectuation of that knowledge. While the idea of working models as organized bundles of schemas implies differences among children's working models, current literature identifies a limited number of major forms of attachment organization (Crittenden, 1999; Main et al., 1985) as the range of possible caregiver responses to attention-seeking behavior also is limited (Main et al., 1985). However, the idea of schema-based working models does give a more precise basis for thinking about how change will affect a child's relationship with its environment. Specifically, if stable, reproducible schemas are integral to a child's attachment behavioral system and guide behavior, and if change calls into question the efficacy of these schemas, change is likely to produce anxiety, defensive exclusion, and defensive misattribution that interfere with the child's ability to contend constructively with its immediate environment (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Within the foster care system, these behaviors are likely to prove disruptive, lowering a child's chances of adapting well to a caring context and increasing the chances of being labeled problematic. This in turn likely will lower the possibility, or risk, of exiting the foster care system. Thus:

Hypothesis 1. Placement change in foster care decreases a child's risk of exiting foster care, independent of the effects of other characteristics and conditions.

Hypothesis 1 implies the effects of placement change are uniform across children. We think this is unlikely in one important sense. Specifically, we expect child's age at time of placement change will affect subsequent risk of exit. How that effect will manifest is subject to competing arguments.

The first argument is consistent with Bowlby's claims (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988) that a positive relationship exists between increasing age and increasingly inflexible patterns of behavior, and with Sroufe's