

**Children in Limbo:
A Biopsychosocial Model of
Foster Care Placement Instability**

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Presentation Overview

- The study of the developing child, especially those living in atypical circumstances such as the child welfare system, is a complex proposition
- We address the limitations of the current conceptualization of attachment theory for contending with the problem of placement instability in the foster care system
- Children's strategies for dealing with change can be both resistant and adaptive

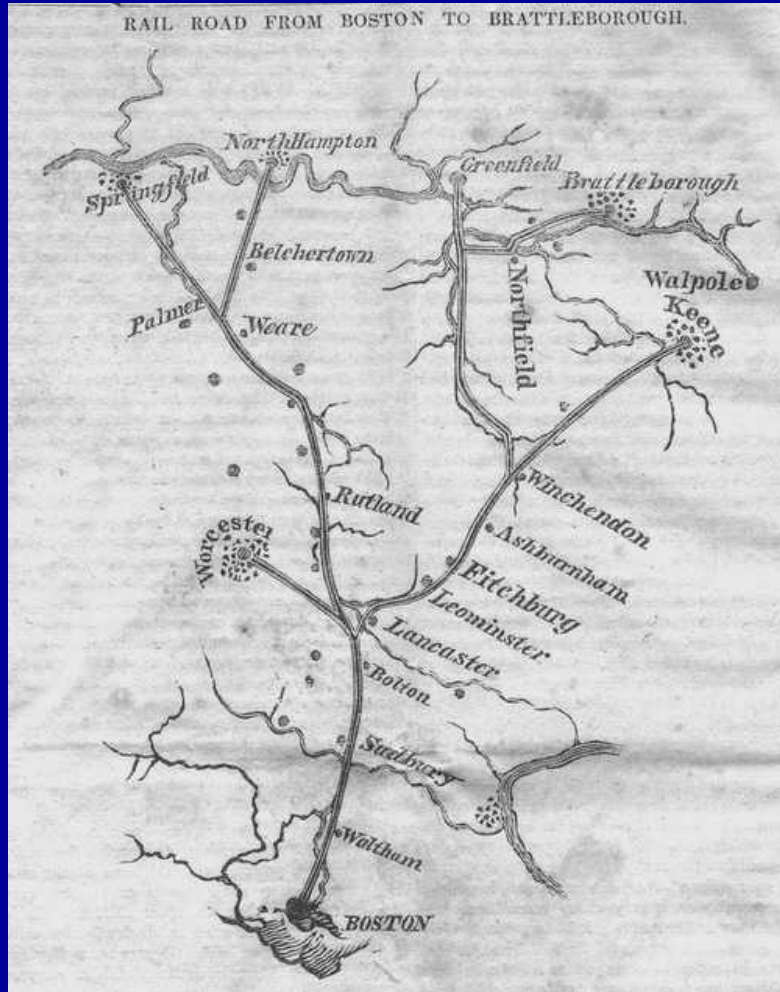
Do children readily and successfully adapt to changing circumstances and relationships?

- Many assume that children are relatively malleable. Although instability is not desirable in children's lives, they generally do manage to adapt to it.
- Attachment theory does not reject this proposition outright. However, it does qualify it by proposing that adaptability is strongly influenced by a child's history of change.

Attachment Theory and Change

- The “developmentalists dilemma” (Richters)
- This has helped produced much research concerned with determining the consequence for a child of the presence of specific internal or environmental attributes or traits.
- Attachment theory is not just a theory of outcome; it is also a theory of process (Sroufe & Waters, 1977; Sroufe et al., 1999).

Developmental Pathways Framework



(Bowlby, 1973)

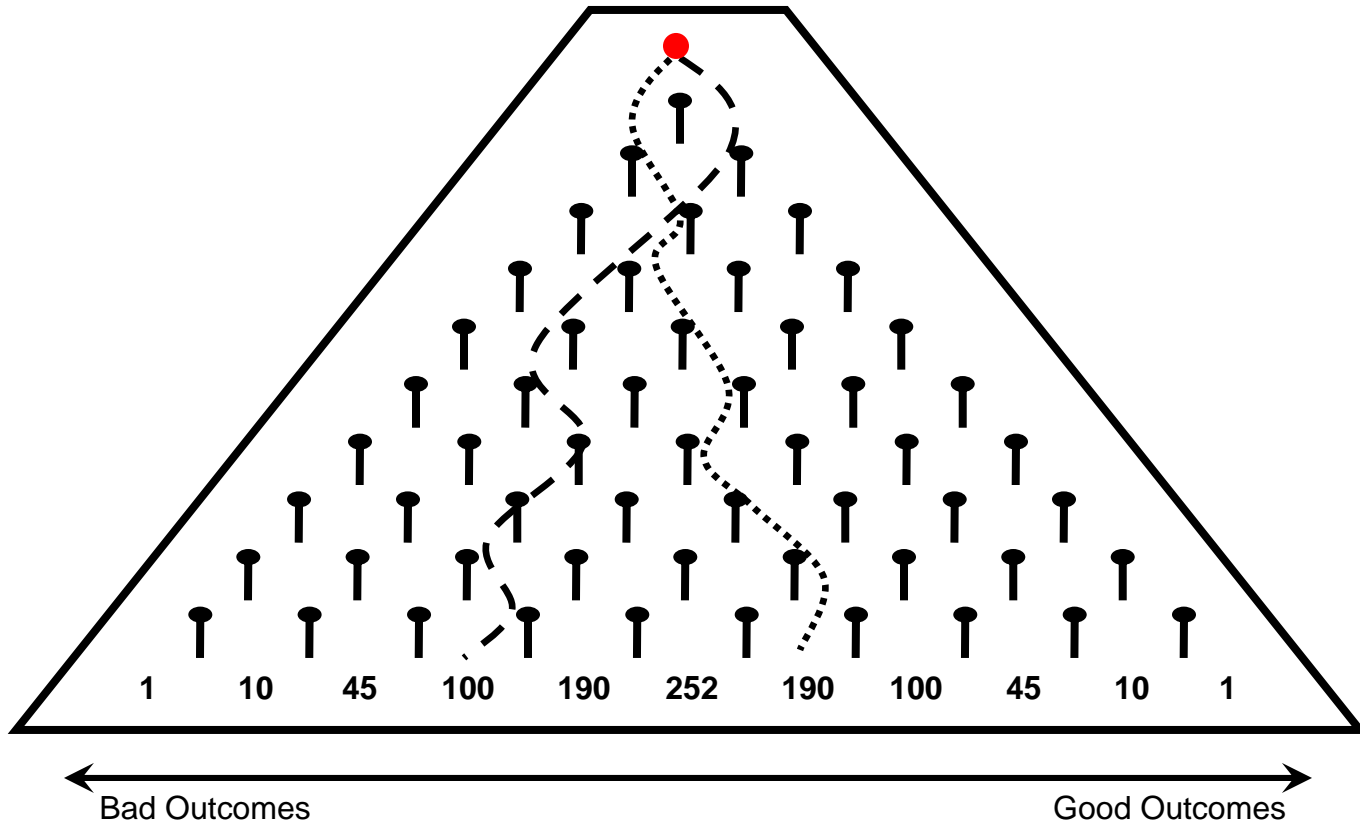


(Sroufe, 1997)

Developmental Pathways Framework

- Previous models have not offered a mechanism for lifecourse change and development
 - Later change is improbable, but not impossible
- The Galton Box:
 - Nicely illustrates the connection between determinism and probability
 - Probability machine, Quincunx, Pinball machine
 - 50/50 chance of ball going to the right or the left when it hits a pin

Pinball Model of Developmental Pathways



Attachment and Change

- Adaptation (or mal-adaptation) is not just a function of what the child finds in a new situation; it is also a function of what that child brings (Sameroff & MacKenzie, 2003).
- Working models are resistant to change resulting in behavioral inertia, which has implications for “fit” in new relationships.
- Children with secure past attachments more readily adapt to change.
- Understanding how children contend with change is central to the provision of effective models of substitute care.

Foster Care

- Publicly sanctioned and legally enforced system of substitute care for children.
- Approximately 523,000 children in care in the U.S. in 2003 (Pew Commission on Foster Care, 2005).
- “Natural Experiment” to study the basic effects of change.
- May also inform our applied understanding of how best to provide care for other people’s children in our society (Sroufe, 1991).

Placement Breakdown in the Foster Care System

- The issue of foster care drift, with children facing repeated disruptions in placement is seen by many as a significant problem in the child welfare system.
- Unfortunately we have limited understanding of the factors that contribute to the failure of a placement.
- Too often placement breakdown is viewed solely as a function of foster parents that were not up to the task and independent of contributions of disturbed children (Steinhauer, 1991).

***Current Study:
Can attachment theory inform foster care
placement disruption?***

- Explored event history data on a population of 3448 foster children in a given geographic area of Canada, over a 21-year period (1970-1990).
- Data were used to construct an event history for each child in the form of a sequence of time periods, or “spells”, separating each event.
- Preliminary descriptive analysis allowed us to begin to address the possibility that placement history impacts the duration and frequency of future placements.

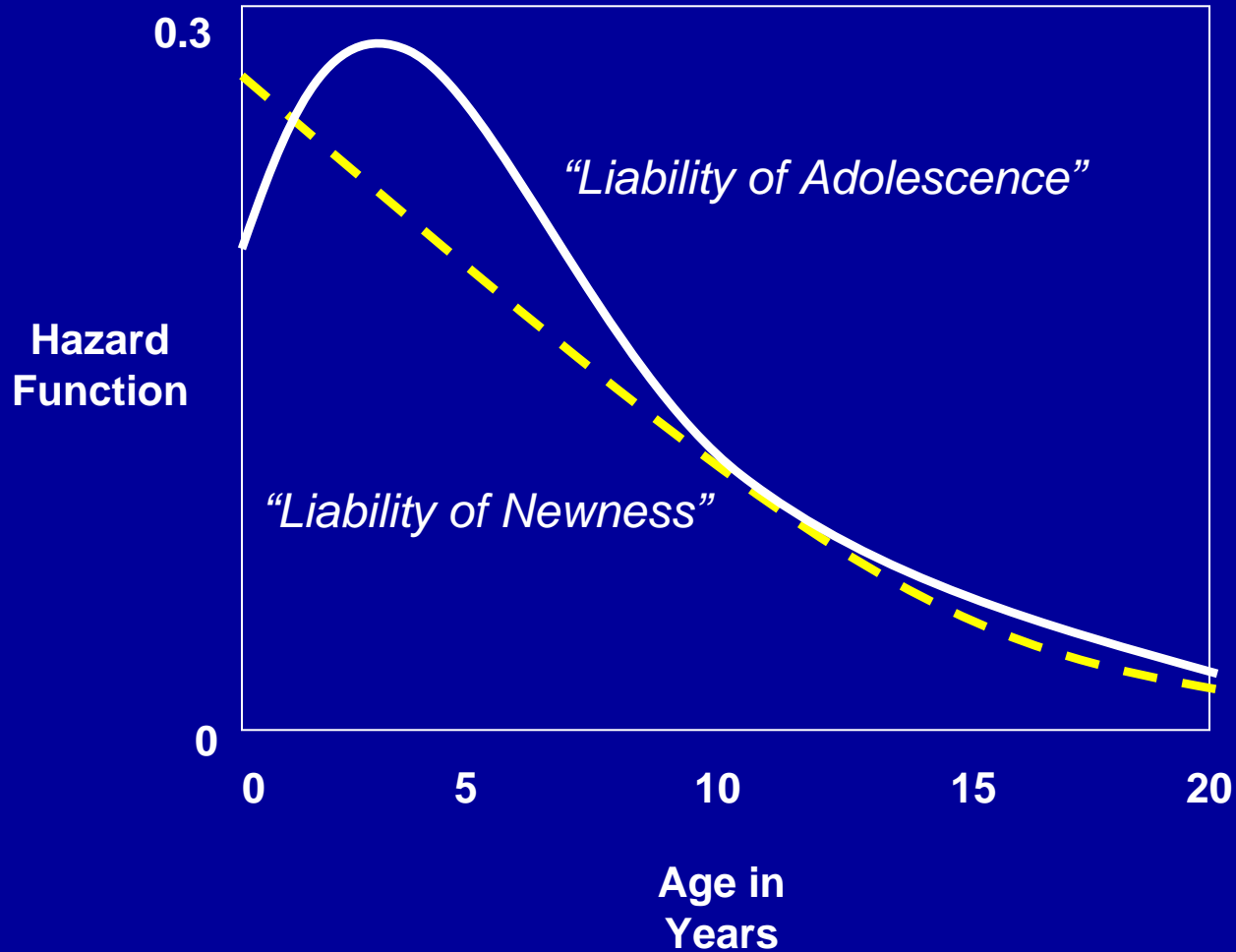
Hypotheses for Change

- Hypothesis 1: The probability of a placement change increases with the number of previous placements.
- Hypothesis 2: The probability of a placement change decreases with the time since the last placement change.
- Hypothesis 3: The probability of a placement change increases with the age of the child.
- Hypothesis 4: An early change in a placement increases the probability of subsequent placement changes.

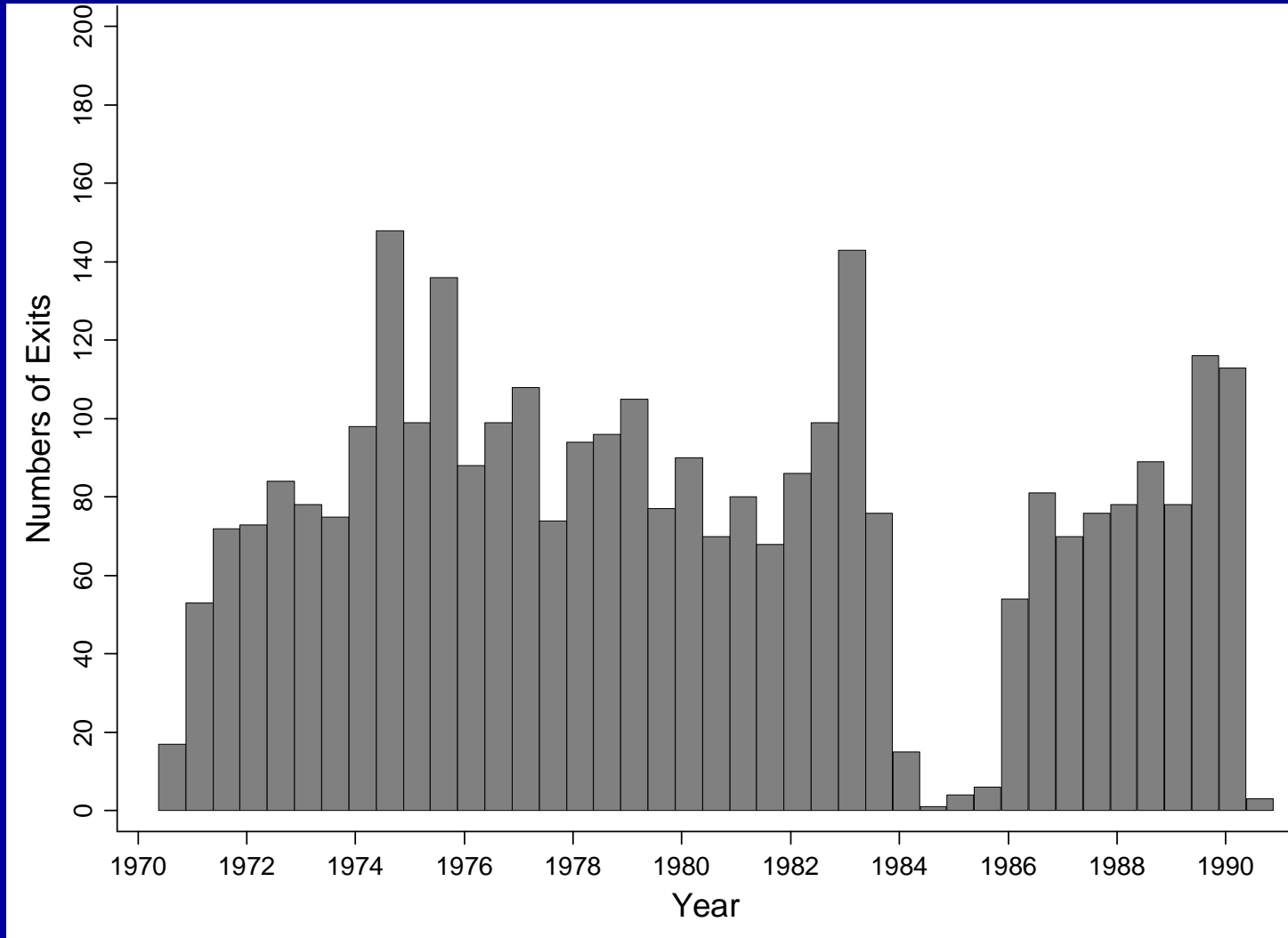
Survival Modeling as a Tool for the Study of Change

- “The utility and flexibility of recent advances in survival analysis have yet to have a major impact on empirical research within the field of developmental psychopathology and elsewhere.” (Willett et al., 1998)
- This approach is known variously as:
 - Survival analysis
 - Event history analysis
 - Hazard modeling
- This method provides developmental psychopathologists with powerful ways of answering their research questions about the occurrence and timing of life events and the time-varying variables that predict change.

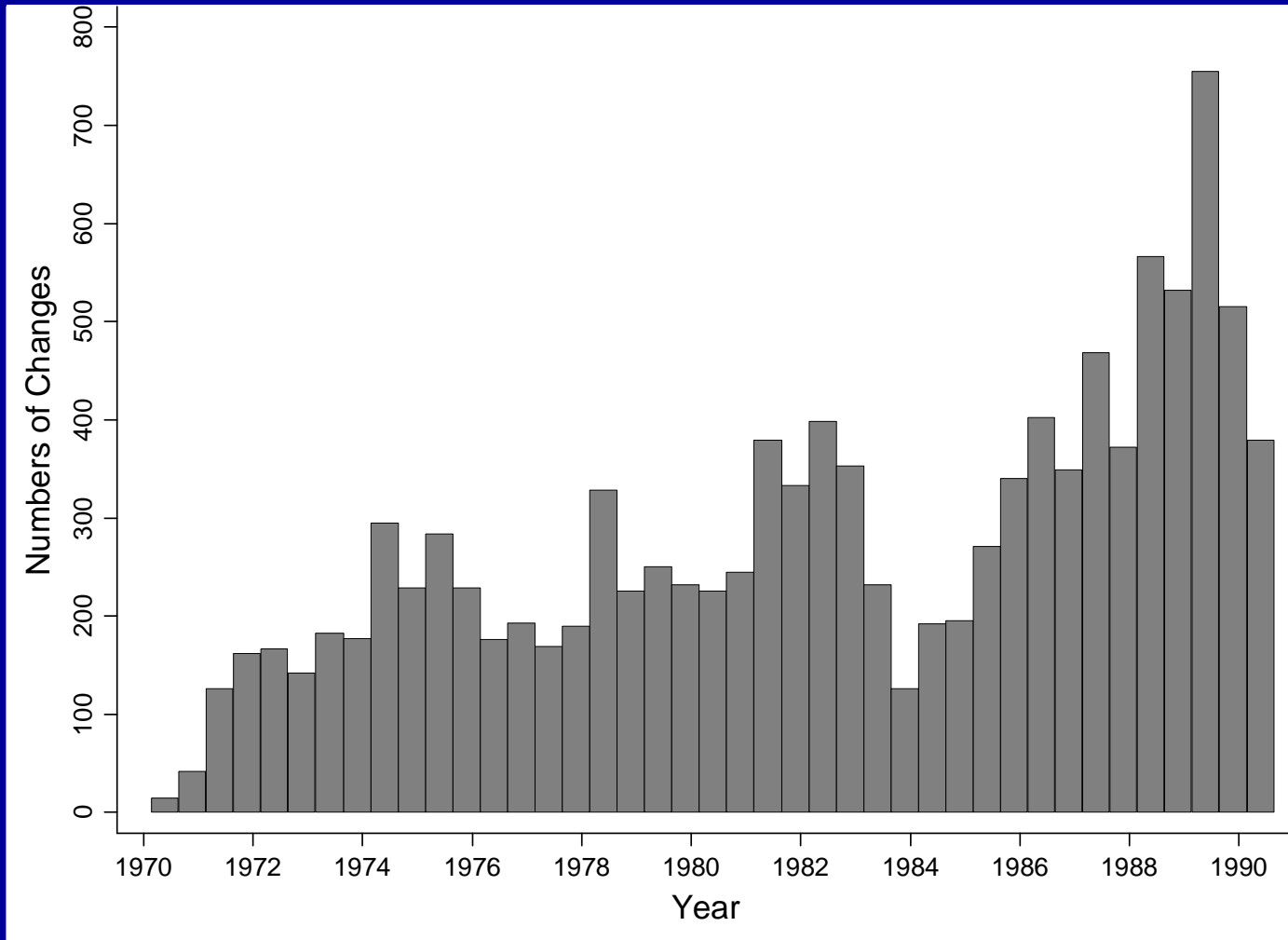
Different patterns of the hazard of organizational mortality



Numbers of exits by six month intervals (1970-1990)



Numbers of Placement Changes by Six Month Intervals (1970-1990)



Time varying control variables

- **Unemployment Rate:** An annual measure of proportion of the population without work who were seeking work.
- **Women's Labor Force Participation Rates:** An annual measure of the participation of women in the paid labor force.
- **Legal Change:** An historical event coded 1 when present and 0 otherwise. Refers to a period beginning in 1978 when legislation was introduced increasing the rights of foster children.
- **Economic Incentives:** An historical event coded 1 when present and 0 otherwise. Refers to a period beginning in 1973 when foster care “reimbursement” rates were increased.

Time varying control variables

- **Labor Unrest:** A period effect coded 1 when in effect and 0 otherwise. Corresponds to the protracted work-to-rule campaign in the early 1980's.
- **Matching Ratio:** A ratio in any give year of the numbers of children in care to the number of licensed foster homes.

Independent Variables

- **Change clock:** A duration “clock” constructed to record the elapsed time in days since last foster home change. It is 0 until a change, at which point it records the elapsed time since the change. If another change occurs, the clock is reset to 0 and again records the elapsed time.
- **Age:** Age is measured as the chronological age of foster child, calibrated in days.
- **Cumulative Change:** This is a cumulative count of the number of placement changes. It takes a value of 0 until the first change, the value of 1 until the second change, and so on.

Independent Variables

- **Change:** A dummy variable measuring whether or not a change in placement occurred, taking a value of 0 until a change of placement occurred and the value of 1 thereafter.
- **Change X Age:** To test arguments about how the early occurrence of change after admission to foster care affects the subsequent propensity for changes to occur, we interact our dummy variable with the child's age beginning at time of entry into the foster care system.
- **Gender:** Gender is coded 1 if male and 0 for female, allowing us to examine potential differences in placement breakdown.

***Is foster care drift really a problem
we should be concerned about?***

**Descriptive information on foster care population
(n = 3448; 53.3% male)**

Variable	Mean (S.D.)	Range
Average placement length in days	169.2 (385.1)	1 – 5079
Total number of placements	4.2 (6.6)	1 – 98
Entry age in years	10.3 (4.6)	1.98 – 20.27
Exit age in years	11.6 (4.6)	1.98 – 22.53
Total time in foster care in days	720.6 (1027.3)	1 – 5820

Total number of placements experienced by the children in the sample (n = 3448).

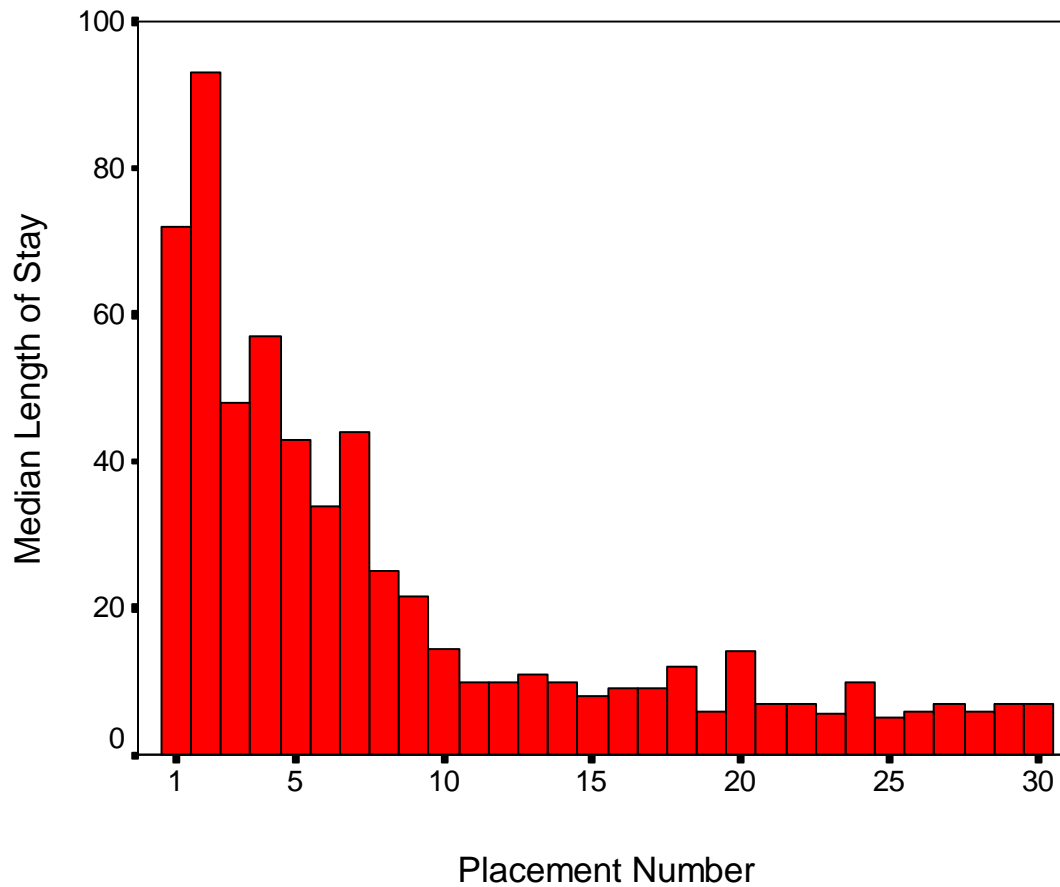
Total Number of Placements	Number of Children	% of Children	Cumulative %
1	1525	44.23%	44.23%
2	429	12.44	56.67
3	372	10.79	67.46
4	237	6.87	74.33
5	165	4.79	79.12
6-10	413	11.98	91.1
11-20	195	5.66	96.75
>20	112	3.25	100

***Is foster care drift really a problem
we should be concerned about?***

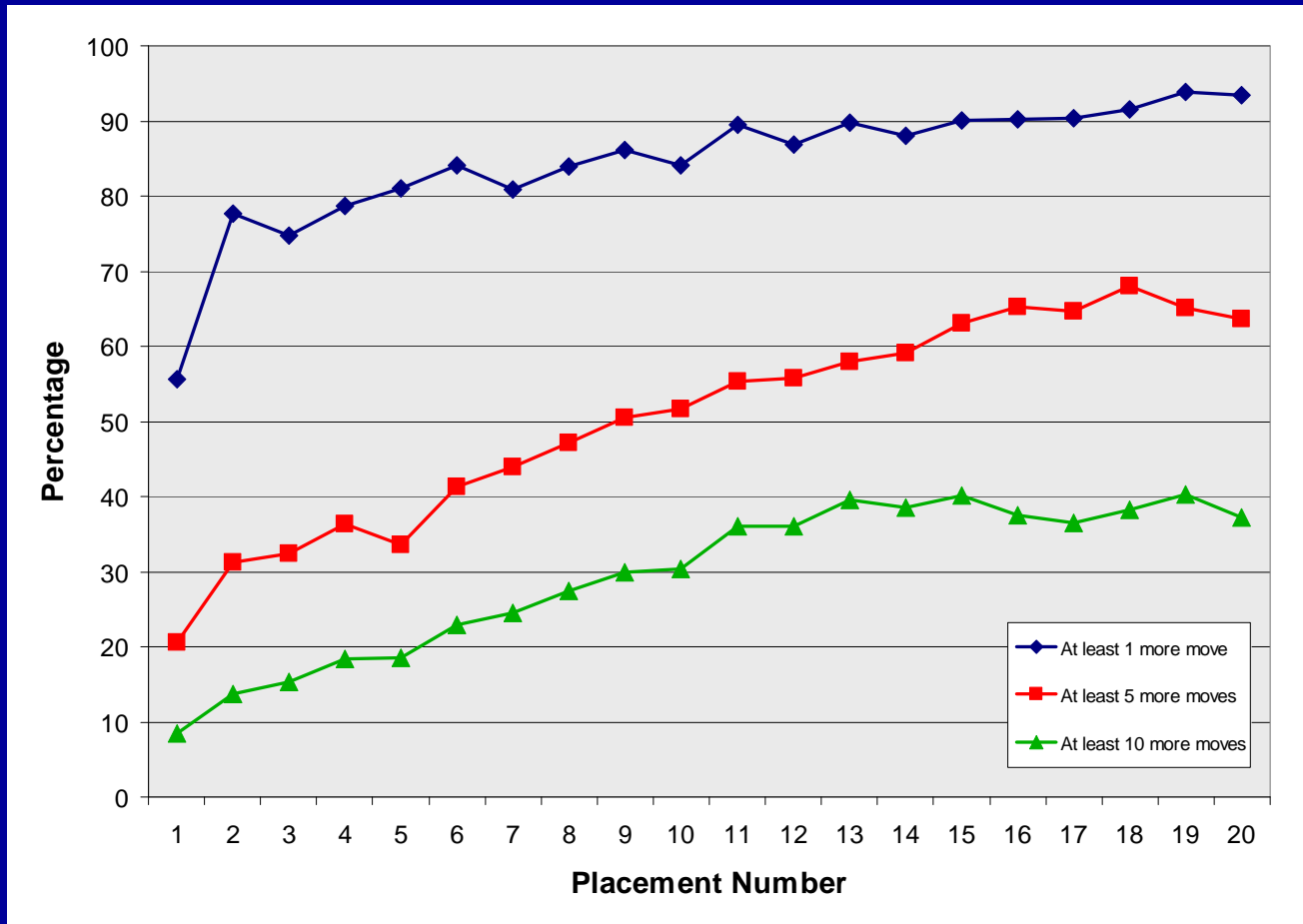
Yes, serial placement breakdown and foster care drift appears to be a significant obstacle to the stability of the structured and nurturing relationships necessary to meet a foster child's needs.

***Does past placement history impact
the success of future placements
in a path dependent manner?***

Median length of stay in days at each placement



Percentage of Children Facing Future Moves by Placement Number



Effects of Change and Time since Change on Rates of Change (n=3,448)

Variable	Model	
Gender	0.012	(0.044)
Unemployment Rate	0.019***	(0.007)
Women in Labor Force	-0.053***	(0.004)
Legal change	-0.191***	(0.052)
Economic Incentives	-0.182***	(0.060)
Labor Unrest	-0.180	(0.111)
Matching Ratio	-0.284**	(0.113)
Time	0.618***	(0.022)
Age Clock	0.040***	(0.002)
Cumulative Placement Changes	0.008***	(0.001)
Change Clock	-0.345***	(0.011)
Change x Age	0.004***	(0.001)
Constant	9.595***	(0.268)
Chi-squared	3723.19	

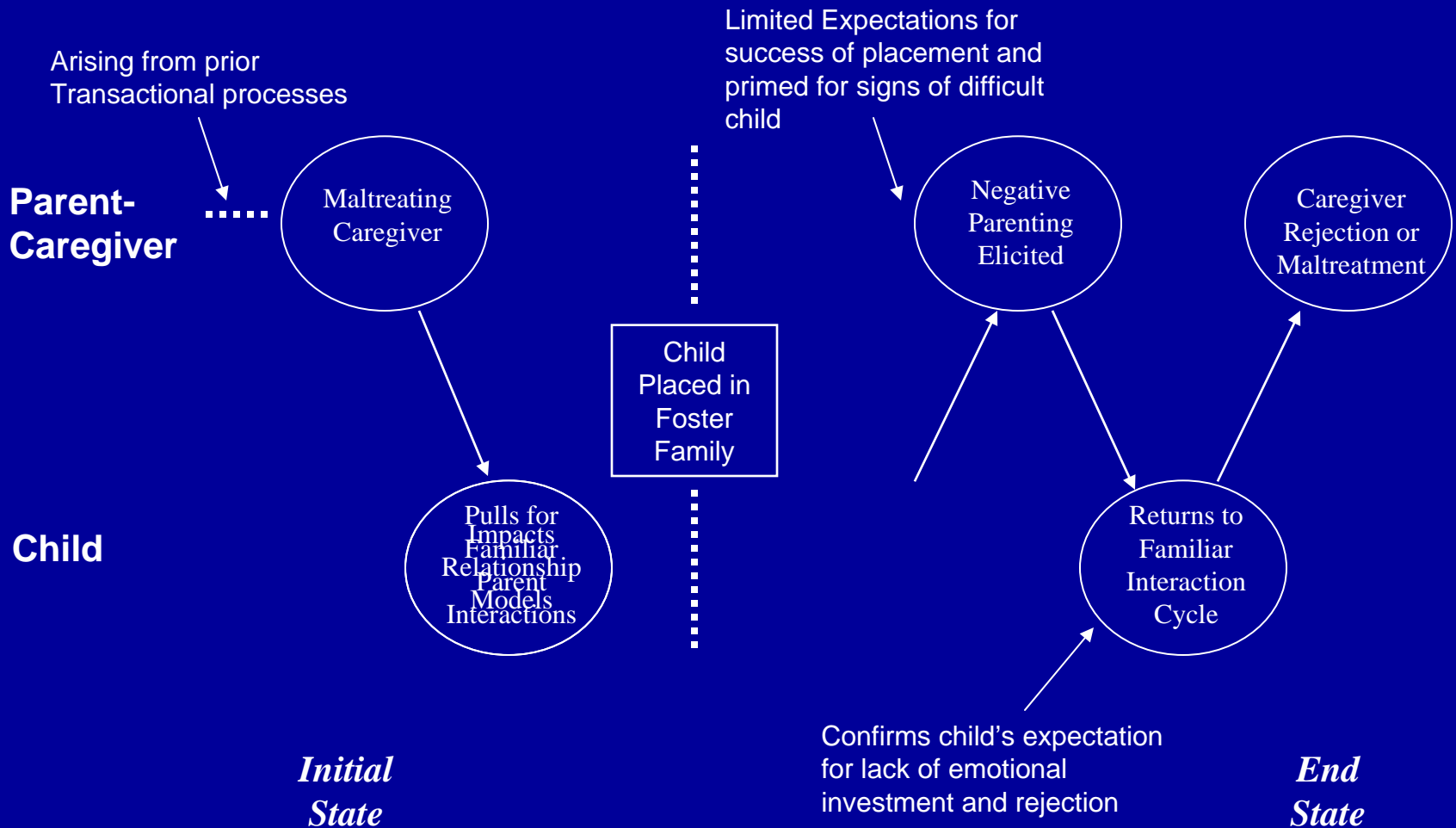
***Does past placement history impact
the success of future placements
in a path dependent manner?***

Yes, the breakdown of past placements seems to be changing the child as they move forward into new homes and decreasing the prospects of future successful attachment and placement stability.

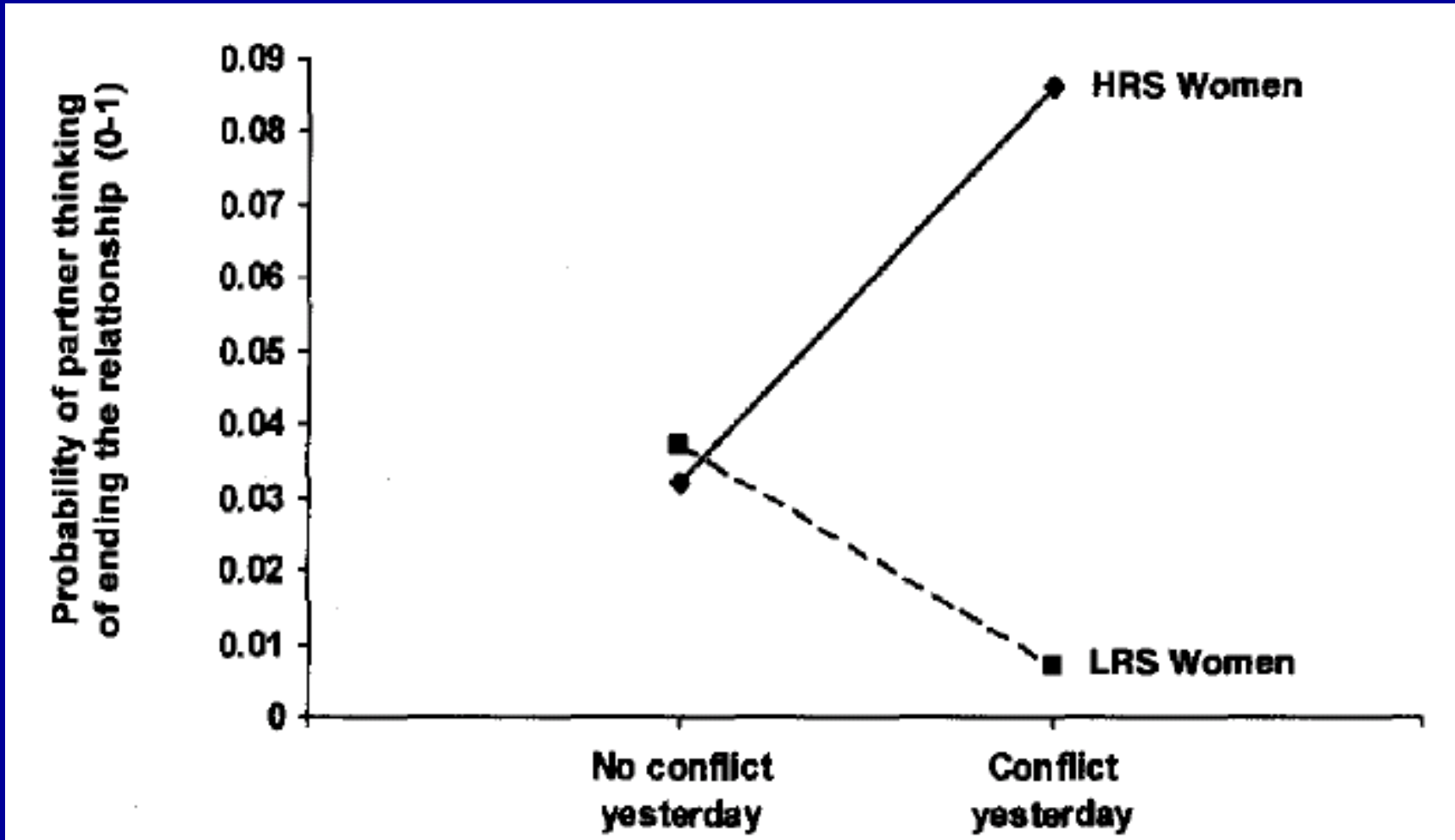
A liability of change in foster care

- These findings suggest that the pattern of breakdown in placements can be explained in part by a “liability of change” hypothesis.
- The foster care system seems to effectively meet the needs of the many children that experience relatively few changes in placement, but for the group of children experiencing serial moves the system does not appear to be working.
- The best predictor of future change may be past change, highlighting the usefulness of attachment theory for addressing the dynamic problem of foster care drift.

Path Dependent, Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in Child Welfare



Rejection Sensitivity (Downey et al., 1998)



Future directions

- Vignette study
 - For foster parents, case workers, and children
 - Varying the previous number of placements
- Pilot Project on Placement Instability
 - 24 foster children in early adolescence: 12 stable, 12 movers
 - Rejection Sensitivity and Behavioral Measures
 - Caregiver Perceptions and Expectations
 - MRI scans of an Emotion Regulation task
 - Cortisol assessments of Physiological Regulation
- Other potential avenues of exploration: foster and group care, adoptive families, big brothers/sisters, teachers and students, romantic relationships.

Conclusions

- The results affirmed the importance of thinking about attachment theory as a theory of process. It is important to study the effects of the process of change and not just change in its content.
- The consequences of change do not just depend on differences between old and new characteristics or contexts.
- In more practical terms, we should never assume change to be innocuous; all change, most particularly early change, counts.