

Disentangling the heterogeneous relationship between background characteristics and a child's placement risk

STUDY PAPER No. 30

Signe Hald Andersen and Peter Fallesen

The Rockwool Foundation Research Unit

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University Press of Southern Denmark
Odense 2010

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Study Paper No. 30

Published by:

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ISBN 978-87-90199-45-6

ISSN 0908-3979

May 2010

Print run: 300

Printed by Special-Trykkeriet Viborg a-s

Price: 60.00 DKK, including 25% VAT

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Abstract

While a range of studies investigate how a child's background characteristics affects his or her placement risk, only few have considered the possible stratified influence of these characteristics. This study contributes to this small literature by investigating if the influence from background characteristics varies by the child's social class membership. The analysis shows that this is the case: background characteristics matters less for preschool children from higher classes compared to low class preschool children, however, they matter more for high class teenagers than for low class teenagers.

Keywords: foster care, social class, risk factors

Forthcoming in Children and Youth Services Review

1. Introduction

Different types of neglect, abuse and lack of social adjustment are usually the direct causes of a child's out-of-home placement (James, 2004; Ottosen & Christensen, 2008; Yampolskaya et al, 2007; Bilaver et al, 1999; Egelund et al., 2004; Hansen et al, 2004; Roy et al., 2004; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Hussey & Guo, 2005). But we know that the risk of neglect and abuse, and the risk that a child is socially unadjusted does not occur at random: The children's personal characteristics matter, just as their socio-economic background explain significant variation in placement patterns (see Berger & Waldfogel, 2004; Berger, 2006; Geen et al, 2002; Hussey & Guo, 2005; Hestbæk, 1999; Brandon, 2000). This then suggests systematic differences in the placement risk for different types of children.

However, a child's placement risk may be the result of two different processes. On the one hand is the child's characteristics (including parent's and family characteristics), which may directly lower or increase the placement risk. On the other hand are the child's more generalized resources which may act as a mediator of the problems leading to placements. As an example, experiencing a parental divorce may have a direct average effect on a child's placement risk, however, whether a child is put in out-of-home care as a consequence of a parental divorce will depend on the child's and the family's additional resources for coping with the event. Hence, to understand how a child's background characteristics affect its placement risk, the analysis should be stratified according to factors which are believed to act as such mediators.

Despite a large and growing literature on the factors influencing and causing a child's out-of-home placement, there are only relatively few studies which analyze stratified samples. A few studies stratify samples according to age (see e.g. Ejrnæs et al., 2008), ethnicity (Taussig & Talmi, 2001) or placement type (Berrick et al, 1993; Berger, 2006; Barth et al., 2006; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Yampolskaya et al., 2007). These studies find significant differences between the background characteristics of preschool children and teenagers, African-American and white children, and children in different types of care. This gives a good indication of how the characteristics of the child, its parents and family matter to different extents across groups. This knowledge on the heterogeneous effects is important, as the more nuanced picture of the risk factors facilitates a more precise identification of which are the children who are at risk of experiencing an out-of-home placement.

The present study expands this small literature, by analyzing how the influence of background characteristics on the risk that a child experiences an out-of-home placement varies by the social class of the children. Class is a relevant stratifying

factor, as the literature has produced solid evidence of differences between classes and differences in the dynamics within classes, with regard to family values, how they raise their children, and how they respond to outside interference etc. (see e.g. Lareau, 2002; Vincent & Ball, 2007; Vincent et al., 2008). This suggests that class is not only an important predictor of the risk of out-of-home placements, but also that families from different classes may respond differently to problematic children, problems between parents and children and the possibility of solving these problems through an out-of-home placement. Consequently, class could be an important stratifying factor for understanding differences in the relation between background characteristics and placement risks. In addition, stratification by class will emphasize that not only children from low status families experience out-of-home care, and that also high resource families develop problems which they need outside help to solve.¹

To investigate class differences in factors affecting placement risk, we use full sample administrative data from Statistics Denmark and focus on the placement risk of children from the lowest respectively the highest class.

2. Background

The theoretical literature on class argues that class differences have both objective and subjective elements. This produces a number of explanations why we should expect a simple correlation between class and a child's risk of experiencing an out-of-home placement, but also a more complicated relation in which the effect of the various risk factors differ between classes.

2.1 Lack of resources may be the direct cause of the placement

The literature defines the objective differences between classes, as differences in resources; either in a narrow sense, as differences in economic capital (the Marxist tradition) or in a broader sense, as differences in economic, social and cultural capital (the Weberian tradition). This means that the higher classes have more money, more education and better social contacts than the lower classes. These objective differences in resources may lead to different child rearing possibilities (Chin & Phillips, 2004) and subsequently to different placement patterns between classes simply because the lack of e.g. economic resources in the lower classes may directly cause an out-of-home placement, if for instance the parents cannot afford to bring up the child. Because of the direct link between resources and

¹ According to Luthar & Becker (2002) and Luthar & Latendresse (2005), the focus on the problems of high status children and youth disappeared from the literature in the 1970's, and was replaced by a strong focus on low status children. However as both these articles show, also children from high status families have severe and non-negligible problems.

placement risk, this explanation accounts for a simple correlation between class and the risk that a child experiences an out of home placement. However, the correlation will be small or negligible once we control for differences in the resources which constitutes the class differences (as found by Franzén & Vinnerljung, 2006; Viner & Taylor, 2005; Sidebotham et al, 2002).

2.2 Possession of resources may prevent problems from leading to an out-of-home placement

Furthermore, class differences in resources allow parents of children to provide different degrees of support in case the child runs into problems, which might potentially lead to an out-of-home placement (Ream & Palardy, 2008; Lareau, 2002). This means that factors which constitutes a risk in the lower classes, because the parents do not have the resources for handling its consequences, might not be a problem in the higher classes because the parents have the resources. E.g. in the event of parental unemployment, which is a significant risk factor, higher class parents may have comparatively more cognitive, social or economic resources for handling the negative impacts. Hence the parents may solve the child's problems before the social system feels obliged to intervene. This explanation, which still only refers to objective class differences, suggests that we should expect the effect of each risk factor to interact with the child's class, and more specifically, that belonging to a higher class reduces the negative impact of the known risk factors.

2.3 Class membership may determine the definition of problems

However, from sociology we know that class differences also consist in subjective differences, as the quantitative class differences translate into qualitative differences in world views and interpretations (Bourdieu, 1987). As a consequence, parents from different classes differ in how they handle their child's problems e.g. in school: While higher class parents take on a proactive strategy for solving the problem, and only reluctantly accept their child's flaws, lower class parents acknowledges the child's wrongdoings and expect the school to intervene (McNamara et al., 2003; Vincent, 2001; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Higher and lower class parents are then likely to solve the same problem in different ways, not only because they have different resources to spare, but also because they interpret the problems and their possible solutions differently (see e.g. Lareau, 2002). This explanation then predicts a direct and positive effect of class on a child's placement risk, as higher class parents may argue more before accepting an intervention. The explanation also predicts interacted effect between class and known risk factors, as the class specific interpretation of what constitutes a problem implies that risk factors differ between classes. While the most straightforward expectation would imply that belonging to the higher classes reduces the positive effect of the known

risk factors, it is also possible that some risk factors matter more in the higher classes: e.g. if the stigma of living in a non-nuclear family is worse in high class strata, this may cause more problems for the high class child than for the low class child, and thus be more of a risk factor.

2.4 Problems differ between classes

Last, class difference could arise from differences in the problems leading to the out-of-home placement. Studies show that children from low resource families are more likely than children from high resource families to experience parental maltreatment and substandard parenting (Sidebotham et al., 2002; Berger, 2005; Berger, 2007). Other studies show that high class children have a higher risk of developing depressions, anxieties and, consequently, substance abuse and other types of delinquent coping strategies. The findings are explained by a stronger pressure to perform, put on high class children by their parents, just as the high class children are left on their own more often, both because of their parents' high work loads and because the parents expect their children to be self-sufficient. Both factors decrease children's mental well-being (Monuteaux et al., 2007; Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Hence, as the two groups of children, high and low class, experience different types of problems, and the unfolding of different problems are triggered by different (risk) factors, one could assume that background characteristics have different impacts on high and low class children's placement risks. Given this explanation, our analysis should produce significant effects of interactions between class and known risk factors. However we cannot predict the exact signs of these interactions.

Consequently, from this literature on parenting and social class we find reasons to believe that placement patterns and placement risks may differ across social classes, not only because resources differ between classes, but also because classes vary in how they handle and define problems, and because problems differ between classes. Thus, even though parents' and family characteristics often cause the problems leading to an out-of-home placement, the claim of this paper is that classes differ in how these characteristics affect placement risk, because the total amount of resources, problem-solving strategies and problems differ between families and parents of different classes. This suggests that class may not only have a direct effect on a child's placement risk, class may additionally interact with all other known factors influencing this risk. This is the claim investigated in the present study.

3. Data & method

In Denmark all residents have a unique personal number which identifies the resident in a great many transactions, such as tax forms, visits to the doctor, interaction with the welfare system, schooling, work status and registration of residence. Statistics Denmark conducts a yearly collection of the information registered by this personal number, and makes these data available for statistical and research purposes. The available data is then a panel which goes as far back as 1980, which contains all Danish residents, and which allows for a linking of parents, children and siblings. These registers also contain information on interventions aimed at neglected children, both preventive measures and actual placements, and show if and when a child receives an intervention. We therefore have full information on the number of placements per child, along with a range of information on both the children and their parents.

From this data we use all children between ages 0-6 and 13-17, who experience an out-of-home placement during the period 1982-2005, along with a 2 % random control group drawn from the population of children of same age not experiencing out-of-home placements. We analyze the two groups (preschool children and teenagers) separately, as previous studies show how factors influencing placement risks differ between preschool children and teenagers. The sample of preschool children consists of 220,574 year-by-individual observations, representing 40,995 individuals, and the sample of teenagers consists of year-by-individual 230,933 observations, representing 57,375 individuals.

3.1 Dependent variable

For each child, we obtain one observation per year, and let a dummy denote whether the child experience out-of-home placement in a given year. We censor data after the end of the first experienced out-of-home placement, to avoid problems of selection pertaining to children who experience multiple out-of-home placements during their childhood. Thus, we observe the children from the control group all their years as preschoolers and teenagers, while we only observed the children who experience an out-of-home placement until their first out-of-home care. In our data, 6,113 preschool children and 31,490 teenagers experience their first out-of-home placement.

3.2 Definition of class

To identify the parents', and hence the child's/teenager's social class position, we rely on the Goldthorpe Social Class schema (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), which consists of 5 classes: professional occupations (class 1), intermediate occupations, including most managers (class 2), skilled non-manual occupations (class 3a), skilled manual occupations (class 3b), partly skilled occupations (class 4) and unskilled occupations (class 5). Since our analysis focuses on children from the highest and the lowest classes we restrict our sample to children from respectively class 1 and class 5. With the information from the administrative registers we may identify the professional occupations (which are the higher grade professionals and top managers) and thus create a valid class 1. We may furthermore identify semi- and unskilled working class individuals, which allows us to construct class 5.

As mentioned above, we observed the preschool children and the teenagers for several years, until they experience their first placement. This means that their parents may potentially switch class during the observation period, and, in principle, that we should regroup children/teenagers annually (i.e. that class membership should be time varying). However, one may argue that the highest class achieved during the observation period is also the best indicator of the child's class membership; i.e. individuals aspiring to class 1 may spend some initial time in class 2, while working their way up the social ladder, and during that period, their world views and orientations may correspond better to the world views and orientations of class 1 than to those of class 2, because their aspirations have already put them in class 1. Thus placing such individuals in class 2 would be a misspecification. Given these arguments, we identify a child's/teenager's social class by the highest social class position recorded for their parents during the observation period. In line with this we also need to consider how to handle the many instances where a child's/teenager's mother and father do not hold the same class position. Given that mothers are usually the primary caregivers, her class position could be more important. However, the literature on the importance of parents' class position on child outcomes seems to have precedence for using father's class position (Goldthorpe, 1983, however, see also Sorensen, 1994) and we will follow this tradition.²

In our sample 59 per cent of the preschool children and 58 per cent of the teenagers grow up in class 1 and 41 per cent of the preschool children and 42 per cent of the teenagers grow up in class 5. We observe that 26 per cent of the preschool children in class 5 experience an out-of-home placement, while this only applies to 7 per cent of the preschool children in class 1. Moreover, 71 per cent of the teenagers in

² For a small number of children we have no information on father's class position (if he is dead or lives abroad). We determine the class position of these children by mother's class.

class 5 experience an out-of-home placement, while this applies to 43 per cent of the teenagers in class 1. Recall that we use a limited control group, and if we had used a full control group, these percentages would correspond to actual placement rates of respectively 0.7, 0.6, 4.7 and 1.5 per cent.

3.3 Controls

The literature on factors influencing placements, and child maltreatment in general, stresses the need for applying an ecological perspective, in which one considers the multiple factors which may influence the child's life course, rather than just one aspect of the child's life. This implies considering how processes which take place at all levels, both individual level, parental level and family level affect a child's risk of experiencing an out-of-home placement. We therefore include three groups of variables:

The first group contains variables on the child's characteristics. Here it is possible and relevant to include the child's age at the first placement and an indicator for gender, as the analysis by Webster et al. (2000) show that these characteristics matter for a child's placement risk. Consequently, the individual level variables which we include are child's age and gender. We also include information on the child's birth weight, as previous studies have identified this characteristic as an important predictor of the child's life course (Behrman & Rosenzweig, 1994).

The second group contains variables on the characteristics of each parent. Previous studies show that parents' socio-economic status, criminal behavior and health influences a child's placement risk (Berger & Waldfogel, 2004; Berger, 2006; Geen et al, 2002; Hussey & Guo, 2005; Hestbæk, 1999; Brandon, 2000). The second group therefore contains variables for the parents' labor market status – whether they are employed, unemployed, students, on early retirement pension or outside the labor force. It also contains variables for parents' education and income, indicators of whether or not they are engaged in any criminal behavior. With regards to health, the second group also contains variables on the number of visits to the doctor. This is an indirect indicator of health, as it does not contain any information on health status, however, it does capture the self assessed need for health care, and thus subjective health. For a small group of children we have no information on the father – either because he is dead or lives in another country. To account for this, we include a dummy variable, which takes the value 1 when information for the father is missing. In addition, we ascribe the value 0 to all other variables related to father's characteristics for these children.

The third group contains variables on the characteristics of the family. Studies show that children from broken homes and children who grow up with a step-parent are more likely than other children to experience an out-of-home placement,

just as the number of children in the family is important (Hestbæk, 1999; Yampolskaya et al., 2007). We therefore include indicators of the number of children in the family, and of whether or not the mother lives alone, with the biological father or another man. We also include an indicator for father’s death, as this incident may also generate a broken home.³

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, which we present by class/age-group combination to make clear how and whether the background characteristics of the various groups differ. We use lagged information for all variables except for the child’s age, to avoid problems of simultaneity (i.e. the father might lose his job as a consequence of having his child put in out-of-home care, rather than the other way round). For the preschool children we see that the high class children are slightly younger than the low class children. We also see that the mothers of the high class children are better educated and have a significantly stronger attachment to the labor market than the mothers of the low class children. Also the high class mothers have lower crime rates, but they visit the doctor more often. We find the same pattern among the fathers – they have more education and their labor market affiliation is stronger. Also their crime rate is lower, while they visit the doctor more often. To no surprise we find that household gross income is higher in the high class families. While the number of children in the high and low class families is almost the same, more high class mothers live with the biological father, fewer high class fathers are dead or missing.

With respect to the teenagers, we find the same picture; high class mothers and fathers are better educated and have stronger labor market affiliations than the low class mothers and fathers. Again we find that high class mothers and fathers have lower crime rates than the low class parents, while there is hardly any difference between the two groups’ number of visits to the doctor. In addition, household gross income is highest for the high class teenagers, and the family pattern resembles that of the preschool children; more low class mothers are single, more high class mothers live with the biological father, and fewer high class fathers are dead or missing.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Covariates	Preschool children		Teenagers	
	Low class	High class	Low class	High class
	Mean (std. err.)	Mean (std. err.)	Mean. (std. err.)	Mean. (std. err.)
0 years old	0.10	0.14	---	---
1 year old	0.12	0.13	---	---

³ This variable overlaps somewhat with the dummy for ‘father missing’

2 years old	0.13	0.14	---	---
3 years old	0.14	0.14	---	---
4 years old	0.16	0.15	---	---
5 years old	0.17	0.15	---	---
6 years old	0.18	0.15	---	---
13 years old	---	---	0.18	0.19
14 years old	---	---	0.19	0.19
15 years old	---	---	0.20	0.20
16 years old	---	---	0.21	0.21
17 years old	---	---	0.22	0.21
<hr/>				
<i>Covariates. Mother</i>				
Vocational or higher	0.07	0.66	0.11	0.64
Outside the labour force	0.31	0.12	0.29	0.10
In work	0.32	0.74	0.48	0.79
Student	0	0.05	0	0.03
Early retirement pension	0.01	0.00	0.04	0.01
Unemployed	0.28	0.09	0.19	0.07
Crime rate	0.07 (0.36)	0.01 (0.14)	0.03 (0.24)	0.01 (0.14)
# visits to the doctor	4.74 (13.12)	5.73 (11.72)	6.04 (16.62)	6.06 (16.86)
<hr/>				
<i>Covariates. Father</i>				
Vocational or higher	0.32	0.70	0.13	0.65
Outside labour force	0.35	0.09	0.41	0.13
In work	0.46	0.84	0.46	0.82
Student	0	0.03	0	0.01
Early retirement pension	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00
Unemployed	0.18	0.04	0.11	0.04
Crime rate	0.13 (0.48)	0.03 (0.21)	0.05 (0.35)	0.02 (0.22)
# visits to the doctor	1.60 (7.51)	2.34 (7.40)	2.22 (10.18)	2.60 (9.06)
<hr/>				
<i>Covariates. Family</i>				
Household gross income in 100.000	2.46 (1.47)	5.22 (2.80)	2.98 (1.45)	5.61 (3.73)
# of children < 18	1.92 (1.11)	1.96 (0.85)	1.67 (1.22)	1.67 (0.98)
Mother single	0.39	0.15	0.40	0.27
Living with father	0.43	0.79	0.32	0.56
Living with other man than father	0.18	0.06	0.28	0.17
Father dead	0.02	0.01	0.08	0.03
Father missing	0.20	0.04	0.20	0.06

We estimate the correlation between these various characteristics and the children's placement risk using a standard logic model. To assess whether class significantly influences the correlation between the background characteristics and the child's placement risk, we estimate one model for the preschool children and one model for the teenagers, where all background characteristics enter with main effects as well as interacted with a dummy for class membership. We choose this strategy over a strategy where we estimate separate models for each class/age-group combination, as the standard errors and t-statistics of the interactions will tell whether observed class differences in the coefficients are in fact significant.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the results from the two models. At an overall level we see that father's characteristics matter less for the placement risk of preschool children than for the placement risk of the teenagers. The model also shows no indication of class differences with regards to the child's/teenager's own background characteristics, except for his or her age.

However, the main focus of this paper is class differences in factors influencing a preschool child/teenagers placement risk. In the following, we first consider class differences for preschool children, and next, class differences for the teenagers.

4.1 Preschool children

The second column of table 2 shows the results from the model based on the preschool children. We see that almost all the coefficients of the main effects are significant. The individual level variables show that placement risk increases by age, and decreases by birth weight (and birth weight missing). The coefficients of mother's covariates show that mother's crime rate, visits to the doctor, increasing age and receipt of early retirement pension increases placement risk, while her increasing educational level decreases placement risk. The results also show that all types of mothers direct and semi-direct affiliations with the labor market – whether she actually works, is unemployed or a student – is better than her being outside the labor force in terms of reducing placement risk. The results are the same when we look at the effect of the fathers characteristics, except that father's work or unemployment is insignificant. The last group of main effects concerns the characteristics of the family. They show that increasing household income and number of children decreases placement risk. They also show that it is better for the preschool child that the mother lives with the biological father compared to being single, and that losing one's father significantly increases the placement risk. We also see that the dummy variable for social class is insignificant (the dummy takes the value 1 for high class children). Hence, when controlling for the other covariates (and interactions) we find no direct effects of the child's class membership.

However, the coefficients of the interactions between the covariates and the class indicator modify some of these results. First, we notice that the age effect is far lower for high class children than for low class children, which implies that the placement risk changes only little for the high class children during their early childhood. Second, we learn that the positive main effects of mother's crime and mother's age nets out for the high class children, as the negative interactions have the same size as the positive main effects. In addition, it matters less for the placement risk of the preschool children if the mother works and if she receives early retirement pension. In similar vein, we learn that father's crime rate, his age and his educational level matters less for the high class children. Third, also the household income and the number of children have smaller negative effects for the high class children than for the low class children. However, it has a stronger negative effect on the placement risk of the high class children when the mother lives with another man than the biological father, compared to her being single. In addition it matters less for the high class child whether the father is dead, and in case the mother finds a new partner if the father dies, the large positive – and significant – main effect of 'father dead' disappears all together.

From these results we learn that the background characteristics of both the low and high class children matter for their placement risk, but that it seems that the high class children are more robust to the various risk factors, than the low class children. However, in contrast it seems that the presence of a male adult in the family, in case the biological father is absent, is more important for the placement risk of the high class children, as this matter more in terms of reducing the child's placement risk.

Table 2: Results

Covariates	Preschool children	Teenagers
	Coef. (std. err.)	Coef. (std. err.)
1 year old	0.018 (0.003)***	
2 years old	0.027 (0.003)***	
3 years old	0.033 (0.004)***	
4 years old	0.037 (0.004)***	
5 years old	0.049 (0.004)***	
6 years old	0.049 (0.005)***	
14 years old		0.113 (0.003)***
15 years old		0.188 (0.004)***
16 years old		0.192 (0.005)***
17 years old		0.092 (0.005)***
Female	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.031 (0.005)***
Birthweight	-0.000 (0.000)***	-0.000 (0.000)
Birthweight missing	-0.069 (0.013)***	-0.004 (0.031)

	Preschool children	Teenagers
Covariates	Coef. (std. err.)	Coef. (std. err.)
<i>Covariates. Mother</i>		
Crime rate	0.086 (0.005)***	0.022 (0.007)**
# visits to the doctor	0.001 (0.000)***	-0.000 (0.000)**
Age	0.005 (0.000)***	-0.008 (0.001)***
Vocational or higher	-0.031 (0.006)***	-0.026 (0.008)***
Labour market status (ref=Outside labour force)		
In work	-0.054 (0.004)***	-0.024 (0.006)***
Student	-0.036 (0.004)***	0.000 (0.000)
Early retirement pension	0.265 (0.023)***	0.061 (0.013)***
Unemployed	-0.043 (0.004)***	-0.010 (0.006)
<i>Covariates. Father</i>		
Crime rate	0.018 (0.004)***	0.008 (0.007)
# visits to the doctor	0.001 (0.000)**	0.000 (0.000)
Age	0.002 (0.000)***	-0.001 (0.000)
Vocational or higher	-0.013 (0.005)**	-0.025 (0.007)***
Labour market status (ref=outside labour force)		
In work	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.014 (0.007)
Student	-0.020 (0.006)***	-0.034 (0.018)
Early retirement pension	0.0219 (0.032)***	0.012 (0.018)
Unemployed	0.001 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.008)
<i>Covariates. Family</i>		
Social class (1=highest social class)	0.027 (0.019)	-0.018 (0.048)
Household income in 100.000	-0.020 (0.001)***	-0.025 (0.002)***
# of children < 18	-0.080 (0.002)***	-0.085 (0.002)***
Mother's Marital status (ref=single)		
Living with father	-0.054 (0.004)***	-0.074 (0.006)***
Living with other man than father	-0.001 (0.005)	0.045 (0.006)***
Father dead	0.144 (0.022)***	-0.096 (0.026)***
Father missing	0.016 (0.014)	-0.089 (0.023)***
Other man*father dead	-0.007 (0.026)	0.041 (0.016)*
<i>Interactions</i>		
Highest social class*1 year old	-0.018 (0.003)***	
Highest social class*2 years old	-0.024 (0.004)***	
Highest social class*3 years old	-0.029 (0.004)***	
Highest social class*4 years old	-0.033 (0.004)***	
Highest social class*5 years old	-0.042 (0.005)***	
Highest social class*6 years old	-0.042 (0.005)***	
Highest social class*14 years old		-0.048 (0.004)***
Highest social class*15 years old		-0.064 (0.005)***
Highest social class*16 years old		-0.027 (0.006)***

	Preschool children	Teenagers
Covariates	Coef. (std. err.)	Coef. (std. err.)
Highest social class*17 years old		0.031 (0.006)***
Highest social class*Female	-0.003 (0.004)	0.004 (0.006)
Highest social class*Birthweight	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Highest social class*Birthweight missing	0.027 (0.014)	-0.020 (0.036)
<i>Covariates. Mother</i>		
Highest social class*Crime rate	0.008 (0.011)	0.024 (0.012)*
Highest social class*# visits to the doctor	-0.001 (0.000)***	0.001 (0.000)***
Highest social class*Age	-0.005 (0.001)***	-0.001 (0.001)
Highest social class*Vocational or higher	0.014 (0.005)**	-0.006 (0.008)
Labour market status (ref=Outside labour force)		
Highest social class*In work	0.018 (0.004)***	-0.058 (0.008)***
Highest social class*Student	0.000 (0.000)	-0.066 (0.010)***
Highest social class*Early retirement pension	-0.139 (0.057)*	-0.104 (0.025)***
Highest social class*Unemployed	0.011 (0.005)*	-0.003 (0.010)
<i>Covariates. Father</i>		
Highest social class*Crime rate	0.006 (0.006)	0.019 (0.011)
Highest social class*# visits to the doctor	-0.001 (0.000)***	0.000 (0.000)
Highest social class*Age	-0.001 (0.000)***	0.001 (0.001)
Highest social class*Vocational or higher	0.014 (0.005)***	0.002 (0.008)
Labour market status (ref=outside labour force)		
Highest social class*In work	-0.009 (0.008)	-0.050 (0.012)***
Highest social class*Student	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Highest social class*Early retirement pension	-0.092 (0.064)	-0.011 (0.034)
Highest social class*Unemployed	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.013 (0.014)
<i>Covariates. Family</i>		
Highest social class*Household income in 100.000	0.017 (0.001)***	0.020 (0.002)***
Highest social class*# of children < 18	0.065 (0.002)***	0.003 (0.003)
Mother's Marital status (ref=single)		
Highest social class*Living with father	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.054 (0.008)***
Highest social class*Living with other man than father	-0.035 (0.007)***	-0.034 (0.008)***
Highest social class*Father dead	-0.070 (0.029)*	0.038 (0.037)
Highest social class*Father missing	-0.007 (0.018)	0.007 (0.033)
Highest social class*Other man*father dead	-0.076 (0.032)*	-0.053 (0.027)**
Constant	0.0246 (0.017)***	0.980 (0.039)***

4.2 Teenagers

The third column of table 2 shows the results from the model based on the teenage sample. This model contains fewer significant parameters of the main effects than the model for the preschool children, but we still find some interesting class differences.

Looking first at the main effects we find a curve-shaped age effect – the placement risk is highest for the 16-year old teenagers. Again we find a negative effect of gender, i.e. that boys are more likely to experience a placement than girls. As with the preschool children, mother's crime increases placement risk while her higher educational level decreases this risk. In contrast to the results for the preschool children, mother's visits to the doctor and her increasing age reduce teenager's placement risk. And for the teenagers, only mother's direct labor market affiliation negatively influences the placement risk, while her receipt of early retirement pension still increases the risk. Only father's education matters, as his higher education reduces the placement risk. With respect to the family level variables we learn the increased household income and number of children in the family reduces the placement risk, just as living in an intact family, but also having lost one's father, decreases the child's placement risk. In contrast, teenagers who live with a stepfather, and who lives with a stepfather after having lost their father, experience an increased placement risk. As with the results from preschool sample we find no significant effect of class membership.

Turning to the effects of the interacted coefficients, we see that class matters once again. First, for the high class teenagers, the age effect is reduced, and there is less of a peak round age 16. Moreover, the positive effect of mother's crime is significantly larger, just as her health (i.e. her visits to the doctor) matters more. Also, mother's employment has a stronger negative effect on the child's placement risk, and for the high class teenagers, having a mother who studies reduces placement risk. And where mother's receipt of early retirement pension significantly increased the placement risk of the low class teenagers, we see that this labor market status decreases the placement risk of the high class teenagers. Only one of the interaction terms between father's characteristics and class status is significant, and it shows that having a father who works has a stronger negative effect on the placement risk of high class teenagers. With respect to the interactions related to the family characteristics we see that household income matters far less for the placement risk of the high class teenagers. However, living with the biological father has a stronger reducing effect for this group, while living with another man than the biological father matters less – i.e. the positive effect is smaller. In addition, while being a low class teenager, whose father is dead and whose mothers live with another man increases the placement risk, this family constellation reduces the placement risk of the high class teenagers.

Whereas these results show how the background characteristics matter for both the high class and the low class teenagers, it seems that the high class teenagers are less robust to the various risk factors in focus in this analysis, i.e. the placement risk varies more by these factors. This is opposite of what we saw for the preschool children.

5. Discussion

The results presented in this paper clearly indicate that social class membership mediates the effect of various background characteristics on a child's placement risk. More specifically, they show that the low class preschool children and the high class teenagers benefit more from parental resources, than the high class preschool children and the low class teenagers. This asymmetrical pattern of findings is somewhat difficult to interpret, as all the theoretical perspectives on class effects predict symmetrical patterns, where one would expect certain findings to be consistent within classes, and not differ across age groups within classes:

The first perspective claims that class difference in resources explain class differences in placement patterns, as increased resources decrease a child's risk of experiencing an out-of-home placement. Thus we should find a direct effect of the child's social class on the probability that he or she experiences an out-of-home placement. However, this perspective holds no potential for explaining age specific class differences. And given the pattern observed in our results, where class matters beyond the direct differences in resources, in addition to the substantial age differences in class effects, this explanation does not seem valid.

The second perspective claims that the general pool of resources of the higher classes act as buffers for problems that may otherwise cause an out-of-home placement. Thus, exposure to risk factors of out-of-home placements matters less for the higher class children/teenagers. An empirical manifestation of this perspective would be significant interactions between the covariates and the class dummy, which all show that belonging to the high class reduces the effect of the covariates on a child's or teenagers placement risk. However, as with the first perspective, this perspective holds no potential for explaining the age differentiated class effects that we find in our analysis. In addition to the lack of hypotheses regarding the age effects, the empirical pattern found in this analysis also does not resemble the one predicted by this second perspective. While we do get significant interactions, there is no evidence of the expectation that risk factors matter less for high class teenagers.

The third perspective claims that differences in parenting and in the acceptance of outside help explain class differences in placement risk. As with the second explanation, this one also predicts significant interactions between the background

characteristics and the class dummy. However, this perspective differs from the first and the second perspective, as it holds the potential for predicting hypotheses concerning the asymmetrical findings. Here, one could claim that parents' resources matter more for the placement risk of the high class teenagers than for the low class teenagers because what causes their out-of-home placement is more directly related to their parents' resources, etc. While these are vague claims, they gain more value when we add the fourth explanation of class differences:

According to the fourth explanation, class differences are manifested through differences in the problems causing the placements. And while the problems which are likely to occur in the low class families – the maltreatment and the substandard parenting – will probably be present from early childhood, the problems of the high class families – depression, anxiety and substance abuse – are more likely to appear in the teenage years. Hence, of all the problems which may cause the out-of-home placement, the problems that are class specific occur at certain phases during childhood and adolescence. And how these problems unfold, during these specific phases in the childhood and adolescence will then depend on the resources of the parents; the extent to which the parents are able to provide additional resources for helping the child, and the way parents interpret the children's problems, all of which are class specific coping resources and strategies.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate if the placement risk varies differently by background characteristics for children/teenagers from low respectively high class families. The empirical analysis revealed significant class differences that were not immediately expected given the theoretical perspectives on class differences in placement patterns. However, one may possibly explain the observed pattern by combining the perspectives and claim that they occur as a result of differences in the problems which cause placements in higher and lower classes, differences in the timing of these problems as well as differences in the way parents handle the problems.

6.1 Limitations and implications

As mentioned, this study produced findings which we cannot easily explain using the presented theoretical perspectives. However, if we had had information on the problems causing the out-of-home placement that would have contributed significantly to clarifying the processes. However, this is one of the major limitations of the administrative data; while this type of data is useful for producing full-scale overviews, it unfortunately only contains information on the people's objective characteristics.

However, bearing these limitations in mind, we find that the paper has made two important contributions. First, the paper shows that the effects of risk factors on children/teenagers placement risks vary by the class position of the child/teenager. This is important knowledge for practitioners who wish to identify the “at risk children” before an out-of-home placement is the only solution. Second, at a more general level, the paper adds to the small literature which emphasizes that also higher class children may develop serious problems which even the high resource families cannot solve on their own.

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ISBN 978-87-90199-45-6

ISSN 0908-3979