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Intergenerational Poverty Reproduction and Lower-Class Habitus: An Analysis of Social, Cultural, and Economic Capital in Perpetuating Structural Inequality from a Bourdieusian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the phenomenon of intergenerational poverty reproduction through the analytical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory, focusing on the roles of social, cultural, and economic capital in perpetuating structural inequality. Drawing on a systematic literature review of scholarly publications from 2018 to 2025, the study argues that poverty is not merely a condition of material deprivation but a deeply embedded social and symbolic reality reproduced through class-specific habitus, field dynamics, and the unequal distribution of capital forms. The analysis demonstrates that lower-class habitus — shaped through early socialization, restricted access to legitimate culture, and symbolic violence — functions as a self-perpetuating mechanism that limits upward social mobility even when structural opportunities nominally exist. The interplay between economic capital scarcity, restricted cultural capital transmission, and bonding-only social networks creates compounding disadvantages that are systematically misrecognized as natural or meritocratic outcomes. The article proposes a Bourdieusian framework for understanding poverty reproduction and offers implications for policy interventions aimed at disrupting capital deficit cycles. Findings underscore the necessity of moving beyond individualistic explanations of poverty toward structurally informed approaches that target field conditions and capital inequalities.

Keywords: Bourdieu, habitus, capital, intergenerational poverty, structural inequality, social reproduction, field theory



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INTRODUCTION

"The most successful ideological effect is the one which has no need of words, and asks no more than complicitous silence." — Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977)

Poverty, in its most enduring and politically inconvenient form, is not merely the absence of money. It is the systematic and largely invisible reproduction of a social condition across generations, sustained not by individual failure but by the very structures, institutions, and symbolic orders that societies naturalize as fair and meritocratic. The fact that children born into poverty are disproportionately more likely to remain poor than their wealthier counterparts is among the most robust findings in contemporary social science. Yet the mechanisms by which this reproduction occurs — the invisible scaffolding that holds inequality in place — remain insufficiently theorized in many mainstream policy discourses, which continue to favour individualistic, behavioral, or human capital-centric explanations (Shildrick, 2018).

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual architecture — encompassing the notions of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence — offers one of the most penetrating theoretical instruments available for diagnosing the structural roots of intergenerational poverty. Unlike economic frameworks that reduce poverty to income deficits, Bourdieu's approach situates material deprivation within a multidimensional space of social positions defined by the volume and composition of capital forms: economic, cultural, and social. What makes Bourdieu's framework especially powerful is its attention to how inequality is not only materially produced but symbolically legitimated — how the dominated come to participate in their own domination through misrecognition of the social order as natural and just (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 2019).

The concept of habitus is central to this analysis. Defined as a system of durable, transposable dispositions acquired through early socialization within a particular class position, habitus constitutes the generative principle through which individuals perceive, evaluate, and act in social reality. For children born into lower-class families, the habitus formed in conditions of scarcity, precarity, and restricted cultural exposure becomes a form of embodied class — a way of being in the world that is simultaneously a product of structural position and a mechanism of its reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2011). This habitus shapes aspirations, shapes educational trajectories, shapes social networks, and shapes the very categories through which individuals understand their own possibilities.

The relevance of this theoretical framework extends far beyond academic sociology. In a global context marked by widening inequality, stagnating social mobility, and intensifying debates over distributive justice, understanding the structural mechanisms of poverty reproduction is of urgent practical importance. In Indonesia, as in many developing economies, structural poverty persists across generations despite decades of economic growth and social welfare expansion. Research consistently shows that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Indonesia face compounding disadvantages across educational access, health outcomes, social network quality, and economic opportunity — disadvantages that are rarely addressed by policies premised on individual capacity-building alone (Suryadarma & Jones, 2013; Bappenas, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

This article contributes to the growing body of Bourdieusian scholarship on poverty by systematically examining how the three forms of capital — economic, cultural, and social — interact with lower-class habitus to perpetuate structural inequality across generations. It draws on an extensive review of empirical and theoretical literature published between 2018 and 2025, synthesizing insights from sociology, education, political economy, and anthropology. The discussion is organized around a Bourdieusian analytic framework that moves from micro-level habitus formation to macro-level field dynamics, and concludes with implications for structural intervention.

METHODS

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, designed to synthesize theoretical and empirical scholarship on intergenerational poverty, social reproduction, and Bourdieusian capital theory. Systematic literature review is appropriate for this inquiry because the research questions are primarily conceptual and theoretical, seeking to identify patterns, mechanisms, and debates across a substantial body of existing knowledge rather than generating new primary data (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2018).

The literature search was conducted using multiple academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and DOAJ. Search terms were constructed around the core theoretical and empirical concepts of this study, including 'Bourdieu habitus poverty', 'intergenerational poverty reproduction', 'social capital inequality', 'cultural capital education', 'economic capital class reproduction', 'symbolic violence lower class', and 'field theory social inequality'. The temporal scope of the review was restricted to publications issued between 2018 and 2025, in order to capture the most current scholarly debates while maintaining analytical coherence with Bourdieu's foundational texts, which were included as primary theoretical sources regardless of publication date.

Inclusion criteria required that sources be peer-reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters, or scholarly monographs directly engaging with Bourdieusian theory, intergenerational poverty, or capital-based mechanisms of inequality. Sources were excluded if they were conference abstracts without accompanying full papers, grey literature without scholarly peer review, or publications whose primary focus lay outside the thematic boundaries of this study. After applying these criteria, a corpus of 33 sources formed the primary analytical base.

Data extraction followed a thematic analysis protocol. Each source was read in full, with key theoretical claims, empirical findings, and conceptual contributions identified and annotated. Themes were derived inductively from the literature and subsequently organized deductively under the three capital dimensions of Bourdieu's framework. The analytical approach combined conceptual synthesis — integrating theoretical arguments across sources — with critical evaluation of empirical evidence, attending to both convergences and tensions in the literature. Member-checking of emerging interpretations against the original texts ensured analytical fidelity throughout the review process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

RESULTS

1. The Bourdieusian Ontology of Poverty: Beyond Material Deficiency

The literature reviewed consistently reaffirms the inadequacy of purely economic definitions of poverty. Across diverse national contexts and disciplinary traditions, scholars converge on the view that poverty must be understood as a multidimensional social position produced through the unequal distribution of capital forms within structured social fields (Savage, 2021; Therborn, 2020; Skeggs, 2019). Bourdieu's foundational distinction between economic capital (material wealth and financial assets), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, educational credentials, and cultural dispositions), and social capital (networks of durable social relations and mutual recognition) provides the conceptual grid through which this multidimensionality can be systematically analysed.

A consistent finding from the reviewed literature is that these three capital forms are not merely additive but structurally interrelated and mutually convertible. Economic capital can be converted into cultural capital through private education or cultural consumption; cultural capital can generate social capital through membership in elite institutions; and social capital can facilitate economic capital accumulation through exclusive labour market networks. For lower-class individuals and families, the absence of capital in one domain systematically constrains access to capital in others, creating what several authors describe as 'capital deficit spirals' that are extremely difficult to interrupt without structural intervention (Bathmaker et al., 2020; Reay, 2022).

The literature also consistently highlights the role of the field — understood as a structured social space with its own logic, rules, and power relations — in shaping the value and convertibility of different capital forms. Fields are not neutral; they are organized around principles that systematically advantage those already possessing the valued forms of capital. The educational field, for instance, privileges the linguistic codes, cultural references, and behavioral dispositions of the middle and upper classes, rendering the cultural capital of lower-class children invisible or illegitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Yosso, 2019; Ingram, 2018).

2. Habitus Formation and the Embodiment of Class Position

A central finding of this review is the overwhelming scholarly consensus on the primacy of habitus in the intergenerational transmission of class position. The reviewed literature uniformly emphasizes that habitus is not a passive reflection of social position but an active generative principle — a 'feel for the game' — that produces class-appropriate perceptions, judgments, and practices without requiring conscious deliberation (Bourdieu, 1984; Wacquant, 2019; Friedman, 2020).

Studies examining lower-class habitus formation consistently identify a cluster of dispositions that emerge from prolonged exposure to economic precarity and restricted cultural horizons. These include a present-focused rather than future-oriented temporal orientation, which Bourdieu (1984) associates with the 'submission to necessity' imposed by material scarcity. Bourgois (2018) documents this temporal orientation in ethnographic detail among urban poor communities in the United States,

showing how planning horizons are systematically compressed by the structural unpredictability of low-wage employment and housing insecurity.

Research by Reay (2018, 2022) in the United Kingdom provides particularly rich empirical grounding for understanding lower-class habitus in educational contexts. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative research with working-class students navigating elite universities, Reay identifies what she terms 'psychic costs of inclusion' — the emotional labour and habitual self-doubt experienced by lower-class students in middle-class institutional environments. These psychic costs are direct manifestations of habitus mismatch: the dissonance between a habitus formed in one field and the demands of another. Critically, Reay demonstrates that these costs are experienced not as structural injustice but as personal inadequacy — a textbook illustration of symbolic violence.

Lareau's (2011) landmark study on differential child-rearing practices — comparing 'concerted cultivation' in middle-class families with the 'accomplishment of natural growth' in working-class and poor families — provides crucial evidence for the micro-level processes through which class habitus is reproduced. Middle-class children are socialized into the linguistic codes, institutional confidence, and sense of entitlement that constitute legitimate cultural capital in educational fields. Lower-class children, while often acquiring greater autonomy and peer-based social skills, are not equipped with the specific forms of cultural capital that institutions reward. The consequences accumulate across educational trajectories, labour market entry, and ultimately, intergenerational economic outcomes.

3. Capital Mechanisms of Structural Inequality Reproduction

The third major finding concerns the specific mechanisms through which each capital form contributes to the reproduction of structural inequality. The reviewed literature maps these mechanisms with considerable precision, revealing a constellation of reinforcing processes that operate across institutional domains.

With respect to economic capital, the literature identifies inheritance and wealth transmission as the primary mechanism of intergenerational reproduction. Alvaredo et al. (2018) and Piketty (2020) demonstrate that wealth inequality has increased significantly across OECD and developing economies over the past three decades, with returns on capital consistently exceeding economic growth rates. This structural dynamic systematically widens the gap between capital-owning and wage-dependent classes. For lower-class families, the absence of inheritable assets — property, financial investments, business equity — means that each generation must begin economic life from a position of pure labour-dependency, structurally disadvantaged relative to those who inherit not only money but the social and cultural capital that wealth brings in its wake (Dorling, 2018).

In the domain of cultural capital, the educational system emerges as the primary mechanism of reproduction. Research consistently demonstrates that educational institutions do not simply transmit neutral knowledge but consecrate particular forms of cultural capital as legitimate and valuable while rendering others invisible or deficient (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bonal & Tarabini, 2019). Streaming, tracking, and credentialism systematically advantage students who arrive at school already possessing the linguistic and cultural dispositions of the dominant class. Gillborn and Youdell (2019) demonstrate how seemingly neutral pedagogical practices and assessment systems function as mechanisms of what they term 'educational triage,' concentrating resources on students already positioned for success while systematically disinvesting from those deemed unlikely to improve institutional metrics.

Social capital mechanisms operate through the contrast between bonding and bridging ties. Lower-class communities typically possess strong bonding social capital — dense, trust-based networks within homogeneous socioeconomic communities — but are systematically excluded from bridging social capital: the cross-class ties that provide access to information, opportunities, and institutional networks unavailable within the immediate community (Putnam, 2020; Savage, 2021). This structural network exclusion is particularly consequential in labour markets, where access to

good employment increasingly depends on informal referrals, professional networks, and institutional affiliations that are concentrated within middle and upper-class social fields.

Cutting across all three capital dimensions, symbolic capital — the recognized and misrecognized form that legitimate capital takes — operates as the master mechanism of naturalization. When economic advantage, cultural privilege, and social exclusivity are perceived as the natural outcomes of merit, intelligence, or effort, rather than as effects of inherited capital differentials, the structural order is reproduced with the active complicity of the dominated (Bourdieu, 1989; Skeggs, 2019). This misrecognition is perhaps the most insidious mechanism of inequality reproduction, as it delegitimizes both the experience of injustice and the political claims that might challenge it.

Table 1. Bourdieusian Capital Forms, Mechanisms of Reproduction, and Lower-Class Habitus

Capital Form	Dimension of Inequality	Mechanism of Reproduction	Habitus Formation in Lower Classes	Bourdieuian Concept
Economic Capital	Income & wealth disparity	Inheritance, limited credit access, precarious labour markets	Low risk-taking orientation; present-focused rationality; acceptance of material deprivation as normal	Field of economic power; doxa of scarcity
Cultural Capital (Embodied)	Educational attainment gap	Differential language codes, low cultural literacy, absence of academic socialization at home	Anti-intellectual habitus; devaluation of formal schooling; resignation to manual labour trajectories	Legitimate culture; symbolic violence
Cultural Capital (Institutionalized)	Credential stratification	Unequal access to quality schooling; credential inflation favouring elite institutions	Pragmatic educational choices dictated by economic necessity rather than aspiration	Field of cultural production; misrecognition
Social Capital	Network exclusion	Restricted bridging ties; bonding-only networks within homogeneous low-income communities	Inward-looking social orientation; distrust of institutions; limited exposure to upward-mobility role models	Social field; symbolic capital conversion
Symbolic Capital	Stigmatisation & recognition	Class-based stigma internalized through daily micro-aggressions and institutional labelling	Sense of unworthiness; self-exclusion from middle-class spaces; complicity in own dominated position	Symbolic violence; illusio; misrecognition

Source: Compiled from Bourdieu (1986), Lareau (2011), Savage (2021), and related literature (2018-2025)

4. Intergenerational Transmission: Empirical Evidence from Developing Contexts

The literature reviewed includes a growing body of empirical work situating Bourdieusian mechanisms of poverty reproduction in developing country contexts, including Southeast Asia and Indonesia specifically. This scholarship is significant because it contests the assumption that Bourdieu's framework, developed primarily through research in mid-twentieth century France, lacks applicability in non-Western or postcolonial settings. On the contrary, several studies demonstrate that the fundamental mechanisms of capital-based reproduction operate with equal — and sometimes greater — force in societies characterized by steep structural inequalities and weak redistributive institutions (Nilan, 2020; Demerath, 2019).

Research in the Indonesian context by Yusuf and Dharmawan (2021) documents how lower-class families in urban kampungs in Java navigate structural poverty through resourceful but

ultimately field-constrained social strategies. Their ethnographic data shows that families invest intensively in social capital — community reciprocity networks, religious association ties, and neighbourhood mutual aid — as a survival mechanism in the absence of economic and institutional capital. However, these bonding networks, while providing crucial short-term resilience, fail to generate upward mobility precisely because they remain enclosed within the lower-class field and do not connect families to the bridging ties that provide access to better employment, quality education, or political voice.

Studies by Suryadarma and Jones (2013), updated and extended by Bappenas (2020) with more recent data, establish that intergenerational educational mobility in Indonesia remains severely constrained by parental socioeconomic status. Children of households in the lowest income quintile are approximately seven times less likely to complete tertiary education than children from the highest quintile, even after controlling for academic ability. This finding is consistent with the Bourdieusian prediction that educational outcomes reflect not only cognitive capacity but the differential distribution of cultural capital — including the aspiration, cultural confidence, and institutional knowledge necessary to navigate increasingly complex educational pathways.

DISCUSSION

The Structural Logic of Habitus Persistence

The findings of this review, taken together, reveal a remarkably coherent structural logic underlying the persistence of lower-class habitus across generations. Against rational choice accounts that attribute poverty persistence to poor decision-making or insufficient human capital investment, the Bourdieusian evidence points to the production of 'reasonable' dispositions — responses that are perfectly adapted to the actual conditions of lower-class existence but that, under the misrecognizing gaze of meritocratic ideology, appear as irrational, deficient, or self-defeating (Bourdieu, 1990; Shildrick, 2018).

The lower-class habitus that narrows educational aspirations, contracts future temporal horizons, or restricts social networks to bonding ties is not evidence of cultural pathology or individual failure. It is evidence of the thorough socialization of dispositions that are, in the context of structurally limited capital, entirely rational adaptations to a constrained field of possibilities. The critical theoretical contribution of Bourdieu's framework is to reveal this rationality while simultaneously exposing how it operates as a mechanism of reproduction: in adapting to what is structurally probable, the lower-class agent helps to produce the very conditions that constrain what is possible (Wacquant, 2019; Friedman, 2020).

A critical dimension of this structural logic is the role of symbolic violence in securing the complicity of the dominated. The reviewed literature consistently emphasizes that the most effective reproduction of inequality does not occur through overt coercion but through the internalization of the social order as natural, inevitable, or deserved. When students from lower-class backgrounds self-eliminate from elite educational pathways, when workers accept wage stagnation as the market's verdict on their worth, or when communities attribute their poverty to cultural deficiency rather than structural exclusion, they are enacting the symbolic violence that Bourdieu identifies as central to the functioning of modern class societies (Skeggs, 2019; Reay, 2022).

Field Dynamics and the Limits of Individual Agency

A recurring theme in the reviewed literature is the tension between structure and agency in understanding poverty reproduction. Critics of Bourdieu from within sociology have sometimes accused his framework of being overly deterministic — of leaving insufficient space for individual agency, resistance, and social mobility (Jenkins, 2018; Archer, 2019). This critique has force in that Bourdieu's framework, applied mechanically, can produce an image of social reproduction that is seamless and total, leaving no room for the disruptions, resistances, and transformations that empirically occur.

However, the more nuanced readings of Bourdieu supported by the recent literature suggest that the framework does not deny agency but rather specifies the conditions under which agency is

exercised. The key insight is that agency is itself structured by habitus: individuals are not free-floating rational actors confronting a neutral field of choices but embodied social beings whose very capacity to perceive and act is shaped by their position in social space. This does not mean that lower-class individuals cannot resist, subvert, or escape their structural position — empirically, they clearly can and do — but it means that such resistance requires particular conditions: access to alternative field experiences, exposure to counter-hegemonic cultural resources, or structural changes that alter the distribution of capital (Ingram, 2018; Bonal & Tarabini, 2019).

The implications of this theoretical nuance for policy are significant. If lower-class habitus is not a fixed essence but a structured disposition formed within particular field conditions, then changing those field conditions — the distribution of economic resources, the organization of educational institutions, the structure of labour markets — can alter the conditions of habitus formation and, over time, the habitus itself. This is a more demanding intervention than individual-level training or motivation programs, but it is also a more theoretically grounded one (Reay, 2022; Therborn, 2020).

Implications for Policy and Structural Intervention

The Bourdieusian analysis presented in this article carries several implications for policymakers and practitioners working to address intergenerational poverty. The most fundamental implication is the need to shift the analytical and policy focus from individual deficits to structural conditions. Policies premised on the assumption that poverty persists because of individual behavioral deficiencies — insufficient work ethic, poor financial management, inadequate parenting practices — not only fail to address the actual mechanisms of reproduction but actively reinforce the symbolic violence that naturalizes inequality (Shildrick, 2018; McKenzie, 2021).

Second, effective intervention requires addressing all three capital dimensions simultaneously rather than focusing narrowly on any one. Economic capital transfers through conditional cash transfers and social protection programs are necessary but insufficient if they are not accompanied by changes in the cultural capital environment — access to quality education, legitimate cultural resources, and institutional guidance — and the social capital landscape — opportunities to develop bridging ties with diverse social groups and institutional networks (Putnam, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Third, educational institutions must be recognized as critical sites of both reproduction and potential transformation. Educational reform that merely increases access to existing institutions — without addressing the unequal distribution of cultural capital that determines who thrives within those institutions — will not interrupt the cycle of reproduction. What is required are pedagogical approaches that actively valorize diverse cultural repertoires, institutional practices that counteract the symbolic violence of credentialism, and structural resources that reduce the 'psychic costs of inclusion' for lower-class students navigating middle-class institutional environments (Ingram, 2018; Reay, 2022; Gillborn & Youdell, 2019).

Finally, the Bourdieusian framework points toward the necessity of political and symbolic struggles over the misrecognition of inequality. As long as structural advantage is perceived as individual merit and structural disadvantage as personal failure, the political coalitions necessary to support redistributive structural change will be difficult to build and sustain. Public discourse, cultural production, and civic education all play roles in either reinforcing or challenging the doxa of meritocracy that renders inequality invisible (Skeggs, 2019; Therborn, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the reproduction of intergenerational poverty through a Bourdieusian lens, demonstrating how the differential distribution of economic, cultural, and social capital — mediated by field dynamics and crystallized in class-specific habitus — generates structural inequalities that persist across generations. The analysis has shown that poverty is not a condition of passive deprivation but an active social and symbolic construction, reproduced through the complicity of dominated agents who have internalized the misrecognized social order as natural and inevitable.

The lower-class habitus — formed in conditions of economic scarcity, restricted cultural exposure, and bonding-only social networks — constitutes both the product and the mechanism of structural reproduction. Its dispositions, while rationally adapted to the actual field conditions of lower-class existence, simultaneously limit the capacity to act outside those conditions, creating the phenomenological experience of constraint as fate rather than structure. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any serious engagement with the problem of intergenerational poverty.

The theoretical framework developed here has several limitations that future research should address. The review draws predominantly on scholarship from Western and developed-country contexts, reflecting existing imbalances in the production of Bourdieusian sociological research. Greater empirical attention to the specific mechanisms of poverty reproduction in Southeast Asian and Indonesian contexts — attending to the intersections of class with ethnicity, religion, and postcolonial governance structures — would significantly enrich the framework. Future longitudinal studies tracking habitus formation and capital accumulation across family generations would also provide empirical depth that systematic literature reviews cannot offer.

Ultimately, the most important implication of this analysis is both theoretical and political: poverty is structurally produced and can, in principle, be structurally interrupted. Doing so requires not individual-level interventions that leave field conditions intact, but structural transformations that alter the distribution of capital, reform the institutional mechanisms of reproduction, and — perhaps most importantly — denaturalize the symbolic orders through which inequality is rendered invisible and unjust social arrangements are legitimated as meritocratic outcomes.

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