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## The Role of Families in Reproducing Inequalities

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### Abstract

Families play an important role in the raising of the next generation, acting as the primary agent of socialisation. The raising of this next generation is affected by the different forms of capital, cultural, social, and economic, that the family is able to pass down to the next generation. Differences in the capital being transmitted from one generation to the next, as well as the role family plays in shaping the next generation for society, leads to a reproduction of inequalities along familial lines. Through reviewing other literature written about this topic on each of the different forms of capital, this essay seeks to present the reproduction of inequality via each type of capital, and how it intersects in the reproduction of inequality by families.

### Author Note

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In this essay, I seek to investigate the role of family as an agent of socialisation, the various aspects of socialisation that it affects, and how it influences inequality within society, specifically how it helps to reinforce economic inequalities across generations, leading to intergenerational wealth and poverty. Looking into this topic, I will first attempt to define family, and its role as the primary agent of socialisation. I will then look at how family reinforces economic inequalities via the transmission of cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital, as well as reinforcement of social roles.

The definitions of what is a family can vary and is subjective to what purpose we are defining the family for and our values regarding family, while the role of the family can be debated on from many angles. For this essay, a family would be defined as a social group usually bound by blood, marriage, adoption, or cohabitation. (Bureau, 2024) This definition can include many different types of families, although the one most researched is that of the traditional nuclear family. Whilst research in family sociology has slowly moved on from that of the traditional nuclear family and viewing family through a functionalist lens, it continues to be the reference point for most contemporary research. (Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021) Looking at the family through a functionalist lens, the role of the traditional nuclear family is twofold, to act as emotional support for its adult members, and to act as the primary agent of socialisation, where the family serves as a ‘factory of personality’, imbuing children with values that allow them to later meet the needs and expectations of society. (Kleve & Köllner, 2023) It is the latter, the function of being the primary agent of socialisation, that this essay would like to investigate further.

The transmission of cultural capital from parent to child helps to set up the foundations of how the child interacts and views society, upon which the child builds upon which can affect their future socioeconomic status. Cultural capital can come in many ways, but can be largely classified as incorporated, institutional, or objectified. Objectified cultural capital refers to the physical objects and can easily be converted to and from economic capital. Institutional capital refers to the educational achievements accredited by academic institutions; the recognition given to a person by elite institutions. Incorporated capital refers to the disposition a person has towards such items, and takes a long time to accumulate, with the process taking place in early childhood from a person’s family of origin. (Georg, 2004) The process of accumulating incorporated capital from the family of origin also leads to the development of habitus, a set of acquired dispositions, through which one perceives society and their prospects within it. (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) While

cultural capital and habitus can change later in life, and indeed does do so more meritocratically after secondary education (Georg, 2004), they tend to prefer stability, with large changes after primary socialisation, largely through the family of origin, unlikely as future experiences are viewed through the lenses of existing cultural capital and habitus. (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) When it comes to future socioeconomic status, cultural capital not only is used to ensure status and reproduction of said status for those in high socioeconomic standing, but also as a means of upwards social mobility for those from lower classes. (Georg, 2004) For children from middle- and upper-class families, the cultural capital and habitus conferred to them from family allows them to have certain attitudes and abilities that help them do better academically and go on to pursue further education. Conversely, children of working-class families who lack the cultural capital and habitus that lets them succeed academically tend to be less successful in school and tend to drop out of the education system earlier. Alternatively, working-class children can pick up cultural capital from the education system, allowing them to be successful academically and continue to pursue further education, providing social mobility for working-class children. (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) It is also seen that class inequalities in education performance tend to increase as the children age (Andersen & Hansen, 2011), so the advantage gained earlier in life by children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds via cultural capital could go on to affect their lives greatly by the end of education. However, considering that the primary socialisation provided by family sets the cultural capital and habitus from which the child views future circumstances, children from middle- and upper-class families have an advantage over those from working-class families when it comes to cultural capital and habitus, which can give them future advantages in job prospects, securing their socioeconomic status. Overall, the transmission of cultural capital within families from parent to child is affected by the socioeconomic background of the family, and the impacts of cultural capital on how a child develops can affect their future socioeconomic status, leading to family transmission of cultural capital largely reinforcing economic inequalities across generations.

The transmission of social capital from parent to child within the family provides the child with social connections, and the knowledge of how to use those connections, providing them resources and opportunities to maintain their socioeconomic status. Social capital can be defined as investing in and using resources found in social relations to receive returns. (Lin, 2000) When it comes to future job prospects, social capital can play a twofold role via different mechanisms. Firstly, the direct use of one's social network resources can be used to gain advantages in the job

market, such as having information regarding job prospects or getting referrals to hirers for certain positions. Secondly, one's social network has indirect influence on one's entry into the labour market, as people tend to avoid taking up a class positions worse off than that of others in their social network. This leads to motivations and expectations for those with high social capital, having social networks with those of higher socioeconomic status, with regards to education and occupation, driving them to seek better education and jobs. (Verhaeghe et al., 2015) Having high social capital provides a person motivation to seek better paying jobs, and more resources to do so, which can lead to higher socioeconomic status. Social capital can also be split into strong and weak ties, with family being a strong tie, being differentiated by the strength of the relationship. While weak ties were of better use at finding information about jobs and landing an initial job, strong ties were more instrumental in the acquisition of better jobs, with strong ties being able to provide more resources. There is also a strong correlation between the education level and socioeconomic status of parents, and the social capital of their children, especially with regards to strong ties. (Verhaeghe et al., 2015) This ties in with how people tend to form social networks, with those from similar groups, those of similar socioeconomic status. (Lin, 2000) The ability to use and sustain social networks is also affected by one's socioeconomic status. (Cleaver, 2005) All of this is affected by the socioeconomic status of the family, in terms of a child's parents. In the early stages of socialisation, the parents' socioeconomic status can affect the social capital a child has available to work with later in life, having a significant impact on when the child enters the labour market, and what type of occupational class they end up in. (Verhaeghe et al., 2015) Families of lower socioeconomic status also tend to be smaller and have fewer existing ties (Cleaver, 2005), leading to less social capital being passed on. Overall, social capital plays a huge role in the future job prospects and education level attained by a person, and the socioeconomic status of a person's parents greatly affects how much and what type of social capital a person accrues, in terms of both who the connections are with, and the scale of the network one is able to sustain.

The transmission of economic capital from parent to child within the family, as well as the use of economic capital in the upbringing of the child, provides the child not only financial resources, but also other material resources and knowledge that can be bought using economic capital, and the knowledge and confidence in using those financial resources. Whilst cultural capital can be bought using economic capital (Georg, 2004), and social capital is influenced by socioeconomic status (Lin, 2000), thus indirectly economic capital, there are other areas that transmission of economic capital from parent to child affects. When it comes to transmission of

economic capital, the most noticeable effect would be the inheritance of financial resources. Parents in households of higher socioeconomic status, with higher levels of income, tend to have higher levels of saving, and leave behind larger bequests for their children, providing children in the household with more assets and the continued maintenance of large estates. (De Nardi, 2004) While bequests and gifts are highly focused on, they tend to come later in life, and most of the advantages that come from family wealth start much earlier in life. (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2017) In particular, not just from parent to child, but also from grandparent to grandchild, investments by family that shape the early adulthood of descendants, especially investments in education, tend to pay off more and achieve higher returns, having more time to appreciate. (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2017) In education particularly, there is a correlation between a family's socioeconomic status and the educational attainment of the child, with children from lower socioeconomic status families having poorer academic performance and aspirations. This could be due to less conducive environments for education found in families of lower socioeconomic status, and the lower financial ability to provide for better quality education. (Fergusson et al., 2008) This inequality regarding education that arises from unequal economic capital can go on to become inequality in jobs and income, leading to perpetuation of differences in socioeconomic status. Another aspect that comes with the transmission of economic capital is that it helps to provide a safety net for investments, and the effect that it has on the child's financial decision making. Education is positively correlated to a child's future financial decision making, alongside having greater financial security, leading to the child being more willing to have financial investments in high-return assets. Family wealth can also be invested in descendant's' homeownership and marriage, investments during early adulthood which are also correlated to higher wealth growth in the future. (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2017) Overall, the transmission of economic capital by the family to descendants, not limited to just between parent and child, but also including extended family, as well as the investment of family wealth into descendants, especially in education and other early adulthood milestones, sets foundations for the building of wealth by the descendants.

Whilst we have looked at the transmission of cultural, social, and economic capital within family, and how families of differing socioeconomic statuses face inequality due to differences in ability to transmit capital, there are also differences in how family transmits the capital between family members based on gender. Acting as the primary agent of socialisation, the socialisation of gender is part of the role of the family, affecting not only how the family distributes capital, but also how socialisation of gender roles affect future earning potential for women. There are

significant disadvantages regarding the acquirement of social capital for women. Men end up having more social capital related to occupations in the economic sectors, while women acquired more social capital related to domestic and community affairs. This places women to be more dependent on social capital from the family, which tends to be homogenous class-wise for social capital, limiting the ability of women to acquire social capital that improves their position. (Georg, 2004) There also continues to be a gender pay gap and an underrepresentation of women in the workforce (Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021), due to expectations socialised by the family for females to participate in domestic work. (Kleve & Köllner, 2023) Overall, the family, in distributing capital unequally between genders, and socialisation of gender roles, does lead to inequality between genders.

In conclusion, the transmission of cultural, social, and economic capital within the family from elders to descendants provide the descendants with financial resources, social networks, the knowledge of how to utilise those resources and networks, and the motivations and expectations to use what has been provided to attain and maintain higher economic status. The continued ability of families from higher socioeconomic status to pass down more capital to their descendants, to invest more in the development of their childhood and early adulthood, helps to build foundations for said descendants to achieve similarly high socioeconomic status, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds lack access to capital to build as solid a foundation. The role that family plays in socialisation of gender also plays a role, leading to intersectionality for women, as the unequal roles and capital are distributed between gender roles. Through this unequal access to capital based off one's family socioeconomic standing, the family as an agent of socialisation reinforces economic inequalities across generations, leading to intergenerational wealth and poverty.

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