



## Family “Capital” and Young People’s Educational-Occupational Choices in the Context of a Review of Recent Sociological Literature

Georgia Spiliopoulou

ORCID: 0000-0002-5588-0557 • ResearcherID: U-1511-2017

Gerasimos Koustourakis

ORCID: 0000-0001-8499-5399

Anna Asimaki

ORCID: 0000-0002-0518-4123

*University of Patras, School of Humanities and Social Sciences*

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### *Abstract*

Family constitutes the first group in which socialization takes place and within it the young person’s primary system of perceptions and thoughts, as well as his ‘repertoire’ of attitudes, choices and actions, is constructed. The purpose of this study is the investigation and presentation of the influence of family “capital” on the formation of young people’s educational-occupational choices through a review of recent sociological literature. From the study and analysis of the content and the research findings of relevant scientific papers the influence of family “capital” (cultural capital/habitus, economic and social capital) on the formation of young people’s educational-occupational choices in relation to their social origin emerges. In particular, it seems that habitus, through its reproductive and its transformative function, guides young people who come from socio-culturally more or less privileged environments in the formation of educational-occupational decisions and choices in order to maintain or transform their position in the social structure.

**Keywords:** family “capital”, habitus, reproductive function, transformative function, educational choices of students.

### 1. Introduction

Family, which constitutes the first group within which the young person is socialized, has a decisive effect on the formation of personality and the shaping of the system of perceptions, preferences and choices (Giddens, 2002; Hughes & Kroehler, 2007; Nova-Kaltsouni, 1998). It seems that researchers active in the field of the Sociology of Education are engaged in the issue of social and educational inequalities in relation to the socio-cultural origin of students (Kyridis, 1996, 1997; Lamnias, 2001; Matěakejů & Straková, 2005; Pyrgiotakis, 1998; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006, 2010). That’s why research interest focuses on the educational success and the educational-occupational choices and opportunities of young people. More particularly, many studies examine the influence of particular factors, which contribute to the educational course and educational success of young people, as well as to the choices concerning their educational and occupational

future. In this context, there are some studies which examine the contribution of socialization and pedagogical practices, applied within the family context, to the educational course of children (see: Colpin, Vandemeulebroecke, & Ghesquière, 2004; Vincent, Ball, & Braun, 2010; Vincent, Ball, & Kemp, 2004). Moreover, study interest focuses on the investigation of the influence of the educational route of students and the cooperative relationships that develop between students' parents and teachers (see: Levine-Rasky, 2009; McClure & Walker, 2000; Seyfried & Chung, 2002). Also, the discriminations and inequalities students are likely to experience in school according to their social, national, racial and religious origin attract researchers' attention (see: Levy & Massalha, 2010; Rankin & Aytac, 2008; Rogers, 2007). In addition, research interest focuses on the investigation of the relationship between the educational choices of students and the various forms of family “capital”, such as cultural and social capital (see: Bodovski, 2010; Green & Vryonides, 2005; Heath, Fuller, & Johnston, 2010).

This paper attempts to investigate the influence of family “capital” on children's choices concerning their educational and occupational future. In particular, our interest focuses on the answer to the following question: *How is the influence of family “capital” on the formation of educational-occupational choices of young people presented in the context of recent sociological scientific studies?*

For the construction of the content of this paper, which is developed after the section on theoretical references, we focused our interest on the approach to and study of relevant scientific literature. This guided us to define the following sections which are related to the thematic categorization of the papers we studied. The present paper closes with some concluding observations.

## 2. Theoretical pointings out

The approach to the theme which is under investigation is directly related to the use of the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu. More particularly, the notion of capital possesses a central position in Bourdieu's theoretical construction (1977b, 1986, 1990). Capital “does not exist and function except in relation to a field” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 101; Wacquant, 1989: 39) and is effective within the confines of this field, whereas it is converted to another type of capital under certain conditions (Bourdieu, 1993: 73).

According to Bourdieu (1986: 243), capital can exist in the following forms: (a) As *economic* capital, which was directly converted into money, and it may be institutionalized in the form of property rights. (b) As *cultural* capital, which is convertible under certain conditions into economic capital, and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. (c) As *social* capital, which is related to social “connections” convertible to economic capital under certain conditions, and which may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. And, (d) as *symbolic* capital, which is related to resources available to the individual on the basis of “prestige” and “honor” and contributes to their growth. However, according to Bourdieu, all types of capital (economic, cultural and social) can function in the form of symbolic capital if they have explicit and practical recognition (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 2002).

Cultural capital, which constitutes a central notion in Bourdieu's theory, could be defined as “cumulative capabilities and opportunities of the family to cultivate the most valued social knowledge, sensitivities and ways of thought and action”. Namely, it concerns “a corpus de savoir, de savoir-faire” and mainly “de savoir-dire” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964: 36-37; Lamnias, 2001: 157; Milonas, n.d., 211). Specifically, Bourdieu (1977b, 1986, 1994a) discerns three forms of cultural capital: the embodied form – habitus, the objectified form and institutionalized cultural capital in the form of educational credentials (a form of socialization).

Cultural capital in its embodied form is acquired through a long process of inculcation and incorporation, and it presupposes investment in time from the person himself. It is directly

related to the body of the individual in the form of dispositions, since it constitutes ‘a have that became a be, an hexis’ (Accardo, 1991: 88; Bourdieu, 1994a: 78). Habitus, ‘the endless capacity to engender products –thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions– whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its own production’ (Bourdieu, 1977b: 95, as cited in James, 2009: 317), provides a theoretical link between objective social structures and subjective perceptions of the world (James, 2009: 317).

Objectified cultural capital includes visible cultural goods that can be inherited, such as paintings and books. Comprehension and “consumption” of cultural goods is related to the embodied cultural capital the social subject possesses (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu, 1994a: 81-82; Lamnias, 2001: 158).

Institutionalized cultural capital is acquired in the context of educational institutions and is legalized in the form of educational credentials obtained by students after their successful graduation from these institutions. This form of cultural capital reveals the history and the course of the individual across the educational system (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamnias, 2001: 158).

From Bourdieu’s theoretical framework it emerges that social inequalities in educational success are traced to the social distribution of cultural capital. In this regard, educational reproduction leads to social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977a; Symeou, 2007: 475). Bourdieu and his collaborators, in the context of their studies on the educational system, initially used the notion of cultural capital in order to explain the degree of educational success of children whose parents have high educational qualifications. These children hold a privileged position in school due to the help they receive from their parents, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, due to the familiarity they acquire with “highbrow” culture (Prieur, Rosenlund, & Skjott-Larsen, 2008: 47). In fact, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979: 17) mention in a characteristic way:

*Not only do the most privileged students derive from their background of origin habits, skills, and attitudes which serve them directly in their scholastic tasks, but they also inherit from it knowledge and know-how, tastes, and a “good taste” whose scholastic profitability is no less certain for being indirect.*

So, according to Bourdieu (1986: 243), academic success concerns “the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market”.

In the course of this paper, the categorization of the review of scientific literature according to the thematic content of relevant studies is presented. Also, in each thematic categorization we will focus our interest on the brief presentation of the findings of some characteristic studies.

### 3. Choice of higher education studies

There is great interest, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon space, in the investigation of young people’s educational choices in the field of higher education. In particular, studies which focus on the United Kingdom place emphasis on the examination of the effects which are due to family socio-economic and cultural factors regarding the definition of its members’ higher education choices. Increased participation in the British higher education system, with its gradual transition from an ‘elitist’ to a ‘mass’ system, advantages socio-culturally privileged young people. So, class inequalities, whose preservation operates against socio-culturally underprivileged people, seem to remain intense (see: Iannelli, 2007; Machin & Vignoles, 2004; Pugsley, 1998; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Watson, 2013). It seems that the current British higher education system remains as stratified as it was in the past, offering an additional advantage to socio-culturally privileged people, who already enjoy many advantages (Blackledge & Hunt, 2002). Moreover, the specific educational system could be parallel and correspond to the French stratified educational system that Bourdieu describes in his theory (Reay et al., 2001: 858).

In the Greek educational system, access and the degree of participation of young people in tertiary education has expanded offering more chances and opportunities to students from socio-culturally less privileged environments to be admitted to tertiary education. However, the representation of social classes in the field of higher education, which presents characteristics of social stratification, remains uneven (Kyridis, 1996, 1997; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006, 2010).

The education system, which appears meritocratic on the surface, actually perpetuates and reproduces existing socio-economic and cultural inequalities, because it includes, on the one hand, a hidden value system which privileges people from backgrounds with high socio-economic status, who are “de facto” privileged from a socio-economic point of view. And, on the other hand, people, whose habitus, which is opposed to the “legitimate habitus” means they have a lower socio-economic status, consciously follow a course which excludes them from the educational field while also denying them any future chance of contact with this field (Bourdieu, 1977a; Dumais, 2006: 86).

In his work *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*, Bourdieu states characteristically (1977a: 494):

*...the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it doesn't give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture.*

In this regard, equal educational opportunities and prospects for every student alike is a myth, since socio-economic and cultural inequalities seem to be perpetuated and reproduced in the educational field (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1984).

#### 4. Social origin, forms of family “capital” and students' educational-occupational choices

Recent sociological studies reveal that family habitus combined with the families' possession of economic and social capital play a significant role in the formation of the educational-occupational choices of young people from middle-class and working-class backgrounds. This is related to the use of the family's social “connections” which seem to contribute to the occupational choices and outlets followed by its young members (see: Green & Vryonides, 2005; Pugsley, 1998; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009, 2011; Tavares, Tavares, Justino, & Amaral, 2008; Vryonides, 2007; Waters & Brooks, 2010).

In particular, young people of working-class origin, whose family environment can't offer them ‘effective’ social, economic and cultural capital, tend to choose more “secure” and “compromised” educational and occupational solutions. In contrast, young people of middle-class origin, whose families possess a great volume of cultural, social and economic capital, are guided to choose high status studies in the social and academic hierarchy, such as medicine and law. This is imprinted in the major classification of the university field concerning “*les Grandes et les Petites Écoles*”, as well as the “homology” of working-class young people who choose “*la petite porte des Petites Écoles*” and middle-class young people who choose “*la grande porte des Grandes Écoles*” (Bourdieu, 1989: 188). Also, it seems that a large number of middle-class young people choose to study in prestigious university institutions in order to use institutionalized cultural capital, acquired in the form of undergraduate degrees and postgraduate diplomas, as a means of reproduction of their social advantages and maintenance of their privileged position in the social field (Azaola, 2012; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Green & Vryonides, 2005; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2006; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2010).

Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides' study (2011) conducted during the academic year 2008-2009 with first-year university students in the Medical School and Department of Primary School Education at the University of Ioannina in Greece is representative. The research findings showed that family habitus, the uncertain economic positions of the parents' occupation and the restricted economic resources of the family, combined with the general financial context and the labor market conditions, contribute significantly to the "compromises" working-class students make in order to choose their academic destination. So, students from working-class backgrounds, whose families possess a low volume of economic capital, choose a department which leads them to a low-status, permanent occupation in the public sector. Moreover, from the research it emerges that these students are looking for "secure" educational and occupational outlets. This is because they know that their family's limited social capital can activate very few social "connections" in order for them to find a job after graduation. In contrast, middle-class students motivated by the symbolic and material benefits their occupational employment could offer them in the future, choose to study medicine. A strong factor which affects this educational choice is their "disposition" towards medicine, that is to say, it has to do with the sense that this scientific field constitutes a "natural" continuation of their educational course throughout history. That's why the specific students stated that they want to use educational credentials as 'a form of exchange value' allowing them to "exchange their education for prestigious jobs, financial security, social power and cultural prestige" (Labaree, 1997: 31, as cited in Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2011: 98).

In the context of current Greek social reality, characterized by the severe social consequences of the economic crisis, there is strong competition among lyceum students in order to enter institutions which seem to guarantee more occupational opportunities, such as Medicine, Law and Polytechnic Schools (Tsikalaki & Kladi-Kokkinou, 2016: 66). In this case, it seems that students who come from socio-culturally advantaged environments have increased their chances for admission to these Schools. That's why their families invest a great volume of economic capital in private tutoring provided to their children outside of the school system. In this way, they aim to transform their economic capital into cultural capital, which is expected to be institutionalized in the form of a prestigious university degree by their children (Bourdieu, 1986, 1994a; Jæger, 2007: 532; Koustourakis & Asimaki, 2011: 615). Although there is increased participation of socially disadvantaged students in the process of entering tertiary education, it is still quite difficult for them to prepare for the entrance examinations because they don't have a family safety net which could support their educational effort (Koustourakis & Asimaki, 2011). So, there is a significant percentage of students in this social category who don't try to enter tertiary education, because their family cannot afford to support their entrance preparation, or the long-term studies which would follow. Furthermore, students from socially underprivileged family environments don't expect to improve their social position through higher level studies because of the high unemployment rates that affect young people who hold tertiary education credentials in Greece (Tsikalaki & Kladi-Kokkinou, 2016: 65-66).

##### 5. Reproductive function of habitus and students' educational-occupational choices

Many studies with a sociological character reveal the effect of cultural capital and habitus on the educational success of young people in relation to their social origin. Such a fact seems to confirm Bourdieu's theory of "cultural reproduction" (see: Davies, Qiu, & Davies, 2014; Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Mullen, 2009; Noble & Davies, 2009; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009, 2011; Symeou, 2007; Thompson, 2009; Wakeling, 2005; Waters & Brooks, 2010). In particular, it emerges that dispositions children inherit from their families are imprinted on their educational success and on the way they plan their future throughout their educational and occupational choices. This comes about because families can be classified according to their social origin, since it seems that families who belong to the same social class share structurally similar positions within the social world, and internalize similar experiences of

social relations (Maton, 2008: 53). So, young people who come from socio-culturally advantaged environments seem to inherit a habitus which corresponds to the “legitimate culture”. In this regard, the family habitus of the specific young people reinforces them with certainty and self-confidence and guides them to choose higher education studies which usually have a high level of prestige. On the other hand, the family environment of young people from working-class backgrounds doesn't usually provide them with the opportunity to become familiar with educational stimuli. Therefore, they make less ambitious educational choices and as a result when they choose to study in higher education they integrate into lower-status academic institutions (see: Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Maton, 2008; Mullen, 2009; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009, 2011; Waters & Brooks, 2010).

Mullen's study (2009), which showed that the cultural capital of higher socio-economic status parents plays a significant role in their children's study in elite institutions in the United States, such as an Ivy League university, is indicative. In fact, parents from privileged backgrounds, through their personal experience of study in elite institutions and their acquisition of a strong body of knowledge, inculcate the belief in their children that Ivy League institutions constitute appropriate destinations for studies. On the contrary, parents from socially underprivileged environments who don't have personal experience of higher education studies express doubts about the suitability of high-status academic institutions for their children's studies. Therefore, a number of less privileged young people don't try to enter high-status academic institutions, such as an Ivy League university, because they don't feel comfortable attending them.

In that case, the sense of comfort and familiarity which characterizes young people of middle-class origin concerning the choice of study at university institutions is combined with the statement that university level studies constitute a “natural” continuation throughout their educational course. This is in contrast to the unfamiliarity young people of working-class origin usually feel about their decisions and their choices to study at a university institution (Mullen, 2009; Reay, 1998; Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2010; Vryonides, 2007; Watson, Nind, Humphris, & Borthwick, 2009). Students, whose parents don't ‘bring’ educational-cultural qualifications and experiences of university studies, internalize the belief that the higher education field “is not for them” (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dumais, 2006: 85; Maton, 2008). In this case, they are self-excluded from entrance to academic institutions, a fact which contributes to the reproduction of social stratification. In other words, they function according to self-selection which has characteristics of a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Dumais, 2006: 85), and which results in their “reconfinment” in family working-class culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964: 110).

#### 6. Transformative function of habitus and young people's educational-occupational choices

Although there are many studies whose findings confirm Bourdieu's theory of “cultural reproduction”, other studies show conflicting results. In this case, it seems that the cultural capital and habitus that young people who come from socio-culturally underprivileged environments have acquired from their family, follow a social mobility model. Namely, they don't follow a reproductive model, as Bourdieu suggests in his theory, a fact which is imprinted on their high educational-occupational expectations and choices (Baker & Brown, 2007; Flere, Krajnc, Klanjšek, Musil, & Kirbiš, 2010; Lehmann, 2009; Watson et al., 2009). It seems that the social environment of socio-culturally underprivileged families, which is limited in opportunities and prospects for development, urges young people to restructure their schemes of thought and perception, and as a result they are guided to higher education choices so as to ensure improved chances and prospects of upward educational, social and occupational mobility in the future (Accardo, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Swingewood, 1998).

Baker & Brown's research (2007), conducted in 'traditional' UK universities and according to which it emerged that 'non-traditional' students from socio-culturally underprivileged environments have adopted a middle-class "disposition" towards higher education and stand in favour of "good" Universities, is characteristic. These students shaped a habitus which enabled them to pass through social and educational environments, which are significantly differentiated from the experiences they had acquired during childhood within the family environment. In this regard, the structures of young people's habitus are not "set" but evolve in relation to their position within the evolving social field (Accardo, 1991: 91-92; Laberge, 1995; Maton, 2008: 53). So, young people develop evolving ways of thought and action, which are imprinted on 'reversible' educational choices in relation to their social origin (Bourdieu, 1990; Maton, 2008: 53; Swingewood, 1998). It should be mentioned that Bourdieu defines the individual as agent, determined to some extent by objective structures, and as a controlled free and independent subject (acteur) who has an 'infinite' capacity for creative choices. In other words, it concerns the link between the objective and subjective which is imprinted on the practice of social subjects (Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014: 127).

The difficult social conditions young people from socio-culturally underprivileged environments experience, combined with the 'negative' working experiences of their parents, can lead them to invest in education, using the full extent of opportunities and benefits it offers. They do this so as to transform and/or improve their social structure in the context of existing social stratification (Accardo, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lehmann, 2009; Swingewood, 1998). So, in this case, the habitus of young people, which is dynamically productive (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), can have a collective nature as a product of collective class-based practices, whereas at the same time it can be transformed and adapted. This is because social experiences accumulated in the context of the individual's historic route can contribute to the transformation of his dispositions, expectations and choices about his individual future, affecting his educational and occupational choices (Bodovski, 2014: 392; Bourdieu, 1977b).

In this framework, Lehmann's study (2009) conducted in 2005 with students at a Canadian University is representative. The research findings showed that working-class students chose to study at University so as to have the chance of upward social mobility. It seems that the ambitions of their parents contributed to their goals, since they wanted their children to improve their social position by gaining a better future. In fact, the conclusions students from working-class backgrounds reached about the difficult working conditions of their parents and their limited socio-economic opportunities, led them to shape strong dispositions about occupations which diverge from the restricted occupational "pathways" of their parents. So, the choice of university studies constitutes for these students a "vehicle" for upward social mobility.

Therefore, from the studies which reveal the transformative function of habitus it seems that young people who come from socio-culturally underprivileged environments struggle to enter the university field and try to "break" the barriers of their admission to it by transforming the habitus they have acquired from their family (Bourdieu, 1984: 116; Bourdieu, 1993: 74).

## 7. Concluding observations

According to what we examined above, we come to the following conclusions:

- Family "capital" (cultural capital/habitus, economic and social capital) seems to play a significant role in the formation of the educational-occupational choices of young people in relation to their social origin. In particular, it emerged that the family environment, reinforced with educational-cultural stimuli, which constitutes 'the main "site" of accumulation of different forms of capital and their transmission to the next generation' (Bourdieu, 1994b: 143), combined with the investment of financial resources and the use of an expanded network of social

“connections” for ensuring educational benefits, contribute to the choice process of middle-class young people in favour of educational-occupational options that are high in the social and academic hierarchy.

- According to a series of studies, young people who come from socio-culturally more privileged environments tend to choose prestigious university studies, such as medicine, considering that these choices constitute a “natural” step, a part of their inheritance. In other words, they think that the choice of higher education studies corresponds to their system of dispositions (*habitus*) in the sense that the generative rules within the university field – its unwritten “rules of the game” – are homologous to their own *habitus*. In this case, young people internalize the objective opportunities given in the university field and they come to choose the “fate” that is most likely for them (Maton, 2008: 58). In this regard, it could be claimed that the *habitus* of young people from socio-culturally more privileged environments at elite universities finds itself ‘as “a fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127).

- The social environment limited in educational stimuli, benefits and opportunities of the more or less privileged socio-cultural families, which emerges from the findings of some studies, urges young people to transform the system of dispositions they have internalized within the family context, and guides them to higher education choices so as to have the opportunity to move up in educational, social and occupational level (Accardo, 1991; Swingewood, 1998). *Habitus* is the link between the individual and the social (Maton, 2008: 53) and in this case it seems that “negative” experiences internalized during the life course of some young people, who come from disadvantaged socio-cultural environments, are unique and lead them to make decisions and choices which differentiate them from people who belong not only to the same social class but also to the same family.

From this study, which focused on the review of recent sociological literature, concerning the formation of young people’s educational-occupational choices, it emerged that the *habitus* of social subjects affects the way they make their decisions and their choices either through its reproductive or its transformative function. In this case, it seems that the activation of young people’s *habitus* contributes to the maintenance or transformation of their position in the social structure in relation to their social origin (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Mills, 2008a, 2008b; Swingewood, 1998).

To sum up, we assume that ongoing bibliographical research focused on the sociological analysis of scientific papers, which are engaged in young people’s educational-occupational choices in relation to family and other institutional factors, which define them, in the context of “free market” countries, is of scientific value. Such countries are the United Kingdom and USA which constitute fields of strong maintenance of social reproduction. In addition, a sociological analysis of scientific papers which examine the transformative function of *habitus* would also be interesting.

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