

The Generative Logic and Practical Path of Family Education from the Perspective of Bourdieu's Field Theory

Dan Guo*, Dandan Tang, Qin Lu, Meilin Liu

School of Culture and Education, Tianfu College of Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Mianyang, Sichuan, China

*Corresponding author, E-mail: guodanl@tfswufe.edu.cn

Abstract

This paper employs Pierre Bourdieu's field theory to transcend the experiential level of family education research and conduct an in-depth analysis of its underlying social generative logic and practical pathways. It first argues that the family is not a purely private space but a "field" where capital, habitus, and power (specifically manifested as symbolic violence) are interwoven and interact. The structural inequality of capital forms the dynamic foundation of family education practices; the internalization and generation of habitus serve as the core mechanism for shaping the dispositional system of the offspring; and the symbolic operation of power maintains the order within the field. Subsequently, the paper diagnoses three major real-world dilemmas currently impeding the enhancement of family education effectiveness: the alienation of educational interaction due to disparities in capital, the misplacement of educational roles caused by habitus lag, and the disruption of the educational ecology exacerbated by field encroachment. Finally, in response to these challenges, the paper proposes systematic optimization strategies: promoting capital empowerment to bridge educational divides, advancing habitus reshaping to return to the essence of education, and building field alliances to safeguard a healthy family education ecology. This study provides a profound philosophical-sociological perspective for understanding the nature of family education and offers theoretical insights and practical guidance for its high-quality development.

Keywords

Family Education; Generative Logic; Field

1 Introduction

The introduction of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory into the domain of family education research provides a powerful analytical framework for transcending superficial experiential descriptions and gaining deeper insights into its underlying social logic and operational mechanisms [1]. This theoretical lens enables researchers to conceptualize educational phenomena not as isolated incidents but as products of complex social relations and structural forces. The family, from this perspective, should not be regarded merely as an isolated "private garden," but rather as a dynamic relational space shaped by specific sociological forces and characterized by implicit competition for valuable resources—what Bourdieu would identify as the "family field." Within this

structured space, the formation and implementation of family education are neither random occurrences nor entirely determined by subjective will; instead, they follow a deep-seated generative logic systematically woven together by the interplay of three fundamental elements: capital, habitus, and power [2]. This tripartite framework offers a comprehensive sociological understanding of how family education functions as a mechanism for social reproduction while simultaneously providing spaces for potential transformation and resistance.

2 The Generative Logic of Family Education from a Field Perspective

2.1 Capital Possession: The Dynamic Foundation of the Family Field

Capital serves as both the primary instrument of competition for actors within a field and the fundamental basis for occupying specific positions and exerting social influence. In the specialized context of family education, the unequal distribution and composition of various capital forms constitute the dynamic foundation of its practical logic and strategic orientations. Bourdieu's sophisticated classification system identifies multiple forms of capital—including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital—all of which maintain convertibility rates within the field's specific economy [3]. Economic capital, being the most visible and quantifiable, directly determines the material resources a family can mobilize to advance their children's educational prospects. This includes access to premium school district housing, comprehensive extracurricular tutoring programs, international educational travel opportunities, and other advantage-conferring resources that collectively provide children with significantly differentiated educational starting points and developmental platforms. Cultural capital, while less tangible, operates in a more concealed yet profoundly impactful manner, manifesting through parents' educational credentials, specialized knowledge bases, aesthetic tastes, linguistic repertoires, and strategic familiarity with educational institutions' implicit norms and expectations. As demonstrated by Annette Lareau's seminal research in *Unequal Childhoods*, middle-class families typically employ a sophisticated strategy of "concerted cultivation" to consciously and systematically transmit their substantial cultural capital to their children through organized activities, reasoned dialogue, and institutional interventions, thereby securing and reproducing an advantageous position in educational competition [4]. Social capital, representing the aggregate of actual and potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships, provides crucial access to valuable information, influential recommendations, and strategic opportunities that significantly impact educational trajectories. The complex interplay between the total volume and specific structure of these various capital forms essentially predetermines a family's potential position-takings and scope of action within the educational field, thereby systematically imprinting the logic of social stratification onto family education practices from their very inception.

2.2 Habitus Formation: The Core Mechanism of Family Education

The central objective and most enduring effect of family education lies in its capacity to shape the habitus of the offspring—the deeply ingrained dispositions that organize social practices and perceptions. Habitus, constituting a core theoretical concept in Bourdieu's sophisticated framework, refers to a system of durable,



transposable cognitive and behavioral dispositions that are internalized through long-term engagement in social practices and that function as generative principles structuring individual actions while simultaneously being structured by those actions [5]. In the specialized context of the family field, educational practices extend far beyond the explicit transmission of academic knowledge or technical skills. Through the daily rhythm of cohabitation, continuous behavioral modeling, implicit value judgments, and emotionally charged interactions, specific perceptual frameworks, cognitive schemas, evaluative standards, and behavioral patterns become systematically “inculeated” into the offspring’s bodily and mental structures. For instance, deeply held approaches to time management and future orientation, characteristic attitudes toward authority and institutional power, fundamental definitions of success and failure, and even seemingly natural aesthetic preferences and consumption patterns are constructed imperceptibly through countless daily interactions within this primary socialization field, gradually becoming incorporated as the “second nature” of the developing offspring. This primary habitus, formed during early socialization within the familial context, constitutes a “pre-structure” or conceptual framework that individuals carry with them into broader social fields such as educational institutions and professional workplaces, profoundly influencing their learning strategies, interpersonal interaction styles, occupational choices, and life trajectory decisions in ways that often escape conscious awareness. As Bourdieu consistently emphasized, the power of habitus lies in its capacity to ensure the “taken-for-grantedness” of practice, enabling social agents to act in ways congruent with their objective social positions without requiring explicit calculation or conscious deliberation, thereby invisibly contributing to the reproduction of existing social class structures and their associated inequalities [6].

2.3 Power Operation: The Maintenance Mechanism of the Family Field

Every social field is inherently characterized by ongoing struggles for symbolic dominance and the legitimate imposition of vision, and the family field constitutes no exception to this fundamental sociological principle. Power operations within the familial sphere seldom manifest as overt physical coercion or explicit commands but are more frequently embodied in a subtler, gentler yet ultimately highly effective form of symbolic violence. This specific mode of domination operates through the systematic “misrecognition” and unwitting “complicity” of the dominated parties, whereby dominant actors successfully impose their cultural capital, classificatory schemes, and value standards upon the dominated in a seemingly natural, self-evident, and socially legitimate manner [7]. In the practical context of family education, parents frequently legitimize their educational choices, disciplinary methods, and evaluative standards through emotionally charged and morally unquestionable symbols such as “love,” “responsibility,” and actions taken “for your own good.” Through the prolonged and complex process of socialization spanning childhood and adolescence, children gradually internalize this imposed power structure as objectively necessary and subjectively justified, thereby willingly submitting to its disciplinary mechanisms while often perceiving such submission as expressions of personal choice or familial loyalty. As noted in relevant research examining the philosophical foundations of parental authority, “parental authority fundamentally stems from reverence for life itself, and its primary educational function lies in guiding children to value the energy and potential of life” [8]. However, when such authority is exercised excessively, arbitrarily, or unreflectively, it can easily devolve into a destructive form of symbolic violence that stifles autonomous development and critical consciousness. Furthermore, the relative autonomy of the family field must be properly understood within

broader social contexts; its internal power relations and characteristic struggle logics invariably reflect and actively reproduce the larger power inequalities inherent in external macro-social fields (particularly class structure, but also gender and racial hierarchies), thereby rendering the family a crucial institutional site for the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of the broader social order, while simultaneously creating potential spaces for resistance and social transformation through reflexive awareness and strategic action.

3 Practical Dilemmas in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Family Education from a Field Perspective

Although field theory clearly elucidates the generative logic of family education, its operation in practice encounters multiple obstructions that impede the improvement of educational effectiveness. These dilemmas are not isolated phenomena but stem from deep-seated contradictions arising from the interaction between internal field dynamics—capital and habitus—and external forces.

3.1 Capital Disparities Lead to Alienation in Educational Interactions

The essence of capital lies in its capacity to generate profit, which in the educational field translates into children's future achievements. The significant disparities in capital possession among families directly cause the alienation of educational interactions. Firstly, differences in cultural capital erect substantial barriers to interaction. Families from middle and lower social strata often occupy a disadvantaged position in home-school collaboration due to their limited cultural capital. This manifests in two extreme tendencies: suspicion and resistance towards school practices arising from insecurity or misunderstanding, or a complete abdication of educational responsibility to the school due to perceived incapability, resulting in a lack of conscious participation. As research indicates, when schools adopt differentiated attitudes towards parental involvement given highly heterogeneous family backgrounds, they inadvertently dampen the enthusiasm of some parents, creating a “cultural discontinuity” [9]. Secondly, the pressure of economic capital is directly transformed into educational anxiety. In a intensely competitive social environment, education is perceived as the primary avenue for maintaining or elevating social status. Parents are compelled to engage in an “arms race” underpinned by economic capital, continuously investing substantial financial resources to secure premium educational resources. This process severely instrumentalizes the objectives of family education, reducing parent-child relationships to a tense dynamic of investment and return, thereby stripping them of their inherent emotionally nurturing function.

3.2 Habitus Lag Results in Misplacement of Educational Roles

As a product of history, habitus often evolves more slowly than the rapid changes in social field rules. This lag directly triggers confusion and misplacement of roles in family education. Currently, Chinese family education is undergoing a painful transition from a habitus shaped by traditional exam-oriented education to one aligned with modern quality-oriented education. The educational beliefs of many parents, functioning as a “historical a priori,” remain deeply entrenched in a mindset predominantly focused on ac-



ademic performance. When national policies like the “Double Reduction” policy attempt to reconfigure the rules of the educational field, these outdated habitus present significant resistance [10]. This is concretely manifested in two contrasting patterns: on one hand, the hyper-intervening “over-parenting” model, where family education becomes excessively “scholasticized,” losing its autonomy and subjectivity and ultimately devolving into an appendage of school education; on the other hand, the completely hands-off “laissez-faire parenting” model, where family education is habitually absent during children’s development. Whether it involves “overstepping” or “absence,” the root cause lies in the failure of the family’s educational habitus to adapt to new role expectations. Parents and teachers, occupying different social positions and holding divergent educational philosophies and interests, find their value orientations in home-school collaboration misaligned, leading to “role positioning failure” [11].

3.3 Field Encroachment Exacerbates Disruption in the Educational Ecology

As a relatively autonomous social space, the family field is experiencing persistent invasion and colonization of its boundaries by external fields, leading to the disruption of its inherent ecology. The most immediate encroachment comes from the school field. While some functions of school education objectively require family support, in practice, this often materializes through parent communication groups, online check-ins, and meticulous homework supervision, excessively imposing the institutional logic of the school onto family life. This “field invasion” blurs the boundaries between home and school, transforming the family into a “second classroom” and encroaching upon time that should be dedicated to emotional communication and life education, thereby weakening the distinctive functions of the family field. Secondly, the digital media field introduces a “lack of physical presence.” Virtual interaction platforms, such as WeChat and QQ groups, while convenient, generate new challenges. Symbolic communication based on text and voice messages struggles to convey the emotional warmth and subtle feedback inherent in embodied interaction. Consequently, home-school communication and parent-child exchanges often remain transactional, hindering the development of deep emotional resonance and trust-building. Furthermore, phenomena like information overload and conspicuous comparison within online class groups 无形 中 intensify parental anxiety. On a more profound level, the commercial capital field markets educational anxiety, steering family education towards consumerist traps. This further disrupts families’ capacity for rational decision-making based on their actual circumstances, plunging the family field into a crisis of dissolution under the strain of multiple external forces.

4 Optimization of Practical Pathways for Family Education from a Field Perspective

Confronted with the deep-seated dilemmas within the field of family education, the path to optimization requires more than mere technical adjustments. It necessitates systematic intervention and reconstruction starting from the core elements of field dynamics—capital, habitus, and field relations—to forge viable practical pathways.

4.1 Promoting Capital Empowerment to Bridge Educational Divides

Capital serves as the driving force for action within a field. The primary task of bridging divides in family education lies in promoting the rational flow and equitable empowerment of capital. First, public support should be strengthened to supplement the capital stock of disadvantaged families. Governments and communities must take proactive measures by establishing and improving public service systems for family education, providing external support for families lacking in cultural and social capital. This includes offering public-interest parent education courses, providing universal access to extracurricular activity resources for children, and building community-based parent mutual-aid platforms. As research indicates, targeted policy support should be provided to disadvantaged families; schools and society at large must create opportunities for them, using external interventions to alter their initially unfavorable positions within the field. Second, families should be guided to optimize their own capital structure, enabling a rational return in educational investment. Families, particularly parents, need to develop a conscious “capital awareness,” recognizing that education entails not only the investment of economic capital but also the long-term cultivation of cultural and social capital. Families should be encouraged to shift away from over-reliance on extracurricular tutoring and toward sustained investment in cultural capital (e.g., fostering a reading-friendly home environment, engaging in profound parent-child dialogues) and social capital (e.g., supporting children in building healthy peer relationships). Parental responsibility extends beyond knowledge education to include fostering life and study habits, cultivating a sense of responsibility, and enhancing mental health and other personal qualities—all of which depend on multi-dimensional capital investment that transcends mere economic capital.

4.2 Facilitating Habitus Reshaping to Return to the Essence of Family Education

The lag in habitus is a key reason why family education practices fail to keep pace with contemporary demands. Therefore, facilitating the reshaping of habitus among all participants is central to returning family education to its authentic purpose. First, parents’ reflective practice must be stimulated to break the automatic cycle of habitus. Parents need to undertake a “historical” examination of their own educational beliefs, recognizing that their habitus is a product of specific social structures and personal upbringing. This awareness can help free them from unconscious intergenerational reproduction, enabling a transition from a state of “being” to one of “conscious agency.” Second, a scientific consensus on education must be consolidated to shape a modern habitus for family education. Schools, media, and social organizations should collaborate through various channels—such as parent schools, expert lectures, and authoritative media campaigns—to disseminate modern educational principles centered on “child-oriented” development and “holistic education,” thereby helping parents establish a scientific parenting habitus. Only by transforming their educational habitus based on a shared consensus can parents and schools become “educational partners” in collaborative efforts. This requires parents to accurately grasp the unique function of family education, which emphasizes “modeling by example,” “character development,” and “life education,” thereby counteracting the alienating trend of familial education becoming scholasticized and rediscovering its original purpose of cultivating “whole persons.”



4.3 Constructing Field Alliances to Safeguard the Family Education Ecology

The healthy functioning of the family field depends on establishing clear boundaries and healthy interaction mechanisms with external fields, particularly the school education field, thereby constructing alliances to protect the educational ecology. First, the boundaries of responsibilities between home and school must be clarified to establish a new order for collaborative education. The family and the school are two distinct educational fields with complementary advantages; any overstepping by either party leads to systemic disorder. While schools should take a leading role in collaborative education, they must respect the independent and emotional nature of the family field, refraining from shifting teaching and grading tasks—which are inherently the school’s responsibility—onto families. Based on clearly defined responsibilities, both parties should jointly build a “home-school education community,” achieving functional complementarity rather than morphological sameness. Second, technological means should be utilized effectively to achieve the integration of virtual and physical fields. In the digital age, technological media should not be simply rejected but rather guided to serve the essence of education. In the post-pandemic era, home-school cooperation must fully leverage modern information technology to achieve integrated online and offline development. However, the focus should be on incorporating online media technology into the educational processes within real-life offline contexts. The use of technology should aim to enhance communication efficiency and share educational resources, not to create new forms of monitoring and pressure. The ultimate goal is to safeguard the central role of high-quality, embodied parent-child interactions and home-school communication, ensuring that technology becomes a tool that consolidates—rather than undermines—family emotional bonds and the authenticity of education, thereby preserving a family education ecology characterized by clear boundaries, sound functioning, and emotional richness.

5 Conclusion

Viewing family education through the lens of Bourdieu’s field theory allows us to penetrate the fog of everyday experience and glimpse the deep-seated generative logic and power configurations underlying it. This study reveals that family education is far from a homogeneous, egalitarian “community of love.” Its operation is profoundly governed by the family’s capital structure, historically shaped habitus, and covert power relations. In practice, this generative logic manifests concretely as various dilemmas arising from capital disparities, habitus lag, and field encroachment, making the path to enhancing its effectiveness fraught with difficulty.

Confronting these challenges rooted in social structure requires more than simple technical adjustments. The practical pathways argued in this paper—promoting capital empowerment, facilitating habitus reshaping, and constructing field alliances—aim to initiate systematic intervention and optimization based on the core elements of field dynamics. This necessitates not only self-awareness and reflection within the family but also collaborative support from external forces such as schools, communities, and even the state. Together, they must strive to build an educational environment characterized by fairer capital flow, more modern and scientific habitus, and clearer, healthier field boundaries.

In summary, field theory provides a powerful explanatory framework and constructive action plan for understanding and optimizing family education. Future research and practice in family education should more consciously position themselves under the perspective of relational thinking. By deeply understanding its social generative logic, we can explore a practical path that truly aligns with educational principles and promotes the holistic development of individuals.

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