

# A Sociological Case Study Based on Cultural Capital and Intergenerational Social Mobility

**Biyun Wan**

*School of Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China*

*\*Corresponding author: Biyun Wan, School of Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China, E-mail: wanbiyun96816@163.com*

---

## Abstract

Cultural capital and intergenerational social mobility are important concepts in the field of sociology, which have significant implications for studying various sociological events and common phenomena in society. This article uses these two important concepts to study and analyze the actual case of news protagonist Percy, who hopes to work as a chef in the future but is obstructed by his family. Through case analysis, this article explores the cultural capital involved in this case and how it specifically affects the upward social mobility of individuals or families, and provides some sociological perspectives to analyze specific cases.

## Keywords

cultural Capital, intergenerational social mobility, social status, career choices

---

## 1. Introduction

In sociological research, cultural capital and intergenerational social mobility are two crucial concepts. Firstly, capital needs to accumulate and has a certain degree of specificity, while also being able to bring benefits to individuals in specific fields. It promotes unequal distribution in society (Bourdieu 1986:241-46), and cultural capital is also an important form of capital. It can become a symbol of people's high social status, as well as the basis for people to obtain better jobs, resources, and even upward mobility. Cultural capital includes attitudes, preferences, behaviors, educational certificates, and other aspects (Lamont&Lareau 1988:156); Cross generational social mobility, also known as intergenerational mobility in sociological concepts, mainly compares the differences in mobility between children's social classes and parents' social classes, mainly in terms of wealth, occupation, and reputation.

This article delves into the interaction between cultural capital and intergenerational social mobility through the real-life case of news protagonist Percy. Firstly, this article will provide a detailed introduction to the concept and types of cultural capital through case studies, explaining how it can be accumulated through education, family, and social relationships. Secondly, by analyzing the mechanisms of intergenerational social mobility and its manifestations in family backgrounds through case studies, this paper explores why different family backgrounds have vastly different impacts on career choices. Finally, summarize and explore the role of families in the accumulation of cultural capital and intergenerational social mobility.

## 2. Case Introduction

This case takes place in an ordinary family in Hong Kong in the 21st century. The protagonist Percy is a student at the University of Hong Kong, studying for a Bachelor's degree in Education and Social Sciences. His father is a restaurant chef and his mother is a homemaker. Percy has always had high expectations for his

son's future development, hoping that he can become a government worker after graduation, enjoying good salary, strong job stability, and high social status. But the protagonist Percy, influenced by his father's profession, has always been interested in cooking and has always dreamed of becoming a chef. Therefore, he hopes to drop out of the University of Hong Kong to study cooking and realize his dream in the future. After communicating with his parents, his idea was strongly opposed by them. The following text will analyze in detail the cultural capital and intergenerational social mobility involved in this case.

### **3. The Manifestation of Cultural Capital in this Case**

#### **3.1 Specific manifestations of cultural capital**

Specifically, cultural capital can be divided into three forms: intrinsic cultural capital, concrete cultural capital, and institutional cultural capital. Inherent cultural capital refers to the cultural capital inherent in an individual, which mainly reflects their long-standing cultural taste, hobbies, etc; Specific cultural capital refers to items such as scientific equipment or artistic works, such as a painting or calligraphy; Institutional cultural capital refers to the cultural capital that individuals possess that is recognized in the system, generally including graduation certificates, license qualifications, etc. This is widely recognized in the labor market and is also a more direct way for people to transform cultural capital into economic capital.

#### **3.2 The Manifestation of Cultural Capital in Percy's Case**

In this case, it mainly involves two forms: implicit cultural capital and institutional cultural capital.

Firstly, Percy has been deeply influenced by his father's profession for a long time, and has always been interested in cooking, which has even influenced his future career choices. This reflects his long-standing hobby and has become his internalized personal cultural capital. Personal cultural capital is greatly influenced by family atmosphere and culture, and is usually difficult to change easily. Its formation takes a long time, and similarly, its disappearance or transformation also takes a long time. In most cases, once formed, it may follow an individual for a lifetime and deeply influence their many choices and work styles from the depths of their heart.

Formal education and university diplomas are concrete manifestations of institutional cultural capital, and obtaining formal education is an important way to acquire institutional cultural capital. In this case, One important reason why Percy was prevented from becoming a chef is that "others say that going to college is a ticket to entering society". Generally speaking, modern society generally believes that going to college is the basic way to get a good job, but more importantly, it is not only necessary to receive a college education, but also to obtain a certificate of formal education - a college diploma. Different university diplomas also represent different personal abilities. It is generally believed that graduates from prestigious schools have better abilities than graduates from slightly lower level universities. Percy originally studied education and social science bachelor's degree courses at the University of Hong Kong, which means he can eventually obtain a bachelor's degree from the University of Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong is already a graduate to a large extent. A symbol of having strong job skills and a high level of knowledge, It is not easy for Percy to enter the University of Hong Kong, which is also one of the important reasons why his parents do not want him to give up his original university courses. With a degree from the University of Hong Kong, Percy may have the opportunity to become a government worker and transform his cultural capital into economic capital, which is also the wish of his parents; In addition, a diploma is different from some intangible cultural capital such as habits and hobbies. It has strong security and is easier to obtain legal protection when exchanging with other capital, thereby safeguarding the economic and social interests of the owner. It has become a shortcut for people to convert material, time, and energy investment into other capital (Chen Zhiguo, 2011:50). Percy dropping out of school to study cooking means losing the guarantee of a bachelor's degree from the University of Hong Kong. Therefore, whether in the eyes of his parents or the public, it is irrational.

### **4. The Manifestation of Intergenerational Social Mobility in this Case**

#### **4.1 Factors Affecting Intergenerational Social Mobility**

Market opportunities, social policies, and family upbringing are the three necessary conditions and basic pillars for maintaining and expanding social mobility (Cai Fang 2024: 34-5). From the perspective of the

entire society, market opportunities and social policies can create a larger environment for intergenerational social mobility. In the 1970s and 1980s, thanks to abundant market opportunities and flexible social policies, real cases of grassroots origin and later crossing social classes were not uncommon. However, in modern Hong Kong society, which has a relatively stable social structure and fewer opportunities for upward mobility, the social mobility order and the differentiation pattern between different social classes gradually tend to stabilize, making intergenerational social mobility quite difficult.

#### **4.2 Factors Influencing Cross generational Social Mobility Reflected in Percy's Case**

In this case, Percy's parents actually hoped that their son could obtain a prestigious university diploma, find a decent job, and achieve upward social mobility. In this process, market opportunities, social policies, and family upbringing all played a significant role. Firstly, fair and educational social policies provided a better employment environment, living atmosphere, and social respect for high-level talents, allowing the next generation of ordinary families to have the opportunity to change their original social class through education. Percy's Hong Kong University diploma will become an important "stepping stone" for him to find a job in the future; In addition, fair and open market opportunities provide everyone with a space for fair competition, which is also an important condition for changing the original social class. When looking for a job, Percy can compete fairly with others based on his own abilities; Finally, family upbringing has a strong ability to shape personal concepts and abilities. In this case, Percy's parents have always attached great importance to Percy's education and instilled the concept of upward social mobility. However, it is also the long-term influence of the family atmosphere that Percy has the idea of becoming a chef. In a general sense, he will stay in his original social class.

#### **5.How does Cultural Capital Specifically Affect Intergenerational Social Mobility in this Case**

Through the previous analysis, it can be found that whether it is market opportunities, social policies, or family upbringing, the intergenerational social mobility in this case cannot be separated from the important condition of having a diploma from the University of Hong Kong, which is also Percy's biggest advantage. Because in today's society, the economic and social capital of the original family has a significant impact on their children, even surpassing the influence of market opportunities and social policies to some extent. Often, there is a situation of hereditary wealth and poverty. If the parents have a higher social class, their children will make friends from a higher class since childhood. Such connections are also important social capital for them, which will greatly facilitate their future work and life. They can inherit their parents' wealth and even their careers, and they already have great advantages. Therefore, relatively speaking, cultural capital may be the biggest influencing factor in gaining social mobility advantages at present (Li Yu, 2019:34-5). Because the acquisition of cultural capital is relatively easier and relies more on individual abilities and subjective will, it provides individuals with more opportunities to access good jobs, resources, and environments, as well as more choices.

#### **6. Conclusion**

This practical case not only reflects the difficulties faced by some individuals in the process of career choice, but also demonstrates the specific manifestations of cultural capital and social mobility within families, and explores the key role played by cultural capital in the process of social mobility. As for why it is necessary to achieve upward mobility, the reasons are self-evident. Firstly, for individuals and families, upward mobility means an increase in wealth, an improvement in social status, as well as more political power and discourse power. Moreover, striving for upward mobility is often seen as a manifestation of competitiveness and ambition, which helps to obtain and realize personal value. For society, increased social mobility means fairness in social distribution and an increase in social openness, which better reflects efficiency and fairness, promotes social harmony and development, and enables members of society to achieve better development. Whether it is due to cultural capital or intergenerational social mobility, ultimately it is for individuals to achieve upward mobility in society. The solidification of social classes undoubtedly affects economic development and social progress, and how to break through difficulties and achieve social mobility is the dilemma for contemporary individuals and even the entire society.

## **References**

- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1986). "The Forms of Capital." in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, edited by John Richardson. New York: Greenwood Press. 241-46.
- Cai Fang. (2024). Market opportunities, social policies, and family upbringing that promote social mobility Research on Labor Economics (02), 3-16.
- Chen Zhiguo. (2011). Research on Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory. Capital Normal University, pp. 50.
- Lamont, Michel and Annette Lareau. (1988). "Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Gissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments." Sociology Theory 6,156.
- Li Yu. (2019). Intergenerational social mobility: analytical framework and reality. Zhejiang Journal, Issue 2019 (01), 34-35.

## **Funding**

This research received no external funding.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declare no conflict of interest.

## **Acknowledgment**

Not applicable.

## **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).