



“Family Upbringing” vol. XXXIII (1/2026)
„Wychowanie w Rodzinie” t. XXXIII (1/2026)

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Father, School, and the World: Inheriting and Negotiating Cultural Capital in Sons’ Narratives

Ojciec, szkoła i świat: o dziedziczeniu i negocjowaniu kapitału kulturowego w narracjach synów

Submitted: April 2, 2026 – Accepted: June 11, 2026

Abstract

Aim. The study analyses the transmission and negotiation of cultural capital in father-son relationships based on young men’s narratives. It focuses on family communication, mutual support, ways values and norms are transmitted, and the role of school in mediating between family habitus and individual educational trajectories, shaping aspirations, educational choices, and identity.

Methods and materials. The study adopts a qualitative approach. The empirical material consists of 143 narrative interviews conducted with men aged 18–25 who are transitioning from education to professional adulthood. The data was analysed using qualitative thematic narrative analysis, focusing on identifying patterns of meaning, ways of interpreting experiences, and categories related to father-son communication and education.

Results and conclusion. The findings indicate that the transmission of cultural capital is dynamic and negotiated. In the participants’ narratives, the father appears as a guardian of educational aspirations, a guide to the social world, or a distant figure whose absence

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also structures biographical experience. Participants actively reinterpret paternal messages by selectively accepting, modifying, or rejecting them. School functions as a mediator, enabling both reproduction and transformation of cultural capital. The father-son relationship constitutes a significant space for shaping cultural capital, where mechanisms of reproduction and transformation coexist. Communication—both present and absent—plays a crucial role in shaping educational aspirations and social identity. The findings highlight the importance of a dialogical model of fatherhood and the potential of school as an institution supporting the negotiation of cultural heritage.

Keywords: cultural capital, fatherhood, father-son relationship, qualitative thematic analysis, family communication, education, young men

Abstrakt

Cel. Badanie analizuje procesy transmisji i negocjowania kapitału kulturowego w relacjach ojciec-syn na podstawie narracji młodych mężczyzn. Skupia się na komunikacji rodzinnej, wzajemnym wsparciu, sposobach przekazywania wartości i norm oraz roli szkoły jako przestrzeni mediującej między habitusem rodzinnym a indywidualnymi trajektoriami edukacyjnymi, kształtującej aspiracje, wybory edukacyjne i tożsamość.

Metody i materiały. Przyjęto podejście jakościowe. Materiał empiryczny stanowiło 143 wywiadów narracyjnych przeprowadzonych z mężczyznami w wieku 18–25 lat, będącymi w okresie przejścia od edukacji do dorosłości zawodowej. Dane zostały poddane jakościowej analizie narracyjnej, koncentrującej się na identyfikowaniu wzorców znaczeniowych, sposobów interpretowania doświadczeń oraz kategorii związanych z komunikacją ojciec-syn i edukacją.

Wyniki i wnioski. Wyniki wskazują, że transmisja kapitału kulturowego jest procesem dynamicznym i negocjowanym. W narracjach uczestników ojciec pojawia się jako strażnik aspiracji edukacyjnych, przewodnik po świecie społecznym lub jako odległa postać, której nieobecność również strukturyzuje doświadczenie biograficzne. Uczestnicy aktywnie reinterpretują przekazy ojcowskie, selektywnie je przyjmują, modyfikują lub odrzucają. Szkoła pełni funkcję mediatora, który umożliwia zarówno reprodukcję, jak i transformację kapitału kulturowego. Relacja ojciec-syn stanowi istotną przestrzeń kształtowania kapitału kulturowego, w której współistnieją mechanizmy reprodukcji i transformacji. Komunikacja – zarówno obecna, jak i nieobecna – odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu aspiracji edukacyjnych i tożsamości społecznej. Wyniki podkreślają znaczenie dialogicznego modelu ojcostwa oraz potencjał szkoły jako instytucji wspierającej negocjację dziedzictwa kulturowego.

Słowa kluczowe: kapitał kulturowy, ojcostwo, relacja ojciec-syn, jakościowa analiza tematyczna, komunikacja rodzinna, edukacja, młodzi mężczyźni

Introduction

Father-son relationships constitute an important, yet still underexplored, area of research on the transmission of cultural capital within the family. In Bourdieu's classical framework, cultural capital—in its embodied, objectified, and institutionalised forms—is transmitted primarily through everyday practices, communication styles, educational expectations, and ways of interpreting the social world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006). The family therefore remains the primary and foundational environment in which a child's habitus is formed, shaping their subsequent educational and social trajectories.

Empirical studies confirm that parents' level of education, their cultural practices, and their involvement in their children's education are significantly associated with adolescents' academic achievement and aspirations (Jæger & Breen, 2016). However, the literature emphasises that the transmission of cultural capital is not merely a process of mechanical reproduction, but rather unfolds through dynamic interactions and the negotiation of meanings (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2004).

Within this context, the role of the father becomes particularly significant. Contemporary research on fatherhood points to a shift from a model of the father as primarily responsible for the family's material provision toward one of engaged, relational fatherhood, involving active participation in the child's educational processes (Cabrera *et al.*, 2018). This transformation reflects broader changes in family structures and the redefinition of parental roles in late modern societies.

The relevance of this issue is also linked to transformations in educational systems, which—despite their declarative commitment to egalitarianism—continue to reproduce social inequalities by privileging specific forms of cultural capital (Reay, 2004). The school thus becomes a space in which family cultural heritage is verified, reinforced, or challenged. In this context, the question of how young men interpret paternal messages concerning education, work, ambition, and masculinity, and how they incorporate them into their lives, becomes particularly salient.

In this article, I seek to answer the following question: how do young men narratively reconstruct communication with their fathers, and how are the processes of inheriting and negotiating cultural capital manifested in these narratives? The focus is not only on the content of these messages, but also on the ways in which they are interpreted from the perspective of the participants' current educational and social identities. Narrative is thus treated as a space for reconstructing experience and reinterpreting family heritage.

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the ways in which the transmission of cultural capital in father-son relationships is reflected in the narratives of young men, as well as to identify strategies for maintaining, transforming, or rejecting this capital. The article is structured into four main parts. The first outlines the theoretical framework concerning cultural capital and contemporary models of fatherhood. The second presents

the methodological assumptions of the study, based on narrative interviews. The third provides an analysis of the findings derived from the participants' narratives, followed by a discussion and conclusions highlighting pedagogical implications and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

The transmission of cultural capital within the family is a multidimensional process in which father-son relationships, as well as the ways in which young people interpret the resources they receive, play a crucial role. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital distinguishes three forms of this resource: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. As Bourdieu and Passeron (2006) note, culture and education are not simply hobbies or minor influences; they are fundamental in perpetuating differences between social groups and classes.

Embodied cultural capital encompasses enduring dispositions, linguistic competences, communication styles, and habits that individuals acquire through family socialisation. Objectified cultural capital includes material cultural goods such as books and works of art, while institutionalised cultural capital refers to formal qualifications and diplomas that confer social legitimacy on an individual's competences.

The process of transmitting cultural capital occurs primarily within the family, where everyday parenting practices, modes of communication, and articulated educational expectations contribute to the formation of an individual's habitus – a system of enduring dispositions that shape the perception of the social world and strategies for action. Bourdieu and Passeron (2006) emphasise that school reinforces and validates the resources of students who already possess cultural capital consistent with dominant educational requirements, thereby legitimising specific forms of capital and contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities.

At the same time, this process is not deterministic; individuals actively negotiate and reinterpret inherited resources (Reay, 2004). In this context, the father-son relationship becomes a key space of socialisation, in which the father functions as a mediator between the family and the broader social world (Cabrera *et al.*, 2018).

Contemporary models of fatherhood encompass various patterns, including the involved father, the demanding father, and the absent, or emotionally distant, father. As Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda (2013, p. 102) note, "an engaged father actively participates in the child's upbringing, supports education and biographical projects, and becomes a partner in negotiating norms and aspirations." A demanding father tends to emphasize discipline and achievement, whereas an absent father compels

the son to independently interpret family messages and construct his own framework of meanings (Trysińska, 2023).

Forms of communication—such as dialogue, instruction, modelling, or the absence of interaction—play a crucial role in shaping how young men acquire norms, aspirations, and strategies for action.

In this process, narrative functions as a space for identity construction. By telling stories about themselves and their relationships with their fathers, individuals reconstruct experiences and reinterpret the past. Riessman (2008, p. 12) notes that “narrative allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and decisions, while simultaneously shaping their identity.”

In the context of male identity, sons’ narratives make it possible to capture the ways in which they integrate paternal messages with their own understandings of school, work, and social life, as well as how they reinterpret or modify expectations regarding their education and professional aspirations (Famuła-Jurczak, 2022). Narrative thus becomes both a tool for reconstructing experience and a means of actively shaping identity, enabling participants to negotiate inherited cultural capital and position themselves within educational and social contexts.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants’ subjective experiences and their interpretations of family relationships. The primary data collection method was narrative interviewing, which enables participants to provide rich, contextualized accounts of their experiences and reconstruct the ways they interpret family and social messages (Riessman, 2008). Narrative interviewing captures both the content and structure of participants’ stories, making it particularly suitable for examining the processes through which cultural capital is inherited, reinterpreted, and negotiated in father-son relationships. This approach was chosen to provide insight into the biographical strategies of young men and the mechanisms by which they internalise, reinterpret, and negotiate the cultural capital imparted by their fathers.

The study sample consisted of 143 men aged 18 to 25, representing various stages of higher education or entry into the workforce. Sample selection considered diversity in family socioeconomic background and parental education, allowing for analysis of the multifaceted experiences associated with the transmission of cultural capital. The heterogeneous nature of the sample also enabled the study to capture different models of fatherhood, communication strategies, and their influence on the biographical learning processes of participants.

Interviews were conducted individually in a neutral and comfortable setting to ensure participants felt at ease. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Interviews began with an open-ended prompt: "Tell me about your childhood and your relationship with your father, with particular emphasis on situations related to school and learning," allowing participants to initiate their narratives freely. Follow-up questions were posed in a minimally intrusive manner to maintain the natural flow of the participants' stories.

All data was anonymised, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The study adhered to established ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring the right to withdraw at any stage, and securing permission to record the interviews.

This qualitative study employed purposive, maximum-variation sampling to capture a diverse range of experiences. Participants differed in socioeconomic background, parental education, and educational trajectories. Recruitment was carried out via academic communities and social networks, focusing on men aged 18–25 who were transitioning from higher education to the labour market.

The empirical material analysed in this study forms part of a larger research project examining the family and educational relationships of young adults. The analyses presented in this article focus on a thematically distinct subset of the data, specifically exploring father-son relationships and the mechanisms through which cultural capital is transmitted. Data analysis followed the principles of qualitative thematic analysis of narratives, emphasizing the identification of recurring patterns of meaning, interpretive categories, and the ways participants made sense of their experiences, rather than reconstructing the formal structure of their biographical narratives.

Data analysis was carried out in multiple stages. First, all interviews were transcribed and initially reviewed to identify general patterns and emerging themes. The next stage involved narrative reconstruction, focusing on the sequence of events, interpretations of experiences, and key moments in father-son communication. During the coding process, three primary analytical categories were identified: 1) the content of paternal messages, encompassing educational expectations, values, and behavioural patterns; 2) the negotiation of cultural capital, capturing processes of accepting, reinterpreting, or rejecting inherited capital; and 3) forms of communication, including conversations, instructions, modelling, or absence of contact, along with their influence on participants' educational and social experiences. Recurring themes within these categories facilitated the formulation of conclusions regarding fathers' roles in the transmission and negotiation of cultural capital and the ways in which young men construct their educational and social identities based on family relationships.

Analysis of Research Results

The analysis of the empirical material was conducted through a qualitative thematic analysis of narratives, which focused on identifying recurring patterns of meaning and the ways in which participants interpreted their experiences, rather than on quantitative comparisons of responses.

Qualitative research allowed for the reconstruction of narrative images of the father and the mechanisms of transmitting cultural capital in the lives of young men. Analysis of interviews with 143 participants revealed diverse strategies for transmitting, negotiating, and reinterpreting inherited capital, which reflect both the presence and absence of fathers' active participation in the educational and social socialisation process.

Many narratives reveal an image of the father as a guardian of educational aspirations. The father was portrayed as placing a strong emphasis on education, grades, subject choices, and planning for future career and educational paths. One participant felt that "his father always said that good grades open doors and that everything you do at school influences your future" (Participant 27)¹. In such cases, school and formal qualifications functioned as institutionalised capital, the achievement of which was the primary goal of social mobility. Analysis indicates that young men internalised these expectations, but simultaneously made adaptive decisions that allowed them to reconcile their own aspirations with their fathers' demands. In this context, the transmission of cultural capital was not only normative but also negotiable, enabling participants to selectively adopt and reinterpret educational expectations.

Another prominent image of the father that emerged from participants' narratives is that of a guide through the social world. Narratives frequently included discussions about work, responsibility, social values, and behavioural patterns associated with masculinity and independence. As one participant noted, "Dad always said that at work, it's not just what you can do that counts, but also how you behave – honesty and respect for others are equally important" (Participant 89). In this dimension, the transmission of cultural capital was primarily embodied: participants acquired a specific habitus, lifestyle, strategies, and attitudes toward success and failure, which became integral to their personal learning. Fathers functioned as role models, shaping participants' attitudes and behaviour in professional and social life, consistent with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of cultural capital as the transmission of dispositions and practices that enable inclusion in particular social fields (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006).

At the same time, many narratives highlighted the absence of the father's active presence. Participants described paternal silence, distance, or emotional unavailability, which compelled them to develop autonomous strategies for acquiring cultural capital.

¹ All statements have been translated by the author.

As one participant reflected, “We didn’t talk about school or the future. I had to figure out what I wanted to do and how to cope on my own” (Participant 56). In these cases, the transmission of capital occurred indirectly: participants observed paternal role models, contrasted them with their own experiences, and made decisions independently of their fathers’ guidance or expectations. Such experiences fostered autonomy, independence, and the capacity to critically evaluate educational and social values, while simultaneously requiring participants to negotiate, reinterpret, or reject inherited behavioural patterns.

The empirical material highlights the processes through which young men negotiate their fathers’ legacies. Participants described making choices about whether to continue, adapt, or diverge from their fathers’ paths. Analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis of narratives, focusing on recurring patterns of meaning and participants’ interpretations of experiences rather than on quantitative comparisons or deviations from paternal trajectories. Participants reinterpreted paternal messages and behavioural patterns in light of their own aspirations and opportunities. As one participant explained, “Not everything my father said aligned with what I wanted to do, so I chose my own paths, but with certain principles I inherited from him” (Participant 112).

In these cases, schools and other educational institutions served as spaces for alternative legitimisation of cultural capital, providing opportunities to develop competencies independently of family expectations. The analysis demonstrates that the transmission of cultural capital is neither uniform nor deterministic. Participants navigated a coexistence of educational pressures, social modelling, and communication gaps, interpreting, adapting, and negotiating these influences within their own biographies. Narrative reconstruction reveals that young men actively transform paternal messages, integrating them with personal experiences and aspirations, which leads to diverse strategies for constructing cultural, educational, and social identities.

Discussion of Results

The results indicate that the father-son relationship serves both reproductive and transformative functions in the process of shaping cultural capital. Qualitative thematic analysis of the participants’ narratives reveals that fathers, acting as guardians of educational aspirations, convey values and expectations related to academic achievement and further educational paths. This corresponds to Bourdieu’s classic concept of institutionalised capital, the acquisition of which is associated with the legitimisation of social position (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006). The young men’s narratives clearly demonstrate the internalisation of these expectations, but at the same time, an active process of reinterpretation is observed – participants selectively adopt or modify fatherly

messages, adapting them to their own aspirations, experiences, and the broader social context. In this way, the father-son relationship becomes a space for both the reproduction and transformation of cultural capital, enabling the creation of new educational and social trajectories that combine elements of family heritage with individual strategies for participating in education and social life.

The role of schools in this process emerges as particularly significant. Participants' narratives suggest that educational institutions act as mediators between the family and the broader social world, providing a space for verifying and legitimising competencies acquired at home. On one hand, schools can reinforce paternal values and role models; on the other, they create alternative spaces where young men can experiment with their own educational trajectories and negotiate the inheritance of cultural capital. This dual function of schools aligns with the observations of Hervault and Godefroy (2021), who highlight that educational institutions serve as intermediaries in the reproduction or transformation of cultural capital within families of varying social backgrounds, and is also reflected in Polish pedagogical analyses concerning the role of schools in either mitigating or perpetuating educational inequalities.

Communication in the father-son relationship emerges not merely as a one-way transmission of messages, but as an active process of negotiating meaning, in which young men interpret, adopt, modify, or reject paternal patterns. Viewed in this way, communication functions as a central mechanism in the construction of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991; Riessman, 2008), through which individuals actively reconstruct their biographies in dialogue with the experiences and expectations of others. In cases where fathers were absent or emotionally distant, the lack of direct communication often prompted the development of autonomous strategies for negotiating cultural capital, fostering a creative and self-directed approach to education and social life. This observation is consistent with Polish research on contemporary fatherhood and education (Cabrera *et al.*, 2018; Lamb, 2010).

From a theoretical perspective, the research findings confirm that the transmission of cultural capital is not a deterministic or unidirectional process. Participants' narratives coexist with mechanisms of social reproduction, in which paternal patterns perpetuate expected educational and social trajectories, and mechanisms of transformation, in which young men actively adapt, reinterpret, and negotiate the transferred capital. This coexistence of reproduction and transformation aligns with modern Bourdieuan interpretations, which emphasize the dynamic nature of cultural capital and its dependence on the social, biographical, and institutional context (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006; Reay, 2004).

The research findings also underscore the significance of diverse models of fatherhood, ranging from engaged and demanding to absent or emotionally distant fathers (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). Participants' narratives indicate that both the pres-

ence and absence of a father shape young men's educational and social strategies, influencing their attitudes toward success, failure, and autonomy. Within this framework, schools emerge as crucial sites for legitimising, verifying, and modifying cultural capital, providing young people with opportunities to explore their own trajectories and negotiate the inheritance of family legacies.

Expanding the interpretation, the study's findings suggest several important implications and directions for future research. First, there is a need for in-depth analyses of the processes by which young men negotiate cultural capital in contexts of paternal absence or emotional distance, with particular attention to the development of educational and social autonomy. Second, it would be valuable to examine the interplay between family cultural capital and educational institutions to better understand how schools can function either as compensatory or reproductive agents. Third, adopting a longitudinal perspective could illuminate changes in strategies for negotiating cultural capital as young men mature and transition into adulthood. Finally, the results underscore the importance of father education and programs supporting conscious fatherhood as potential instruments for enhancing the transformative mechanisms of cultural capital within families of diverse social backgrounds.

In summary, the father-son relationship within the study sample emerges as a complex mechanism through which cultural capital is transmitted, negotiated, and transformed. Communication, paternal presence or absence, and the role of educational institutions jointly shape young men's individual educational and social trajectories. This process is dynamic, multidimensional, and situated within a broader biographical context. Participants' narratives illustrate that young men actively reinterpret their fathers' legacies, adapting them to their own aspirations, experiences, and the demands of contemporary social and educational life.

Conclusion

The analyses conducted in this study confirm that the transmission of cultural capital in the father-son relationship is complex, dynamic, and dialogical. Drawing on Bourdieu's framework (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006), the findings indicate that cultural capital—particularly in its embodied and institutionalised forms—is not transmitted in a linear or purely reproductive manner. While classical approaches to social reproduction emphasise the consolidation of class through the alignment of family habitus with school expectations, participants' narratives highlight the active role of young men in reinterpreting and negotiating their paternal heritage. These findings align with contemporary reinterpretations of reproduction theory, which underscore the signifi-

cance of individual agency and the contextualised, non-deterministic nature of cultural capital (Reay, 2004).

A key finding of the study is the central role of father-son communication in shaping educational aspirations. Direct communication concerning grades, educational choices, and career trajectories, as well as modelling attitudes toward work, responsibility, and masculinity, constitutes a vital component of educational socialisation. This finding aligns with research on engaged fatherhood, which shows that active paternal involvement promotes higher educational aspirations and better social adaptation in children (Cabrera *et al.*, 2018; Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). Simultaneously, the results indicate that even the absence of communication—manifested as silence, emotional distance, or unavailability—constitutes a meaningful experience that encourages the development of autonomy and the independent construction of cultural capital.

Secondly, schools emerge as institutions mediating between family habitus and individual biographical projects. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory, schools legitimise particular forms of cultural capital, providing advantages to students whose dispositions align with institutional expectations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006). The analysed narratives, however, indicate that educational institutions can also serve a transformative function, offering alternative models, new fields of identification, and opportunities to redefine aspirations. These findings contribute to ongoing debates regarding the ambivalent role of schools as spaces that both reproduce social inequalities and enable social mobility (Reay, 2004).

Thirdly, the narrative approach employed in this study allowed for capturing the construction of educational identity as a dynamic dialogue between past and present. From the perspective of narrative theory (Ricoeur, 1991; Riessman, 2008), recounting the father-son relationship constitutes a form of biographical work in which participants reinterpret experiences and integrate selected elements of their inherited cultural capital into their current self-conception. The narratives reveal that young men are not passive recipients of paternal messages; rather, they act as agents who assign meaning to, adapt, and selectively incorporate the patterns they inherit.

From a pedagogical perspective, the research findings suggest several important implications: 1) For schools and teachers, it is essential to consider students' family contexts and the cultural capital they bring, reflecting on how educational institutions can enhance their transformative potential – particularly for students experiencing deficits in paternal support. This calls for the development of tutoring, mentoring, and communication practices that foster students' autonomy, agency, and capacity for self-directed learning. 2) For fatherhood support programs, the findings underscore the importance of conscious communication regarding education, aspirations, and values. Programs designed for fathers can enhance parental reflexivity and communicative competence, promoting a more dialogical and intentional model of cultural capital

transmission. 3) For educational policy, it is advisable to implement compensatory measures that account for the diversity of family cultural resources. Such policies can help mitigate the reproductive tendencies of the education system and enhance its inclusivity, providing equitable opportunities for students from varied social backgrounds.

The study also has limitations. First, although the sample was large for qualitative research, it was based on the young men's narratives, meaning that reconstructed experiences rather than direct interactions were analysed. Second, the fathers' perspectives were not included in the analysis, limiting the ability to compare the sons' narratives with parental self-reports. Third, the study was cross-sectional in nature, making it impossible to track changes over time.

Therefore, further research could include: 1) longitudinal studies examining changes in the negotiation of cultural capital across stages of adulthood; 2) comparative studies incorporating the perspectives of fathers and other family members; 3) intersectional analyses, accounting for class, regional, and cultural differences.

In summary, the father-son relationship emerges as a crucial space for shaping cultural capital, where mechanisms of reproduction and transformation coexist. Communication—both present and absent—is a key mechanism for shaping young men's educational aspirations and social identity. The research results enrich the theory of cultural capital with a narrative perspective, showing the agency of the individual in the process of inheriting and negotiating family heritage and emphasizing the importance of dialogical, reflective fatherhood in the conditions of contemporary social changes.

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