

# Occupational Mobility in the Context of Social Transformation: A Study in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000315>

Received: 08 August 2025; Accepted: 14 August 2025; Published: 09 September 2025

## ABSTRACT

This study examines intergenerational occupational mobility in the context of rapid social transformation in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, it analyzes how cultural, social, and economic capital, together with habitus, shape descendants' career opportunities and occupational choices relative to their parents. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining a household survey of 163 families with in-depth interviews involving five three-generation cases. Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics and cross-generational occupational matrices, while qualitative thematic analysis explored the influence of family background, social networks, and cultural norms on career trajectories. Results indicate a strong trend of upward mobility and de-agrarianization, driven by urbanization and labor market expansion. However, these shifts remain substantially conditioned by family origin and the accumulation of cultural and social capital, underscoring the persistence of inequality reproduction through subtle mechanisms. This study extends the application of Bourdieu's framework to the Vietnamese context, particularly in rapidly urbanizing provincial cities, and provides empirical insights for policy initiatives aimed at fostering equal opportunity and promoting sustainable social mobility.

**Keywords:** intergenerational mobility, occupational change, social reproduction, cultural capital

## INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is experiencing a profound social transformation, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a socialist-oriented market economy with a clear trajectory toward industrialization and modernization. This process aligns with the national development roadmap in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Such transformation has reshaped the social structure, particularly in occupational composition, social stratification, and generational life opportunities, most markedly in urban areas. Beyond changes in economic organization, these shifts have redefined the fabric of social life, influencing employment patterns, career pathways, and the distribution of life chances across generations.

Within this context, occupational mobility serves as a critical lens for understanding the structure of society. It reflects the capacity for upward or downward movement within the occupational hierarchy and reveals the extent to which social inequalities are reproduced across generations. Mobility may take several forms: upward (moving to a higher-status occupation), downward (transitioning to a lower-status occupation), horizontal (shifting to an occupation of equivalent status), or immobile (continuing in the same occupation as one's parents). Each form is shaped by the interaction between structural opportunities and constraints, cultural norms, and individual agency, making it a sensitive indicator of broader social change.

Despite its importance, research on occupational mobility in Vietnam remains limited and fragmented, particularly from the perspective of cultural sociology. Existing studies, such as Do (2007, 2009), Kim (2004), Turner and Nguyen (2005), have examined intergenerational occupational shifts but have not sufficiently

unpacked the cultural and social mechanisms underlying these patterns. In Thanh Hoa Province, recent works (Nguyen, 2018; Nguyen, 2024) have provided initial insights into occupational inheritance in urban families and traditional craft villages. However, these studies have not fully captured the rapid and complex dynamics of occupational change in the current period of accelerated social transformation.

To address these gaps, this study applies Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction to investigate intergenerational occupational mobility in Thanh Hoa Province. It examines how different forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) and habitus – the system of dispositions shaped by one's living environment – interact to influence whether descendants maintain or diverge from their parents' occupations. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to the Vietnamese context, where rapid urbanization, economic restructuring, and deeply rooted family-based social networks intersect to shape both the opportunities for mobility and the persistence of inequality.

By integrating a cultural sociology framework into the analysis of occupational mobility in a transitional economy, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how social structures and cultural dispositions interact in shaping career trajectories. The findings aim to enrich the literature on occupational mobility in Vietnam, provide empirical evidence for comparative studies in other transitional societies, and offer insights for policymakers seeking to balance opportunity expansion with the reduction of intergenerational inequality.

## METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively examine intergenerational occupational inheritance and its relationship with social, cultural, and occupational structural factors. The quantitative component provided breadth of coverage through a household survey, while the qualitative component offered depth through in-depth interviews. This methodological triangulation ensured both statistical generalizability and contextual understanding, in alignment with the integrated theoretical framework guiding the research. Given that Bourdieu's theory emphasizes the interplay between measurable resources (forms of capital) and lived dispositions (habitus), combining quantitative and qualitative data is particularly suited to capturing both the structural patterns and the subjective experiences that shape occupational mobility.

The research was conducted in 2025 in Hac Thanh Ward, Thanh Hoa Province – the largest and most socioeconomically diverse urban ward in the province. A simple random sampling strategy was applied to select households with at least two generations engaged in paid employment. The study collected occupational information for three generations: the grandparent generation (F1), the parent generation (F2), and the child generation (F3). While F2 and F3 served as the primary units of analysis for quantitative comparison, data on F1 were gathered to establish a complete intergenerational occupational trajectory within each family. The sampling frame was compiled from local household registration records. Eligibility criteria required respondents (F2) to be approximately 60 years of age, to have at least one child in the workforce, and to be able to provide accurate occupational information for all three generations (F1–F3). These criteria ensured the completeness of longitudinal occupational data within each family.

The structured questionnaire was designed with two main sections: the first collected demographic and socio-economic information such as gender, age, education, and household income; the second gathered occupational histories of respondents, their parents, and their children, with a focus on first occupations. To enhance reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested on 15 respondents in a similar ward, and wording was refined for clarity. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, with values above 0.70 for all multi-item measures, indicating acceptable reliability. Construct validity was confirmed through expert review by two sociologists specializing in labor and social stratification.

A total of 180 questionnaires were distributed, and 163 valid responses were retained after data cleaning, yielding a response rate of 90.6%. The sample comprised 52.1% male and 47.9% female respondents, with a

mean age of 60.3 years. The distribution of respondents' first occupations was diverse: Farmers (FM, 11%), Unskilled labor (UL, 1.2%), Handicrafts (HC, 10.4%), Sales and services (SS, 8.6%), Industrial workers (IW, 23.3%), Clerical staff (CS 26.4%), Armed forces (AF15.3%), Professionals (PS, 3.1%), Entrepreneurs (EN, 0.7%), Leadership positions (LP 0.6%). Quantitative data were processed using SPSS 22.0 to generate descriptive statistics and conduct correlation analyses examining the relationships between socio-demographic characteristics, family-based social and cultural capital, and patterns of occupational inheritance across generations.

To complement the quantitative analysis and shed light on micro-level mechanisms (including psychological motivations, family expectations, household practices, and social networks), the study incorporated a qualitative component comprising five in-depth interviews. Participants were selected purposively to ensure diversity in occupation, generational position, and inheritance pattern (complete inheritance, partial or flexible inheritance, and non-inheritance). Interviews followed a semi-structured guide designed to elicit participants' narratives about occupational choice and change, perceived opportunities and constraints, and the influence of family norms, cultural values, and social connections. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded manually. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and link them to the study's theoretical framework.

## FINDINGS

### Occupational structure across three generations

The occupational structure of three generations, within the same families in Hac Thanh Ward, Thanh Hoa Province, is depicted in the charts (see Figure 1). These visuals not only demonstrate the shifting composition of occupations across generations but also reveal the extent of intergenerational mobility under the combined effects of socio-economic transformation and the mechanisms of social reproduction in the locality.

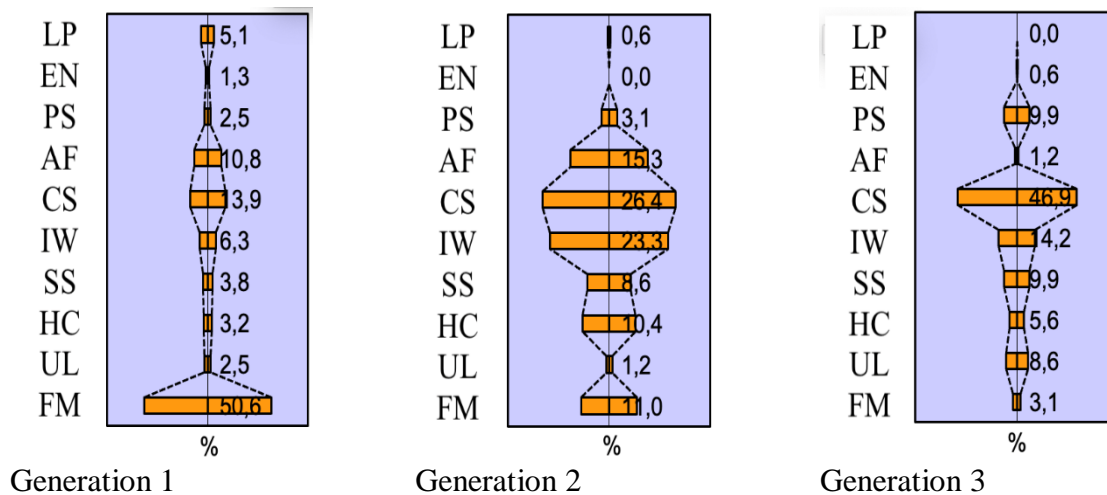


Figure 1. Occupations of generation 1, generation 2, and generation 3

Analysis of the three charts indicates a transformation from a pyramid-shaped structure in the first generation to a diamond-shaped structure in the third. This change vividly reflects the trajectory of occupational restructuring over time in the socio-urban context of Thanh Hoa, and Hac Thanh Ward in particular.

In the first generation, the pyramid structure reveals a clear dominance of agricultural labor, with 50.6% engaged in farming. Non-agricultural occupations – such as clerical and administrative staff (13.9%) and skilled industrial workers (6.3%) – occupied only a small proportion. The upper tier of the occupational hierarchy, composed of professionals and highly skilled workers, was present but extremely limited. These patterns typify a pre-industrial social structure, where educational attainment and access to modern employment opportunities were constrained.

By the second generation, the middle tier of the occupational hierarchy had expanded markedly. Clerical and administrative staff accounted for 26.4%, while industrial workers represented 23.3%. This expansion signals the advance of industrialization and the bureaucratization of employment in urban Thanh Hoa, marking the emergence of a nascent middle class in Hac Thanh Ward. Meanwhile, the proportion of agricultural workers declined sharply to 11.0%, underscoring the process of de-agrarianization and occupational diversification.

The third generation displays a diamond-shaped structure, characterized by a concentration in middle-tier occupations: 46.9% in clerical and administrative positions and 14.2% as skilled industrial workers. Agricultural labor had diminished to a mere 3.1%. The proportion of highly skilled professionals increased to 9.9%, and the presence of entrepreneurs, though modest at 0.6%, indicates the opening of new occupational pathways linked to socio-economic integration and urban labor market expansion.

Qualitative evidence from younger respondents aligns with these quantitative findings. One 33-year-old male engineer recalled: “My grandparents and parents were all farmers. Their greatest wish was for me to study hard to escape the rice fields. Even during very difficult times, I kept studying with the goal of ‘never holding a hoe,’ and now I’m working as an engineer in the city.”. Similarly, a 36-year-old female office employee shared: “My mother was a garment factory worker, working extremely hard. Since I was little, I always thought that I must strive to work in an office in the future.”.

Taken together, these patterns point to a profound restructuring of Hac Thanh Ward’s occupational profile. The shift from a pyramid dominated by agricultural labor to a diamond-shaped structure centered on technical, administrative, and service sectors reflects not only a decisive move away from agriculture but also the diversification of livelihoods and the consolidation of a modern occupational hierarchy. This transformation has been driven by a combination of factors, including economic restructuring, education policy reforms, integration into wider labor markets, urbanization processes, and the upward aspirations of younger generations.

### Trends in occupational mobility and influencing mechanisms

The analysis of occupational mobility between generation 1 and generation 2 confirms that mobility functions as a key indicator of social change, with upward mobility emerging as the dominant trend (see Table 1). Out of 158 father–child pairs, only 33 children (9.49%) remained in their fathers’ occupations, meaning that more than 90% had moved into different professions. This striking figure reflects a society in transition, where traditional occupational constraints are weakening and individuals enjoy greater freedom to pursue careers aligned with their own skills and aspirations.

Table 1. Occupational matrix between generation 1 and generation 2

		Occupation of generation 2										
		AF	LP	EN	PS	CS	IW	SS	HC	UL	FM	Total
Occupation of generation 1	AF	3	0	0	0	7	4	0	1	0	2	17
	LP	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	0	0	1	8
	EN	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
	PS	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0	0	4
	CS	1	0	0	0	8	6	2	4	1	0	22
	IW	0	1	0	0	3	2	0	4	0	0	10
	SS	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	0	0	6
	HC	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	5
	UL	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	4
	ND	19	0	0	3	13	19	7	4	0	15	80
	Total	25	1	0	4	43	43	14	17	1	18	158

Upward mobility was particularly pronounced among children of farmers. Of the 80 fathers engaged in farming – a low-status occupation in the local social hierarchy – only 15 children (18.75%) stayed in agriculture. The majority moved into occupations of higher status: three became clerical and administrative employees, 19 entered skilled industrial work with stable incomes, and seven joined the insurance and service sectors characteristic of the modern economy. Similarly, none of the children of fathers engaged in unskilled labor remained in the same occupation; most shifted to clerical, skilled industrial, or service roles. These patterns highlight the process of occupational de-traditionalization driven by industrialization and service-sector expansion.

Qualitative evidence underscores the role of family-based social capital in facilitating such transitions. One 35-year-old male skilled industrial worker recalled: “My cousin introduced me to work in an industrial park right after finishing high school. Thanks to his connection with the management, I was hired directly without any further introductions. Everyone in my family works in farming.”. In some cases, children did not inherit the exact occupation of their fathers but moved into socially equivalent roles – a form of horizontal mobility. For example, among 10 fathers employed as skilled industrial workers, three children became clerical employees and four entered handicraft occupations. Such mobility reflects the diversification of the occupational structure and the adaptability of workers to changing labor market demands.

Downward mobility, though rare, was also observed. Two cases involved fathers in the armed forces whose children became farmers, and others involved clerical employees whose children moved into unskilled labor – occupations marked by higher precarity. These instances likely stem from personal crises, limited educational attainment, or competitive disadvantages in the labor market.

Table 2. Occupational matrix between generation 2 and generation 3

		Occupation of generation 3										
		AF	LP	EN	PS	CS	IW	SS	HC	UL	FM	Total
Occupation of generation 2	AF	1	0	1	2	14	2	2	1	1	0	24
	LP	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	EN	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	PS	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	5
	CS	1	0	0	8	29	3	3	0	0	0	43
	IW	0	0	0	0	18	10	1	4	4	0	38
	SS	0	0	0	2	3	4	3	0	2	0	14
	HC	0	0	0	2	3	0	5	4	3	0	17
	UL	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
	ND	0	0	0	1	4	3	2	0	3	5	18
	<b>Total</b>	2	0	1	16	76	23	16	9	14	5	162

The transition from fathers in generation 2 to their first children in generation 3 reveals a similar pattern but with notable shifts (see Table 2). While mobility rates remain high, they show signs of stabilization. Occupational inheritance increased from 9.49% in the G1 → G2 transition to 16.0% in the G2 → G3 transition (26 out of 162 cases). The highest rate of inheritance occurred in clerical and administrative positions, suggesting the consolidation of stable middle-class roles within the evolving social structure.

Farming virtually disappeared in Generation 3: only five children remained in agriculture compared with 18 fathers in Generation 2. Most children of farmers moved into clerical, skilled industrial, or service-sector jobs, reinforcing the long-term trend of de-agrarianization. Many transitions occurred between occupations of equivalent skill levels, such as clerical to skilled industrial or handicrafts, reflecting a preference for stability and alignment with personal competencies in the context of an increasingly specialized labor market. Downward mobility was again rare, with only a few cases of transitions from the armed forces or clerical work



to unskilled or casual labor. However, these exceptions underscore the persistence of individual-level vulnerabilities despite broader upward trends.

A comparison of the two transitions,  $G1 \rightarrow G2$  and  $G2 \rightarrow G3$ , highlights key differences. The earlier transition was marked by “breakthrough” upward mobility away from agriculture, driven by industrialization and the expansion of bureaucratic employment. By contrast, the later transition reflects more “selective” and “stable” upward shifts, accompanied by modest growth in occupational inheritance. This suggests a gradual stabilization of the occupational structure, with continuity beginning to emerge in certain middle-class occupations.

Overall, the findings reveal not only patterns of occupational change but also the mechanisms driving them, including the accumulation and conversion of social and cultural capital, shifts in labor market opportunities, education-based mobility, and the enduring influence of urbanization on career trajectories.

### **Application of Bourdieu’s theory to explain occupational mobility**

Occupational mobility is not merely the result of individual career choices; it is shaped and constrained by structural factors and the social capital accumulated across generations. Bourdieu’s theoretical framework on capital and habitus provides a valuable lens for explaining both upward mobility and the continuation of parental occupations. According to Bourdieu, occupational mobility must be understood in relation to: (1) the individual’s social origin, (2) the quantity and types of capital they have accumulated, and (3) habitus – the system of dispositions formed through past experiences that guide present behavior.

As shown earlier, intergenerational occupational mobility in Hac Thanh Ward, Thanh Hoa Province is remarkably high (over 90% between Generations 1 and 2, and 84% between Generations 2 and 3). Such rates are often interpreted as evidence of an “open” society, where individuals can freely choose their occupations. Yet, viewed through Bourdieu’s lens, this mobility is embedded within and often constrained by mechanisms of social reproduction operating through various forms of capital and habitus.

In Bourdieu’s conception, capital is multi-dimensional: Cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, symbolic capital. These forms of capital are interrelated and convertible, enabling their holders to maintain or improve social position. Individuals from families with abundant cultural capital – such as those with educated parents working as professionals, teachers, civil servants, or military officers – are more likely to access stable, high-status occupations (e.g., administrative, technical, or professional roles). This reflects the cumulative effect of cultural capital, in which early acquisition of academic ability, occupational values, and educational access builds a foundation for later career success. As one female interviewee explained: “I grew up in a family of civil servants. Even though no one forced me, I always believed that only jobs with a ‘title’ were worth doing. When I became a contract employee at the ward office, I felt as if I had returned to the place I had always been familiar with.” (Female, 30, office employee)

Social capital also plays a decisive role, especially in cases of horizontal mobility or in stabilizing social position through occupational change (e.g., from industrial work to sales/service, or from technical work to clerical roles). Broad social networks increase access to information, opportunities, and guidance in an increasingly fluid labor market.

Although not directly measured here, economic capital is a crucial foundation for pursuing vocational training, starting businesses, or entering new occupational fields. Children from economically advantaged families are more likely to enter modern sectors with higher initial investment requirements, such as technology, e-commerce, and communications.

Beyond these tangible resources, habitus – dispositions formed through life conditions and reproduced across generations – shapes what individuals perceive as “possible,” “appropriate,” or “worthwhile.” It operates subconsciously, as embodied responses to social situations. This explains why those from professional families

tend to choose stable, specialized careers, while those from manual labor backgrounds may gravitate toward flexible but less secure work, even with similar formal opportunities.

Bourdieu also emphasizes the field – the structured social space where occupational choices are made within broader societal change. Within a field, individuals whose capital aligns with its operational logic enjoy competitive advantages; those misaligned, even with significant capital, may be excluded. Thus, capital alone is insufficient – its alignment with habitus and the field is equally critical.

In the current transformation of the urban labor market in Hac Thanh Ward, the occupational field is a site where capitals are contested, redistributed, and revalued. The shift from an agrarian society to one dominated by industry and services has elevated the value of cultural capital (degrees, soft skills) over pure physical labor. Likewise, globalization and the expanding role of media and technology have enhanced the importance of social capital (professional connections, relational networks).

In such an environment, those with greater capital are better positioned to preserve social standing, access quality opportunities, and exercise broader career choice. Conversely, those lacking cultural and social capital face higher risks of entering precarious, low-status occupations with limited upward mobility.

Applying Bourdieu's framework to Hac Thanh Ward reveals that occupational mobility remains strongly shaped by the distribution of capital across social groups. The capital–habitus–field triad forms a dynamic mechanism that defines both opportunities and constraints in career choice. While the data show many cases of upward mobility – reflecting the apparent openness of modern society – there are also subtle forms of intergenerational inequality reproduction, not through direct occupational inheritance, but via the transmission of capital, habitus, and action trajectories.

From this perspective, occupational mobility is not solely an individual act but an expression of deeper social mechanisms that reproduce inequality. In contemporary society, the parental transmission of resources and capacities for adaptation, competition, and status maintenance plays a decisive role in shaping career outcomes.

In a period of profound social transformation, Bourdieu's framework enables a nuanced understanding of how personal agency and structural conditions interact, offering a basis for policy interventions aimed at ensuring equitable career opportunities and reducing the intergenerational reproduction of disadvantage.

## DISCUSSION

The findings from Hac Thanh Ward indicate a clear pattern: upward occupational mobility across generations is dominant, while traditional occupational inheritance is relatively rare. This reflects a society undergoing rapid transformation in occupational structure, value systems, and the logic of career choice. To understand the mechanisms driving these shifts, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction offers a valuable analytical lens, as it situates occupational phenomena not solely within economic conditions but within the interplay of various forms of capital, habitus, and the structure of the field.

In traditional societies, occupational continuity typically followed a direct transfer model, where children inherited their parents' occupations in tangible form. In contemporary provincial urban settings such as Thanh Hoa, however, this continuity has shifted to a more abstract level: the transmission of occupationally relevant forms of capital and habitus, shaping indirect career trajectories. Thus, while children may not enter the same occupations as their parents, their choices are still influenced by unconscious orientations formed in the family – what Bourdieu terms habitus.

Occupational habitus, developed early through observation, practice, and experience in the family environment, acts as an “implicit map” for later career decisions. Those raised in families of civil servants or intellectuals often develop a disposition toward stable, structured, and specialized professions. By contrast,

children from manual labor or farming households may lack the habitus suited to navigating modern occupational markets, leading to mobility that can also involve uncertainty or instability.

Bourdieu's framework highlights how the three primary forms of capital – cultural, social, and economic – operate interdependently and can be converted to maintain or enhance social position. Cultural capital (educational qualifications, professional skills, lifestyle) equips individuals for high-skill occupations; social capital (networks of family, friends, and colleagues) facilitates access to information and job opportunities; and economic capital provides the resources necessary for vocational training, business start-ups, or entry into competitive sectors. In Hacı Thanh, the capacity for occupational mobility depends not simply on personal aspiration but on the degree to which these capitals are accumulated and transformed.

At the same time, applying Bourdieu's lens in the Vietnamese context reveals certain limitations. While it effectively explains the hidden reproduction of inequality – where individuals from high-capital families access prestigious occupations without direct occupational inheritance – it is less able to fully account for “complete breakthroughs,” where individuals from low-capital backgrounds enter high-status professions through public policy, exceptional personal circumstances, or sheer chance.

A closer examination through this framework also reveals that the apparent “openness” of the labor market is neither entirely free nor entirely equitable. Career opportunities are still heavily shaped by family background, the amount and type of capital – particularly cultural and social capital – and habitus formed in early life. Two outcomes are evident: first, upward mobility within the occupational hierarchy is occurring, supported by urbanization, educational expansion, and economic transformation; second, mechanisms of intergenerational inequality reproduction persist, as cultural and social capital continue to advantage certain groups, even without direct occupational inheritance.

These findings suggest that occupational mobility is not merely an individual accomplishment but the cumulative product of social structures, family resources, and policy contexts. For policymakers, this underscores the need to view career opportunity structures not only through the lens of market efficiency but also in terms of structural equity – ensuring that access to desirable occupations is not disproportionately determined by inherited advantages.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has presented a comprehensive account of intergenerational occupational mobility in an urban community undergoing rapid transformation – Hacı Thanh Ward, Thanh Hoa Province. The findings indicate that upward mobility is the prevailing trend, marked by a substantial shift from informal sectors and unskilled labor to occupations in the public sector, education, and technical services.

By applying Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the study shows that career opportunities are shaped not only by individual effort but also by the accumulation and intergenerational transmission of various forms of capital – particularly cultural and social capital. Habitus further operates as an implicit guide in career decision-making, generating relatively stable patterns of social reproduction even when the occupations of fathers and children differ.

The research extends the application of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory to the contemporary Vietnamese context, with a specific focus on provincial urban areas where urbanization and economic restructuring are creating new conditions for mobility. It also offers practical insights into the often invisible mechanisms that sustain inequality of opportunity, highlighting how inherited advantages continue to influence occupational outcomes.

Future research should broaden the geographical scope, enabling comparative analyses between rural and urban contexts and across different regions. Further inquiry into the roles of public policy, gender, and cultural heritage will deepen understanding of the forces shaping intergenerational occupational trajectories and inform strategies aimed at promoting greater equity in career opportunities.



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