

# Habituation of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Forming Children's Social Care Character in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia

Achmat Prayitno<sup>1</sup>, Dewi Liesnoor Setyowati<sup>2</sup>, Puji Hardati<sup>3</sup>,  
Hamdan Tri Atmaja<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,4</sup>Social Science Education, <sup>2,3</sup>Geography Education, <sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,  
<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Semarang State University, Semarang, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: Achmat Prayitno

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the habituation of Indonesian Migrant Worker (PMI) families in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia in developing their children's socially responsible character. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observation, and document study. The results showed that PMI family habituation is carried out through role models, household chores, involvement in social and religious activities, and communication of values within the family. This process contributes to the formation of children's socially responsible character, demonstrated through empathy, the ability to share, and tolerance of differences. Supporting factors for character formation include support from the migrant community, the role of schools in teaching the values of tolerance and cooperation, and a multicultural social environment that encourages children to learn to appreciate diversity. Inhibiting factors found were limited parental time due to high workloads, limited access to formal extracurricular activities, and social risks in the surrounding environment. The results of the study emphasize the importance of synergy between families, schools, and communities in supporting the formation of children's

socially responsible character in a multicultural environment.

**Keywords:** habituation, Indonesian migrant workers, children, social care, tolerance.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) are an important part of the socio-economic dynamics of Indonesian society, particularly in meeting family needs. One of the main destinations for PMI is Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, which is a center for the plantation, fisheries, and service sectors that absorb a large number of Indonesian workers. This PMI phenomenon has social consequences, including on the aspect of the development of their children's social character, one of the important character values for PMI children is social care. The character of social care is very important for PMI children because they live in a multicultural social environment such as in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia.

Social care is an attitude and behavior that reflects concern for others and the environment, and fosters social solidarity. Social care is an attitude that relates to humanity in general, or an empathy for each member of the human race that encourages helping others (Pahlwati, 2019). Asmani stated that this social care is crucial for fostering a sense of brotherhood and kinship,

and distancing oneself from arrogance, selfishness, and individualism. Caring for the surrounding environment fosters a sense of humanity, solidarity, and togetherness. Caring instilled in childhood will lay a solid foundation for fostering collaboration, synergy, and cooperation (Agustina et al., 2022). The value of social care is an integral part of developing individuals with good character and contributing to community life. However, the PMI family environment presents unique challenges in fostering social care due to parents' busy work schedules, local cultural differences, and limited access to adequate formal education.

In this context, habituation is an important strategy in shaping children's socially conscious character. The habituation practiced by migrant workers (PMI) families in Tawau can be a parenting style that consistently teaches the value of social awareness in everyday life. This value can be reinforced through examples, routines, and communication between parents and children, even in the dynamic migration situation. Habitus is a system of dispositions (acquired and enduring schemes of perception, thought, and action) that take the form of lifestyles, values, dispositions, and expectations of a particular social group (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's theoretical argument is that habitus is the result of skills that become practical actions (not always conscious) that are then translated into natural abilities and develop within a particular social environment. Habitus results in differences in lifestyles and life practices that are acquired through individual experiences of interaction. Habitus is the "mental or cognitive structure" through which people relate to the social world according to Pierre Bourdieu (1990). In relation to the social world, individuals are inseparable from social interactions and spaces. To meet social requirements or acceptance, individuals must possess capital to fulfill their interactions and social arenas or spaces with others. Capital, according to Bourdieu, consists of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. In this context, the

habituation process of migrant workers is inseparable from the social arena or space, defined as the residential environment, and capital, defined as the economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by migrant workers' families.

Research references indicate a relationship in shaping children's character through habituation. *First*, a previous study entitled "*Habituation Method in Developing Children's Independent Character at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*" by Herson Anwar, Kartini Dwi Hasanah from the Sultan Amai State Islamic Institute of Gorontalo, Indonesia, and the Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University of Malang, Indonesia. The results of this study indicate that the method of habituating children's independent behavior in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is by designing activities, both routine, spontaneous, and programmed activities. *Second*, a previous study entitled "*Values in the Family That Affect the Youth Character Habituation with the Mother's Work*" by Dian Pertiwi Josua, Euis Sunarti, and Diah Krisnatuti from IPB University. The results of this study indicate that character habituation is thought to be directly and indirectly influenced by family characteristics, adolescent characteristics, and family values. The data shows that the average family values internalized by families vary.

From these research references, it is clear that no research has specifically examined family habituation in the context of Indonesian migrant worker families in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, in shaping children's socially responsible character. Socially responsible character is crucial because migrant workers' children live in a multicultural society, and all of this is done to ensure harmony. There are three research objectives that are of concern. *First*, to analyze the habituation of Indonesian migrant workers in everyday life in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. *Second*, to analyze the socially responsible character of children of Indonesian migrant workers in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. *Third*, to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in the

formation of children's socially responsible character through the daily habituation of Indonesian migrant workers in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. Academically, this research contributes to the development of migrant work habituation in shaping children's socially responsible character in a multicultural social environment in the Land of the Overseas.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

The research location is Kampung Batu 2, Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. Tawau is a key city in Sabah, Malaysia, directly bordering Indonesia, specifically Nunukan Regency, North Kalimantan. This geographical proximity makes Tawau a strategic route for trade, labor migration, and long-standing socio-cultural interactions between Malaysian and Indonesian communities.



Figure 1: Location of Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia.

Source: <https://g.co/kgs/KzoQ91i>

Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and understands the meanings of social issues among individuals or groups (Creswell, 2017). This study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of in-depth understanding of the habituation of Indonesian migrant workers in shaping the socially caring character of children in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. The main data sources come from two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with

Indonesian migrant workers and their children. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from observations of the daily habituation of Indonesian migrant workers and the socially caring character of their children. Secondary data sources were also obtained from document studies held by Indonesian migrant workers and their children.

Data collection techniques were conducted through three methods. *First*, in-depth interviews were used to explore the experiences and perspectives of informants regarding habituation and their children's socially conscious character. *Second*, observations were conducted to directly observe the dynamics of Indonesian migrant workers' habituation and their children's socially conscious character. *Third*, document studies were used to examine documents held by Indonesian migrant workers and their children, as well as other relevant documents to support the analysis. Data analysis was conducted thematically, beginning with data reduction to filter information relevant to the research focus. The data were then presented in the form of interpretive narratives to uncover emerging social processes, patterns, and values. Conclusions were drawn inductively, linking field findings and document studies.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

The research findings indicate that Indonesian migrant worker families in Tawau employ a simple yet consistent habituation pattern to foster a socially caring character in their children. This habituation process occurs naturally through daily activities, not through formal approaches, but through the repetition of parental actions. The habituation patterns found include modeling social behavior, such as sharing food with neighbors, helping fellow migrant workers facing difficulties, and instilling mutual respect in a multicultural social environment. Children observe these parental behaviors, imitate them, and internalize the values of caring in daily interactions with peers, teachers, and the

community around their homes. This finding aligns with the concept of habitus proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1990), which explains that a person's mindset, values, and actions are shaped through repeated social experiences and ingrained as a relatively permanent disposition. In this context, migrant worker families foster a socially caring habitus in their children through the practice of simple yet meaningful actions. This habitus then becomes a guideline that unconsciously influences children's behavior in various social situations.

In addition to providing role models, habituation is carried out through household tasks that have a character-building dimension, such as caring for younger siblings, cleaning the house, washing dishes, and sharing food with family members. These practices build social capital within the family by fostering trust, solidarity, and support networks that strengthen social relationships between family members and the surrounding community. This strong social capital supports the formation of prosocial behavior that children consistently display in their daily lives. The multicultural social environment of migrant workers also plays a significant role. Children are accustomed to seeing and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, so the social care values acquired in the family become more relevant and contextual. The habitus formed within the family, enriched by multicultural experiences in the environment, contributes significantly to shaping children's character, which is concerned with others. The results of this study confirm Bourdieu's theory that habitus formation occurs through daily practices in specific social arenas, in this case migrant worker families in Tawau. The social care habitus that is formed will form the basis for children's future behavior, both in educational contexts and in social life.

The participation of Indonesian migrant worker families in social and religious activities plays a crucial role in developing their children's socially conscious character. This participation is evident in the

involvement of some families in regular religious activities at places of worship, community service, and various social events organized by migrant communities and schools. Religious activities, in addition to providing a means of spiritual strengthening, also serve as a forum for social interaction among community members. Children have the opportunity to meet, interact, and collaborate with peers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. This broadens children's experiences in interacting with the broader social environment and fosters a sense of togetherness and solidarity among community members.

Community service activities involving the entire family provide concrete experiences for children in understanding the value of social care. Children observe and participate in environmental cleanup activities, community service activities, and helping neighbors in need. These direct experiences serve as a means of internalizing the values of caring and social responsibility, which are crucial for character development. According to Lickona (2012), effective character education must actively involve children in real-world practices so that the values instilled can be properly internalized. In addition to social participation, the habituation process in migrant families also occurs through communication and the instilling of values within the home environment. Parents use family time, such as mealtimes or bedtimes, to convey simple but meaningful moral messages. Values frequently emphasized include respecting differences, not discriminating against friends, and helping friends experiencing difficulties at school. In line with family socialization theory (Hurlock, 2012), the family plays a primary role in shaping children's personalities and characters through consistent parenting, communication, and role modeling.

The findings of this study are also relevant to Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, which explains that a person's mindset, values, and actions are formed through repeated social experiences, thus becoming a relatively

permanent disposition. Children's participation in social activities and the habituation of morally valued communication within the family create a socially caring habitus that is deeply ingrained in the child. This habitus serves as a behavioral guide that influences children's interactions at school and in the wider community, especially in the multicultural social context that characterizes migrant communities. This demonstrates that the habituation carried out by migrant worker families is not formal, but rather occurs naturally and contextually through simple but consistent daily activities. The values of social care, solidarity, and respect for differences grow naturally and sustainably within the child. Direct experiences and social habits that occur in the family and community play a strategic role in shaping a child's character.

### **The Impact of Habituation on Children's Socially Caring Character**

Data analysis shows that parental habituation has a significant positive contribution to the development of children's socially conscious character. This habituation is manifested in the form of simple habits carried out repeatedly and consistently within the family environment. The results of the study indicate that children exhibit several important indicators of socially conscious character. *First*, empathy, seen in children's sensitivity to friends experiencing difficulties in both academic and social contexts, as well as their initiative to help without being asked. For example, children show concern when a friend doesn't have school supplies or is experiencing personal problems, by providing support or assistance as needed. *Second*, the emerging indicator is the ability to share. Children are accustomed to sharing food, stationery, and playtime with peers. This habit demonstrates that the values of caring and solidarity have been internalized in children's behavior, so they focus not only on personal interests but also on the needs of others. *Third*, children also demonstrate tolerance for differences,

namely the ability to respect friends from different cultural backgrounds, languages, and customs. They are not easily provoked into conflict, even when differences of opinion or customs arise in everyday interactions. This is especially important considering that children of migrant workers live in a multicultural environment consisting of various ethnicities and cultures, both at school and in their homes.

The process of developing a socially conscious character is influenced by a complex interaction between family parenting styles, the influence of the school environment, and involvement in the migrant community. Within the family, habituation occurs through parental role models, communication that emphasizes moral values, and the assignment of simple responsibilities within the household. The school environment reinforces this process through collaborative activities such as group study, school community service, and extracurricular activities that foster a sense of community. Meanwhile, the migrant community provides a space for children to practice socially conscious values in a broader context through religious, social, and cultural activities.

These findings align with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which asserts that children learn through observing and imitating the behavior of adult role models. Furthermore, the results of this study can be understood through Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, which explains that a person's thought patterns, values, and actions are shaped through repeated social experiences, becoming permanent dispositions that influence future actions. In the context of migrant worker children, a socially caring habitus is formed through interactions within the family, school, and migrant community, which provide concrete experiences and models of prosocial behavior. This embedded habitus becomes cultural capital that functions when children encounter social dynamics in multicultural environments. Family habituation, reinforced by the broader social arena, results

in the internalization of socially caring values in children, enabling them to be empathetic, sharing, and tolerant in their daily lives.

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors**

The results of this study identify various factors that support and hinder the process of developing socially caring character in children within Indonesian migrant worker families in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia. The most dominant supporting factor is the existence of a community of fellow migrant workers who have mutually supportive social ties. This community serves as an important forum for families to internalize the value of social care. Through social activities, such as mutual cooperation, helping each other, and sharing among members, children have the opportunity to learn and directly practice the value of caring. This aligns with the findings of Ma'arifM (2019) who stated that the community plays a crucial role in shaping children's prosocial behavior because it provides a space for the socialization of moral values.

In addition, schools not only function as academic educational institutions, but also as an arena for socializing the values of tolerance, cooperation, and social care through group-based activities, project-based learning, and interactions with students from diverse cultural backgrounds Ma'arifM (2019). The multicultural social environment in Tawau also plays a supporting role because children are accustomed to living in diversity, so they learn to appreciate differences and develop a tolerant attitude naturally.

These findings can be analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice, which emphasizes three key concepts: habitus, domain, and capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus refers to cognitive schemes, dispositions, and patterns of action formed through social experiences. In this context, the habitus of migrant workers' children is formed through interactions with migrant communities, schools, and multicultural environments. Domains are understood as social arenas where individuals interact,

compete, and produce meaning, such as the family, community, school, and social environment where they live. Social capital, in the form of supportive social networks, and cultural capital, in the form of values, skills, and knowledge acquired by children both from school and from their families, are important factors in the process of developing a socially caring character. With this capital, children are better equipped to develop social sensitivity and concern for others.

However, there are also inhibiting factors that have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of the process of developing socially conscious character. High workloads severely limit parents' time to interact and communicate with their children. From Bourdieu's perspective (1986), this limited time can reduce the transfer of positive habitus from parents to children, thus affecting the internalization of social values. Furthermore, limited access to extracurricular activities focused on character education at school or in the community also poses a barrier, as children have few opportunities to develop social skills in a structured manner. Social risks, such as promiscuity and discrimination in the surrounding environment, can also influence the construction of children's habitus, which in turn impacts their social attitudes and behaviors. The formation of socially conscious character in children in migrant worker families is a complex process influenced by the interaction between family habitus, the social sphere they occupy, and their social and cultural capital. Efforts to improve character formation need to be carried out simultaneously through community strengthening, support from educational institutions, and policies that encourage the formation of a conducive social environment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The habituation process undertaken by Indonesian Migrant Worker (PMI) families in Tawau plays a crucial role in shaping their children's socially responsible character.

This habituation process encompasses four main forms. First, role modeling, where parents intentionally or unintentionally demonstrate socially responsible behavior, such as sharing, helping others, and respecting differences, which then serve as examples for children to emulate. Second, the habituation of household chores, such as caring for younger siblings, cleaning the house, and sharing food, fosters a sense of responsibility and empathy in children toward their immediate environment. Third, involvement in social activities, both within the migrant community and at school, provides children with direct experience interacting and collaborating with others. Fourth, the communication of values, where parents use shared time to instill moral messages about the importance of respecting differences, not discriminating between friends, and helping others in need.

The habituation implemented by this family contributes positively to the development of children's character, as reflected in three main indicators: empathy, the ability to share, and tolerance for differences. Supporting factors for this character development include the support of a strong migrant community and a multicultural environment that encourages children to learn to appreciate cultural diversity. However, there are also inhibiting factors such as limited parental time due to heavy workloads and limited access to formal character education outside the family.

#### **Declaration by Authors**

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