

Changing Symbolic Meanings in Parent–Child Relationships

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Abstract

The parent–child relationship is a dynamic social bond continuously shaped through interaction and shared meanings. This study examines the symbols used in everyday parent–child interactions and how their meanings change across different stages of life. Using qualitative methods, data were collected from parents and adult children through in-depth unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, and observation.

The findings reveal significant shifts in the interpretation of symbols such as silence, care, authority, emotional expression, and digital communication. The study highlights how generational differences and social change influence symbolic understanding, often leading to miscommunication and emotional distance. The paper contributes empirical insights to family sociology by documenting how symbolic meanings are negotiated and transformed within contemporary parent–child relationships.

Keywords

Parent–Child Relationship; Symbols; Qualitative Study; Family Sociology; Social Change

1. Introduction

Parent–child relationships play a central role in shaping emotional development, social behavior, and identity formation. Unlike formal relationships governed by explicit norms, parent–child bonds rely heavily on implicit communication through symbols such as gestures, routines, tone, and silence. These symbols acquire meaning through repeated interaction and are interpreted differently by parents and children.

In recent decades, changes in education, employment patterns, urban living, and technology have altered family interaction patterns. These changes have also transformed the symbolic language within families. This study aims to empirically explore how symbols are used in parent–child relationships and how their meanings shift over time.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify commonly used symbols in parent–child interactions.
2. To examine how parents and children interpret these symbols differently.
3. To analyze changes in symbolic meanings across different life stages.
4. To document the impact of social change on parent–child communication.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to understand the lived experiences of parents and children and their subjective interpretations of everyday interactions.

Sources of Data

Primary Data

The primary data for the study were collected using the following methods:

- In-depth unstructured interviews with parents and adult children
- Focus Group Discussions
- Case studies
- Participant observation

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from the following sources:

- Research journals, newspapers, and magazines
- Digital libraries such as JSTOR and ResearchGate

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used for the study. Participants were selected from different socio-economic backgrounds to capture diverse experiences and perspectives related to parent–child relationships.

Data Analysis

All interviews and discussions were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring symbols, patterns of interaction, and variations in interpretation were identified and categorized under major themes.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study are presented under the major themes that emerged from the qualitative data.

4.1 Silence as a Symbol of Authority and Emotional Distance

Parents often used silence as a disciplinary tool or as an expression of disappointment. For parents, silence symbolized control, maturity, or the act of giving space. However, children consistently interpreted silence as emotional withdrawal, rejection, or unresolved conflict.

In several cases, prolonged silence led to anxiety and emotional distress among children, even when parents believed they were maintaining dignity or avoiding confrontation. This difference in interpretation frequently resulted in unresolved tension within the parent–child relationship.

4.2 Care Interpreted as Duty Rather Than Affection

Parents commonly expressed love through actions such as providing food, financial support, managing daily routines, and ensuring education. These actions were symbolized by parents as care and responsibility.

However, many children perceived these actions as routine obligations rather than emotional affection. The absence of verbal appreciation or emotional expression led children to feel emotionally unsupported despite receiving material care. This finding highlights a symbolic gap between parental intention and children’s perception.

4.3 Changing Meaning of Parental Authority

Traditional symbols of authority such as strict discipline, decision-making control, and monitoring were accepted during early childhood but increasingly questioned during adolescence and adulthood.

Parents viewed these actions as guidance and protection, whereas children interpreted them as interference or lack of trust. This shift often caused conflict during transitional life stages such as career choice, marriage decisions, and the pursuit of independence.

4.4 Emotional Expression as a New Symbolic Expectation

The study revealed that children increasingly expect emotional openness from parents. Verbal encouragement, emotional validation, and active listening were interpreted as symbols of love and acceptance.

Parents who struggled to express emotions verbally were often perceived as distant, even when they were deeply involved in their children’s lives. This shift reflects broader social changes emphasizing emotional communication within family relationships.

4.5 Digital Communication as a Symbol of Care

Phone calls, text messages, and response time emerged as new symbolic indicators in parent–child relationships. Regular communication was interpreted by children as concern and emotional attachment.

Delayed responses were often perceived as neglect or disinterest. Parents, however, viewed communication frequency as secondary to trust and independence. This mismatch created new forms of misunderstanding shaped by technological change.

4.6 Life Transitions and Symbolic Reinterpretation

Major life transitions such as adulthood, employment, marriage, and parenthood significantly altered symbolic meanings within parent–child relationships.

Behaviors that once symbolized care were reinterpreted as control, while silence that once symbolized authority came to represent emotional distance. Relationships were more successful when symbolic meanings were renegotiated through open communication.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that conflict in parent–child relationships often arises not from actions themselves but from differing symbolic interpretations.

Social change has altered expectations related to emotional expression, authority, and communication, leading to symbolic misalignment between generations. These findings support the symbolic interactionist perspective that parent–child relationships are continuously negotiated rather than fixed.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that parent–child relationships are shaped by evolving symbolic meanings. Silence, care, authority, and communication function as powerful symbols whose interpretations change across time and context.

Misunderstanding these symbols can lead to emotional distance, whereas conscious renegotiation of symbolic meanings can strengthen emotional bonds. Recognizing symbolic differences is essential for improving parent–child relationships in contemporary society.

7. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has the following implications:

- Provides empirical insights for family counselors, therapists, and educators
- Contributes qualitative findings to family sociology and symbolic interactionism
- Highlights the need for intergenerational communication awareness
- Encourages reflection on symbolic meanings in everyday family interactions

8. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research may adopt longitudinal study designs or comparative cultural approaches to examine changes in symbolic meanings across generations and social contexts.

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