



Television Mediation in the Reshaping of Family Relationships: A Critical Sociological Analysis in Light of Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role television plays in reshaping family relationships in the context of contemporary social and cultural transformations, using symbolic interactionism as an interpretive framework. The study highlights that television does not function as a unidirectional influence, but rather as a symbolic mediator that contributes to the production of meaning within family interactions. Furthermore, its impact is determined by patterns of use and interpretation, as it can either strengthen family cohesion or contribute to its disintegration, depending on the family's social and cultural context.

Keywords: television; family relationships; symbolic interaction; social interaction; daily life.

Introduction :

As a dynamic social unit, the family has undergone profound transformations in its structure and functions under the influence of rapid technological and media developments, which has made it a central topic in modern sociological analysis. In this context, the theory of symbolic interactionism emerges as an analytical framework that allows understanding family relationships not as mere structural relationships, but as the product of everyday interactive processes through which meanings and symbols are built.

Television is one of the most prominent of these media, which is not limited to transmitting information and entertainment, but has become a social actor involved in reshaping daily life within the family.

This intensive presence has led to a reorganization of family interaction patterns, where communication is no longer based on face-to-face interaction, but is conditioned by symbolic mediation practiced by the media.

Therefore, this article seeks to provide a descriptive and analytical critical reading of family relationships in the light of this perspective, focusing on the mechanisms of building meaning, the formation of roles, the dynamics of conflict and cohesion within the family system.

The problematic

In the context of the socio-communicative transformations witnessed by modern society, the family is no longer a closed format based on direct face-to-face interactions, but has become



an open space within which intensive symbolic and informational flows intersect, mediated by mass media, primarily television. Thanks to this media mediation, the interactive structure within the family is subjected to constant reshaping processes, affecting communication patterns, the production of meanings, and the redefinition of roles and places.

In this context, television emerges as a communicative actor that exercises symbolic forms of power, through the reproduction of social representations and the construction of the perceived reality of individuals, which affects the course of social interaction within the family context, which calls for an analytical approach based on symbolic interactivity to understand how meanings are formed through interaction and how media messages are reinterpreted within the family context.

Therefore, we are faced with the following problem:

To what extent does television as a socio-communicative medium with symbolic power contribute to the dismantling and reconstruction of patterns of interaction within the family by influencing the process of producing meaning and reshaping social representations, and how can these dynamics be interpreted in the framework of symbolic interactivity ?'

Towards a symbolic interactive reading of family relationships

Symbolic interactionism is based on the basic premise that individuals act based on the meanings they give to objects, that these meanings are produced through social interaction and from this perspective, the family is understood as a space for the production of meanings, where relationships are formed through constant interaction.

(Blumer, 1969.p2)

Mead emphasizes that the self is formed through interaction with others, which makes the family the first area of identity formation. In this context, television acquires special importance as a symbolic element that enters into the process of building meaning within the family, through the representations and images it provides. (Mead, 1934, pp135-144)

Symbolic interactionism proceeds from the basic assumption that social reality is not given ready-made, but is built through interaction.

The relationship between spouses, for example, is based not only on predetermined roles, but on a network of symbols (language, gestures, attitudes) that acquire their significance through constant interaction.

Herbert Blumer asserts that meanings arise from social interaction and are subject to constant modification. (Blumer, 1969 p. 5) accordingly, the stability or disintegration of the family is related to the degree of compatibility in the interpretation of these symbols.

Symbolic interactionism offers a qualitative explanation of the conflict within the family, as it is perceived not only as a direct result of material or structural factors, but as a result of difference in the interpretation of symbols and meanings. For example, the father may interpret the son's behavior as rebellion, while the son sees it as an expression of independence. This difference in interpretation leads to tension in the relationship, which means that the family conflict is essentially a struggle for meaning.



Language also plays a central role in this context, as the same phrase can produce different effects depending on the interactive context, which enhances the interpretive character of family relationships. In contrast to conflict, family cohesion is achieved when there is a convergence in the interpretation of symbols, an implicit agreement on values and a stability in the meanings in circulation

Thus, cohesion does not boil down to physical proximity or legal ties, but to a common symbolic understanding. The importance of symbolic interactivity in interpreting family interaction patterns lies in minimizing the influence of the media this theory assumes that individuals have the freedom to interpret meanings, but it reduces the power of media discourse and the impact of repetition and strong symbolism while neglecting the social structure and focuses on partial interaction, but neglects class differences and cultural context as well as power within the family Symbolism is characterized by an exaggeration of the consensual character because it assumes the possibility of symbolic negotiation, while reality reveals the existence of unequal relationships and the imposition of meanings within the family. however, this theory remains one of the most capable approaches to explain how television messages turn into practices and meanings within family life.

Television as a symbolic medium in the reconstruction of family reality

Television is one of the most prominent means that broke into the daily life of the family, as its presence is not limited to the living room only, but its influence extends to the organization of family time and patterns of interaction, the family is one of the most important structures on which societies are based, as it forms the first framework in which the individual learns Television, family life have become directly intersected with media content that enters the home space on a daily and continuous basis.

There are some media studies that indicate that television contributes to reshaping the daily routine within the family, by setting group or individual viewing times, which affects the level of direct communication between individuals (Silverstone, 1994.pp 19-27)

In the contemporary context, television is seen as a medium that contributes to the reshaping of social reality by producing what he calls the 'media experience of reality'. television content is not consumed passively, but is reinterpreted within the family context, making its impact related to the processes of interpretation and interaction(Thompson, 1995.pp82-89). Silverstone also points out that television is integrated into the daily life of households, where it becomes part of routine practices, giving it the ability to influence interaction patterns and relationships(Silverstone, 1994.pp163-176)

Recent studies support this thesis, as a study by Livingstone found that media use within the family is characterized by a negotiated nature, as individuals reinterpret content according to their social contexts (Livingstone, 2020.pp45-).

Other studies have also shown that media contribute to reshaping the concept of 'Connected family' where direct relationships overlap with mediated interactions. (Clark, 2021, pp. 25–30) The influence of television is not limited to the apparent behavior within the family only, but extends to reshaping the perceptions and meanings associated with the family relationships



themselves and giving them interactive symbols that are consistent with what the individual lives inside and outside his family .

Through dramatic and informative content, certain images of the family are presented (idealized, conflictual, or Disjointed), which affect the expectations of individuals about the direction of relationships within their family, and with constant repetition these images become part of the symbolic reference that is used in the interpretation of family reality.

Television also offers a variety of content that presents different models of social and family relationships, which makes individuals reinterpret their family reality based on these models presented. This is what makes television a symbolic actor within everyday life, and not just a technical device, but it has turned from a simple entertainment medium into a key element within family life, as it participates in the formation of thinking patterns, and affects the nature of dialogue and interaction between family members. hence, the study of the relationship between television and family relations has become a necessity to understand the transformations that occur in the structure of communication Within the contemporary family. Thus, the impact of television cannot be understood in isolation from the social context of the family, because individuals do not react negatively to media content, but reproduce its meanings according to their daily experiences. In the traditional perspective, family roles are understood as specific social positions (father, mother, son), but symbolic interactionism redefines these roles as a flexible interactive product.

The role of a father, for example, may take on different meanings: authority and discipline, emotional support and pedagogical partnership

This depends on the interactive context within the family. The role of the mother is no longer limited to the traditional job, but is formed according to Daily symbolic negotiations that reflect the transformations of society.

This dynamic character of roles reveals that the family is not just a structure, but a continuous process of reproducing meanings. (LaRossa, R., & Reitzes, D. 1993. 55(1), p141).

The family is the first framework for the formation of individual identity, where an individual learns to see himself through the interaction of others with him. The contribution of Charles Horton Cooley is highlighted here through the concept of the 'mirror self', which assumes that an individual builds his self-image by being aware of how others see him within the family (Cooley, P. H. 1902 p. 152.)

This perception is formed through the reactions of parents, patterns of everyday interaction, implicit and explicit assessments, therefore, family relationships are not limited to the regulation of behavior, but extend to the formation of self-awareness.

Patterns of family interaction under Television mediation

Family interaction under television can be analyzed by three main patterns :

1/ Integrative Interaction:

This pattern appears when family members watch television collectively, exchanging discussion about the content, and in this context television turns into a medium for dialogue, common meanings are produced that enhance family cohesion from the perspective of symbolic interactivity, this pattern reflects a consensus in the interpretation of symbols where



collective viewing contributes to the creation of a common symbolic space that promotes dialogue and rapprochement.

2/ Fragmented Interaction:

This pattern arises as a result of different interpretations within the family, such as generational differences in the interpretation of values

And the conflict between family values and media contents, in this case the family conflict becomes a symbolic struggle about meanings and not just a behavioral difference.

3/ Interpretive Interaction

In this style, individuals do not receive content uniformly, but each individual interprets messages according to his experiences and reinterprets the meanings. Here it appears that the meaning is not imposed from television, but is built within family interaction, which corresponds to the interactive proposition that individuals are active in producing meaning and are not passive recipients.

Therefore, the interaction is related to the process of reinterpreting the content, as the meanings vary within the family according to cultural backgrounds.

4 / insular reaction

This type of interaction occurs when everyone watches TV separately (telephone, private room), which leads to a decline in direct family interaction with poor communication and the disintegration of common meanings, and here television turns from a medium of interaction into a factor of symbolic dismantling of family relationships.

Reflections of television on the dynamics of family relationships

Television affects family relationships on several levels, including the following:

1/Restructuring family communication in light of television mediation

Patterns of communication within the family witnessed a major transformation with the spread of media, as interaction was no longer limited to direct communication based on symbolic face-to-face interaction, but rather took on an intermediary character in which media messages overlapped with daily interactions. Television worked to reorganize the space of family interaction by imposing a special time rhythm, defining moments of gathering and attention, and redirecting the paths of dialogue within the family.

This shift reflects a move from a participatory communication model to a semi-unidirectional model, where media content dominates the interactive field, reducing opportunities for deep symbolic exchange between individuals. However, this does not necessarily mean an absolute decline in family communication, but rather indicates its restructuring according to new patterns such as interaction around media content, or what can be called 'mediator-centered communication'.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this transformation can be understood as a redefinition of shared meanings within the family, as media-produced symbols and meanings become part of the daily interactive structure, which affects how individuals perceive their roles and status within the family system.

2/ Transformations of values within the family system



Television plays a pivotal role in transmitting and reproducing value systems, as it allows continuous exposure to diverse cultural contents that may conflict or intersect with traditional family values. As a result, the family becomes a space for value negotiation, in which local cultural references interact with globalized values broadcast by the media. Any introduction of new cultural patterns may cause value conflicts.

In this context, it is possible to notice the emergence of shifts in the ladder of values among individuals, especially with regard to concepts such as independence, individualism, and consumption patterns. These shifts are related to what Inglehart (1997) indicated about the transition from material values to post-materialism. Intense exposure to television content may also promote some new cultural trends, such as redefining gender roles within the family, or reshaping expectations associated with family life.

However, the influence of television on values is not inevitable or unidirectional, but rather is subject to mechanisms of reception and interpretation within the family. Individuals do not receive media messages passively, but rather reinterpret them in light of their experiences and social contexts, which is consistent with active reception approaches in media studies.

Accordingly, transformations of values within the family represent a complex, dynamic process in which media, culture, and social structure factors intersect, making television an influential, but not absolutely decisive, actor in shaping the family value system.

Redistribution of power:

Power within the contemporary family is no longer fixed or monopolized by one party, as was the case in traditional patriarchal models, but has become subject to continuous redistribution due to cultural and technological transformations, including the intense presence of television as a symbolic actor within the family space (Bourdieu, 1991, p.170).

Television plays an indirect role in reshaping the balance of power within the family, by influencing the sources of knowledge and legitimacy. In the traditional context, cognitive and moral authority was concentrated with the parents, but television provided children with access to alternative knowledge, which weakened the monopoly of adults on sources of socialization (Livingstone, 2002, p. 45). This shift contributed to the emergence of a pattern of “authoritarian decentralization,” where sources of influence are distributed among actors within the family.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this transformation can be understood as a redefinition of the roles and meanings associated with power, as power is not only exercised through orders, but rather is built through continuous symbolic interaction and interpretation. With the entry of television as a symbolic medium, its contents become part of the process of negotiating power within the family, and control of the media medium itself (selection of channels, viewing time, quality of programmes) turns into a field of symbolic conflict between family members, as each party seeks to impose its preferences, which reflects power disparities within the system. Family (Morley, 1986, p.102) Thus, television becomes a tool for the redistribution of power rather than just a means of entertainment.

In addition, television contributes to redefining gender roles within the family, by presenting alternative models of relationships between men and women, which may lead to the weakening



of traditional authority based on a strict division of roles (98 (Giddens, 1992). p This reinforces the move towards more negotiated and participatory relationships within the family.

From the perspective of media studies, television can be considered a product of 'symbolic power' that affects individuals' perception of themselves and their relationships without directly exercising power (166) Bourdieu, 1991. This symbolic power reshapes standards and expectations, which is reflected in the power structure within the family.

However, these transformations remain relative, as they differ according to social and cultural contexts, and in some cases television may reproduce traditional patterns of authority rather than dismantle them.) 189 (Silverstone, 1994. p.

Redefining family cohesion:

Television introduced a new dimension to family relationships, as it was no longer just a means of entertainment, but rather a symbolic actor that reshaped the patterns of interaction within the family. Its relationship with family cohesion can be understood on two levels.

When television constitutes a shared space for interaction (group viewing, discussion about content), it contributes to the production of shared meanings that support family closeness. (enhance cohesion)

When it turns into an individual means of consumption (separate viewing, everyone's preoccupation with their device), it reduces opportunities for direct interaction, leading to the disintegration of symbolic ties within the family. (weakening cohesion)

Thus, the influence of television is not inevitable, but is determined by how it is integrated into today's practices.

Towards a non-deterministic understanding of the impact of television

Despite the fact that symbolic interactivity provides accurate analysis tools, its exclusive adoption in the study of the family poses several problems:

The first is the neglect of the structural dimension, it focuses on everyday interaction and omits the influence of: economic structure, power within the family and the general cultural context.

Secondly, it reduces inequality: symbolic interactionism presupposes some kind of equal interaction, while studies show that family relationships may be characterized by an imbalance of power (between parents and children or between spouses).

Thirdly, the limitations of interpretation in light of contemporary transformations in the light of globalization and the media, meanings are no longer built only within the family, but are influenced by external sources, which limits the ability of the theory to comprehensively explain without integrating it with other approaches. However, symbolic interactionism remains an effective analytical tool for understanding how everyday interactions turn into meanings that establish family relationships.

The analysis shows that the influence of television cannot be understood in an imperative framework, it should be viewed as an interactive process in which social and cultural factors overlap. Television does not impose its meanings, they are negotiated within the family, which corresponds to the symbolic interactive offering.



Critical reading also reveals that the change in family relationships is due not only to television, but to broader transformations in the structure of society, such as individualism and cultural changes.

Result

The article concludes that television is a central symbolic medium in the reshaping of family relationships, contributing to the production of new patterns of interaction and meaning. However, its impact remains not inevitable, but rather related to how it is used and interpreted within the family. Hence, understanding the relationship between television and the family requires a dynamic approach that takes into account the socio-cultural context. Family relationships, in the light of symbolic interactionism, are not a fixed given, but a dynamic construction formed through constant interaction and the production of meanings. Roles, identity, conflict, cohesion are all phenomena that are understood through the analysis of the symbols and interpretations that family members exchange.

However, a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary family requires moving beyond a purely interactive approach towards an integrative approach that takes into account the overlap between the symbolic and structural dimension.

Thus, the contemporary family is no longer just a closed social unit, but has become an open interactive space in which internal and external symbols intersect, which necessitates the adoption of analytical approaches that combine the symbolic and structural dimension to understand these transformations.

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