



The Symbolic Child: A Cultural Sociological Analysis of the Changing Role of the Child in the Family

Simgesel Çocuk: Ailede Çocuğun Değişen Rolü Üzerine Kültürel Sosyolojik Bir Analiz

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Abstract

Drawing on the realization that classical family sociology often treats children as passive dependents—rendering them analytically invisible—this study examines the transformation of the concept of the “symbolic child,” a culturally constructed image of the child’s role and meaning in family life, from agrarian societies to the digital age. This research aims to re-center the symbolic child as a key analytical figure in family sociology and considers how historical and cultural shifts in the symbolic meaning of childhood have redefined the role and meaning of the family institution. The analysis acknowledges that conceptions of childhood are not monolithic; it notes variations by gender, class, and historical-cultural context, bringing an intersectional nuance to the findings. Methodologically, using a qualitative, interpretive, and historical-comparative analysis grounded in cultural sociology, the study traces and compares changes in the symbolic status of children across successive periods. The key findings reveal a profound transformation in the role of children: from economic agencies and labor contributors in agrarian households, children became emotional focal points in industrial-era families, and in today’s media-saturated society they have become precociously adultified participants. Overall, the findings suggest that to understand the family as a cultural institution, the evolving symbolic child must be placed at the center of sociological analysis.

Keywords: Changing childhood, family, symbolic child, agrarian societies, digital age

Paper Type: Research

Öz

Klasik aile sosyolojisinin çocukları genellikle edilgen bağımlılar olarak ele aldığı ve onları analitik olarak görünmez kıldığı gerçeğinden yola çıkan bu çalışma, tarım toplumlarından dijital çağa, çocuğun aile yaşamındaki rolü ve anlamının kültürel olarak oluşturulmuş bir imgesi olan “simgesel çocuk” kavramının dönüşümünü incelemektedir. Bu araştırma, simgesel çocuğu aile sosyolojisinde önemli bir analitik figür olarak yeniden merkeze koymayı ve çocukluğun simgesel anlamındaki tarihsel ve kültürel değişimlerin aile kurumunun rolünü ve anlamını nasıl yeniden tanımladığını ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Analiz, çocukluk anlayışlarının tek tip olmadığını kabul eder; cinsiyet, sınıf ve tarihsel-kültürel bağlama göre farklılıkları not ederek bulgulara kesişimsel bir nüans katar. Metodolojik olarak, kültürel sosyolojiye dayalı nitel, yorumlayıcı ve tarihsel-karşılaştırmalı bir analiz kullanan çalışma, ardışık dönemlerde çocukların simgesel konumundaki değişiklikleri izler ve karşılaştırır. Temel bulgular, çocukların rolünde derin bir dönüşümü ortaya koyuyor: Tarımsal hanelerde ekonomik eyleyiciler ve emek sağlayıcılar olan çocuklar, sanayi dönemi ailelerinde duygusal odak noktaları haline gelirken, günümüzün medyaya doymuş toplumunda ise erken yetişkinleşmiş katılımcılar haline geldiler. Genel olarak bulgular, aileyi kültürel bir kurum olarak anlamak için, gelişen simgesel çocuğun sosyolojik analizin merkezine yerleştirilmesi gerektiğini gösteriyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Değişen çocukluk, aile, simgesel çocuk, tarım toplumları, dijital çağ

Makale Türü: Araştırma

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Introduction

Once considered miniature adults in agrarian households, children today are often seen as priceless innocents in need of protection – a dramatic shift that underscores how childhood is a cultural construction rather than a fixed biological stage. This article offers a cultural-sociological and historical-comparative analysis of the symbolic child in family life, examining how the culturally constructed image of “the child” and the child’s role in the family have transformed from preindustrial agrarian societies to the digital age. By symbolic child, we refer to the child as imagined in cultural discourse – a figure that has embodied varying meanings (innocent or sinful, economically priceless or useful, victim or agent) across different contexts. The central argument is that changes in the symbolic significance of children both reflect and drive transformations in family structures and relationships. In other words, to understand the family as a cultural institution, we must place the evolving symbolic child at the center of analysis.

This inquiry is situated at the intersection of cultural sociology, historical sociology, and the new sociology of childhood. From a cultural sociology perspective, the family is not merely a functional set of roles or economic arrangements; it is also a system of meanings, narratives, and symbols (Alexander & Smith, 2003). Within these narratives, the figure of the child carries profound symbolic weight as a mirror of societal values and anxieties. A historical-sociological lens, meanwhile, reveals that childhood and family life are far from timeless or universal. Classic works in family history demonstrate that what it means to be a “child” – and indeed what constitutes a “family” – has changed significantly over time and across cultures (Ariès, 1962; Cunningham, 1995; Heywood, 2001; Mintz, 2004). Philippe Ariès’s (1962) controversial thesis that in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist provoked vigorous debate; later scholars refined his claim (Pollock, 1983; Heywood, 2001), but there is broad agreement that childhood is a historically contingent social-cultural category rather than a natural fact. For example, in preindustrial European settings, children as young as seven were often integrated into adult work and social life with minimal recognition of a distinct childhood phase, as high infant mortality and economic necessity fostered a pragmatic view of children as contributors to household survival rather than tender innocents. By contrast, as industrialization and modern schooling spread in the 19th and 20th centuries, a new cultural ideal of childhood emerged – one that emphasized innocence, education, and emotional value. Viviana Zelizer’s (1985) influential socio-historical analysis chronicles this transformation: in the late 1800s and early 1900s, legal reforms like child labor laws and compulsory schooling, along with new sentimental parenting norms, gradually turned children from wage-earning assets into “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” beings. In short, the very conception of childhood was reinvented – children came to be seen as vulnerable dependents to be nurtured and protected, rather than little workers or miniature adults. This reinvention of childhood went hand-in-hand with changes in family life, including a new child-centeredness in nuclear families and greater societal investment in children’s welfare (Coontz, 1992; Zelizer, 1985).

Building on these historical insights, contemporary childhood studies and cultural sociology approach children not as passive appendages of the family but as active shapers of culture in their own right. The “new sociology of childhood” (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup, 1994) fundamentally recasts children as social actors and childhood as a variable social institution. Allison James and Alan Prout (1998, 2015) argue that childhood is socially constructed and thus diverse across societies and history – not a universal natural stage through which all humans pass in the same way. This paradigm challenges older functionalist views that treated the child primarily as an object of socialization (e.g., Parsons & Bales, 1955) and instead insists that children are “human beings” rather than merely “human becomings” (Jenks, 1996; James et al., 1998). That is, children make meaningful contributions to social life in the present, and are not just future adults in the making. For example, research shows children creatively interpret their parents’ rules, participate in peer cultures, and can even influence family decisions – behaviors obscured by theories that cast them only as obedient dependents (Corsaro, 2015;

Mayall, 2002). Recognizing children's agency has important implications: it means that changes in how we culturally imagine "the child" (as innocent, as competent, as in need of control or in need of support) can alter how children are treated and the roles they play within families (James & Prout, 2015; Lee, 2001). This study takes to heart these insights from the new sociology of childhood by treating the symbolic meanings of childhood as central to family dynamics. At the same time, it adopts the tools of cultural sociology – analysis of narratives, discourse, and symbolic codes – to understand how those meanings are produced and sustained (Alexander & Smith, 2003). In sum, our approach synthesizes a constructivist view of childhood with an interpretive, cultural analysis of family life, asking not only how family structures have changed, but why – that is, what cultural purposes and ideals those changes reflect.

A key contribution of this article is to bridge broad historical comparisons with an appreciation for diversity in family forms and contexts. Both general patterns and specific variations are considered, recognizing that the symbolic child may carry different meanings in different familial and social settings. In traditional extended family systems (common in agrarian societies and many non-Western cultures), child-rearing is a distributed responsibility among a larger kin network, and children's economic and social value is often tied to family labor and intergenerational support (Goode, 1963; Lancy, 2015). By contrast, the rise of the smaller nuclear family in industrialized societies concentrated attention on the conjugal unit and its offspring; within this compact family, children often became the emotional center and *raison d'être* of the household (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Zelizer, 1985). Indeed, the mid-20th-century ideal of the suburban nuclear family placed a new emphasis on intensive parenting and protecting the innocence of a few children in the home – a sharp departure from preindustrial times when children were expected to work or to be "seen but not heard" (Coontz, 1992; Zelizer, 1985). Notably, even within a given historical era, childhood experiences have varied across social strata: for instance, a middle-class child might attend school while a working-class peer labored, and girls often had different expected duties than boys. Such differences underscore that childhood is not monolithic but intersects with class and gender dynamics (Cunningham, 1995).

In what follows, the article first outlines the theoretical foundations and methodology guiding this study, then presents a historical-comparative examination of the symbolic child across key periods and family forms. Finally, it discusses the contemporary implications of these shifts – from policy and rights debates to everyday family practices – reinforcing the conclusion that re-centering the symbolic child enriches our understanding of the family as a dynamic cultural institution.

1. Theoretical Framework

Cultural sociology provides the overarching framework for this analysis. In contrast to approaches that treat the family as merely a set of structural roles or economic functions, cultural sociology emphasizes the role of meaning, symbols, and collective representations in social life (Alexander & Smith, 2003). Applying this lens, the family is not just a functional unit but a cultural narrative – a story society tells about itself – in which the figure of the child carries profound symbolic weight (Zelizer, 1985). The concept of the "symbolic child" (Gillis, 2012; Austin, 2024) refers to the child as imagined in cultural discourse: as innocent or sinful, as priceless or useful, as victim or agent. In other words, beyond the biological reality of young human beings, there exists a symbolic idea of "the child" that different societies invest with ideals, fears, and values. These cultural representations of childhood shape how real children are treated and how family life is organized. For instance, if the symbolic child is cast as an "innocent angel", society may elevate protection as paramount; if the child is seen as a "future investment", education and discipline might be stressed; if viewed as a "miniature adult", early autonomy or labor could be expected.

Within sociology, a significant theoretical shift has occurred since the late 20th century in how we understand children and childhood. James and Prout (2015) articulate a "new

paradigm” for the sociology of childhood, arguing that childhood is socially constructed and varies across cultures and history rather than being a fixed biological stage. This paradigm asserts that children are not mere passive dependents but active agents in their own lives and in their families (Corsaro, 2015; James & Prout, 2015). Crucially, it calls for studying children in their own right and viewing childhood as worthy of sociological inquiry independent of adult-centered frameworks (Mayall, 2002). Such an approach challenges the older socialization models by positing that children interpret, negotiate, and contribute to culture, rather than simply internalizing it (James & Prout, 2015). Theoretical insights from this paradigm inform our analysis by highlighting children’s agency and the cultural variability of childhood. In practical terms, the new sociology of childhood encourages us to look at what children do, how they perceive their world, and how they influence those around them, instead of only seeing them as outcomes of parenting or schooling. This theoretical stance directly supports our focus on the symbolic child: it suggests that the prevailing image of “the child” in any era is not just an abstract idea but can reshape actual social relations and institutions (for example, law, education, family roles) by changing expectations of children’s capacities and needs.

Historically, the notion that childhood is a mutable social category was powerfully introduced to sociology by Philippe Ariès (1962). Ariès’s controversial thesis – that “in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist” (1962) – underscored the culturally constructed nature of childhood. By examining art, documents, and family records from pre-modern Europe, Ariès argued that children were once regarded as small adults, without the special emotional and symbolic status they hold today. Although later scholars have nuanced or contested some of Ariès’s claims, his work laid the foundation for viewing childhood not as a natural given, but as a cultural artifact that changes with time and context (Cunningham, 1995; Heywood, 2001; Pollock, 1983). The implication here is crucial: if childhood can be different across epochs, then our current assumptions about children are not inevitable. This insight opens the door to asking why those assumptions change. For example, why did the economically useful child of agrarian times give way to the emotionally priceless child of modern times? Ariès pointed to demographic and economic conditions (high mortality, need for labor) as influencing medieval and early modern attitudes. Subsequent scholars added that moral and intellectual movements (like Puritanism or Enlightenment humanism) reframed childhood as a special phase of innocence or malleability by the eighteenth century. Thus, the historical sociology of childhood teaches us that the symbolic child – how we collectively imagine what a child is – evolves in tandem with broad social changes.

Our cultural approach is further enriched by insights from symbolic anthropology and interpretive sociology that stress understanding social phenomena through the symbols and meanings people attach to them (Alexander & Smith, 2003; Donzelot, 1979). From this vantage point, a society can be read as a text of symbols, and the child is one of its key symbols. The child’s role in the family can thus be analyzed as a “symbolic script”: different historical periods and cultures script the role of “the child” differently – for example, as obedient helper, as economic contributor, as precious loved one, as rights-holder – and these scripts both reflect and reinforce broader social values (Ariès, 1962; Caldwell, 1976; United Nations General Assembly, 1989; Zelizer, 1985). The notion of scripts emphasizes that people enact certain roles based on cultural expectations. In an agrarian script, a 10-year-old might enact the role of a worker or caretaker for siblings; in a modern script, a 10-year-old is expected to be a schoolchild and dependent. The scripts also come with narratives about why the child matters: perhaps as a carrier of the family name, as the future of the nation, or as a divine gift. These narratives give emotional and moral weight to the child’s role. By interpreting these cultural scripts, we can better understand continuity and change in family life. For instance, when the script changed from seeing children as “assets” to seeing them as “innocents,” it didn’t just affect how adults felt about children – it also drove concrete changes like child labor laws and new parenting norms, because the social script now defined child labor as cruel and education as essential.

In this context, our theoretical framework combines the new sociology of childhood's focus on children's agency and the social construction of childhood with a cultural sociology focus on symbolic meanings (Alexander & Smith, 2003; James & Prout, 2015). This framework guides a re-reading of family history and family sociology with the child – and the cultural symbolism of childhood – at the center.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, historical-comparative methodology grounded in cultural-sociological analysis. Rather than collecting new empirical data, it synthesizes and interprets existing scholarly research, historical records, and cultural texts to trace the evolving role and image of the child (Kipping et al., 2014). Key historical and sociological works are treated as foundational sources for understanding childhood in different periods – for example, Ariès's history of medieval families, Zelizer's analysis of the changing economic value of children, and James and Prout's theoretical contributions on children's agency. In addition, we examine a range of secondary sources: legal documents (such as laws and policies on children's status), literary and artistic representations of children, and other cultural artifacts. These sources were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), focusing on influential examples and turning points that illustrate cultural constructions of childhood in each period. For instance, we consider the English Factory Acts of the 19th century and contemporary debates around them to capture the changing discourse on child labor, and we reference the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as a landmark of the modern child-rights discourse.

Our analytical approach is interpretive and historical. We engage in a form of historical hermeneutics – interpreting past meanings of childhood and family by closely reading texts in their context. We analyze legal statutes (to see how children's legal personhood was framed), pedagogical writings (to learn what was expected of children and parents), and popular culture depictions of children (to gauge societal attitudes), always asking: what do these sources tell us about how people of that time understood “the child” and the family? We also draw on the interpretations of prior scholars in sociology, history, and anthropology to enrich and triangulate our analysis. Throughout, we apply a cultural interpretive lens: we ask not only what happened (e.g., “child labor was banned”), but what it meant in the cultural narrative (e.g., “childhood came to be defined by schooling and play instead of work”). We pay attention to discourse – how people of each era talked about and represented children – as well as to social practices – how children's daily lives were actually structured – and consider the interplay between the two (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

Our analysis is explicitly comparative both across time and across social-cultural contexts. Temporally, we compare multiple historical periods (premodern agrarian, industrial, and late-20th/early-21st-century digital eras) side by side to identify continuities and ruptures in the cultural idea of the child. This broad sweep allows us to see long-term trends (such as the overall shift from children as contributors to children as dependents) as well as unique features of each era. At the same time, we consider variations within a given time frame across different social settings. For instance, even in the industrial era, a child's experience could differ markedly between a middle-class family (where the child might attend school and be doted upon) and a working-class family (where the child might work in a factory). Likewise, gender norms could influence childhood roles: girls were often expected to help with domestic chores or sibling care, whereas boys might engage in wage labor or enjoy greater access to schooling. We also look beyond the nuclear family to consider children “outside” the prototypical family unit (such as orphans or foster children) when relevant, as this illuminates the boundaries of the cultural ideal – for example, when a child is not raised in a nuclear family, how does society compensate and what assumptions are revealed?

To ensure the credibility of our interpretations, we triangulated evidence from multiple sources and disciplines (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Whenever a major interpretive

claim is made (for example, “Victorian society sentimentalized children as innocent”), we support it by citing multiple scholars or types of evidence – historical writings, legal changes – to increase validity. Our interpretive narrative is not about measuring variables but about providing a coherent explanation. We ground each claim in documented evidence or established research findings and note points of scholarly debate where they exist.

The choice of this methodology is closely tied to our theoretical framework and research aims. Since we posit that childhood is a cultural construct that changes over time, a historical-comparative method is the logical way to investigate that claim (Thelen & Mahoney, 2015). We did not, for example, conduct a contemporary survey about attitudes on children – such a method would capture only a snapshot of the current moment, whereas our interest is in long-term transformations and the power of cultural meanings. By using secondary data and historical sources, we are able to trace how the symbolic child has been codified in different eras (in art, law, policy, etc.) and how those codifications align with shifts in family life. This approach aligns with what cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander calls the “strong program” in cultural sociology – treating cultural meanings not just as reflections but as drivers of social change (Alexander & Smith, 2003). In line with this, our strategy of reading historical texts and contexts is designed to uncover deep cultural meanings and their evolution. Given our broad scope (from medieval times to the present), this synthetic interpretive approach is the most feasible and appropriate for addressing the research questions.

In sum, our methodology can be described as an interpretive cultural-historical sociology of childhood. The validity of the analysis rests on converging evidence from multiple sources and the plausibility and coherence of the narrative we construct. By examining how meanings of childhood have shifted over time and why, we aim to reveal the cultural logic linking changes in the idea of the child to changes in family life.

3. Changing Symbolic Roles of the Child Across Time and Contexts

3.1. From Miniature Adult to Innocent Child: Origins of the Modern Childhood

In medieval and early modern Europe, children were generally not seen as fundamentally different from adults in the way they are today. Once past infancy, youngsters were folded into adult society as apprentices, servants, or helpers, with little recognition of a distinct developmental stage called “childhood” (Ariès, 1962). High infant mortality rates and the economic exigencies of agrarian life meant that emotional investment in each child was tempered by pragmatism. A child’s value was largely tied to their potential contribution to the household or community: even by age seven or eight, children were expected to perform work – tending animals, minding siblings, or helping in the fields – much as “miniature adults” (Ariès, 1962; Lancy, 2015). This is not to say that parents lacked affection for their children in these eras, but the cultural meaning of childhood was markedly different. The idea of the child as a tender innocent in need of special sheltering was largely absent. Indeed, as Philippe Ariès famously argued, in medieval society the concept of childhood as a protected, separate phase was effectively unknown (Ariès, 1962). While later historians have nuanced Ariès’s thesis (Pollock, 1983; Heywood, 2001), there is broad agreement that childhood is a historically contingent social category rather than a fixed biological fact.

By the early modern period (16th–18th centuries), attitudes toward children began to shift. Religious and philosophical developments contributed to new sensibilities about youth. For example, Puritan moralists saw children as vulnerable souls to be saved from sin, implying that children needed guidance and protection. Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke (1690) advanced the notion of the child’s mind as a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate shaped by education – emphasizing nurture and learning. By the late 18th century, Romantic influences (notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s treatise *Émile* in 1762) had elevated the image of the child as a pure, innocent being of nature who should be kept separate from the corruptions of adult society. These emerging

ideas laid the groundwork for what we now recognize as the modern ideology of childhood innocence.

Crucially, the early modern period also witnessed the first moves toward segregating children from adult life in practice. Among upper and middle classes in Europe, formal schooling and child-focused parenting gained traction. Ariès (1962) notes that from the 15th century onward, children began to appear more distinctly as children in paintings and writings, reflecting a growing awareness of childhood as a unique phase. Diaries and parenting manuals from this era describe new practices of nurturing and educating the young (James & Prout, 2015). Childhood was increasingly seen as a special time requiring schooling, moral formation, and play before assuming adult roles. However, such a sheltered childhood remained a luxury largely confined to elite families. Among the poor and working classes, well into the 19th century, children generally continued to work and contribute economically out of necessity, even as new cultural ideals of innocence were being articulated. Notably, even these early understandings of childhood were gendered: historical evidence shows that girls and boys often had distinct roles and expectations (Cunningham, 1995; Heywood, 2001).

3.2. The Industrial Era: From Child Laborer to “Priceless” Child

The industrial revolution of the 19th century brought profound changes – and contradictions – to the role of children. On one hand, early industrialization intensified the exploitation of child labor. Factories and mines routinely employed children because they provided cheap, malleable labor and could perform certain tasks as effectively as adults. In the early 1800s, it was common in Britain, America, and elsewhere for boys and girls as young as eight or ten to toil long hours in mills, mines, or as domestic servants. During this phase of industrial capitalism, a child’s economic utility was brutally tangible: children were wage-earners contributing to their family’s survival, especially in working-class households. (Charles Dickens’s fictional depictions of orphaned and working children in this era – such as *Oliver Twist* laboring in a workhouse – captured the grim reality faced by many youngsters without protective families.)

On the other hand, the 19th century also saw the rise of social reform movements that began to question and curtail child labor. Gradually, new laws and norms reconfigured the child’s role from worker to student and dependent. Pivotal legislation, such as the Factory Acts in Britain (starting in 1833), restricted the working hours of children and set minimum ages for employment. Similar legal reforms spread across Europe and North America through the late 1800s. At the same time, schooling expanded: many nations introduced compulsory education, requiring children to attend school through their early teens (Cunningham, 1995). These shifts signaled a revaluation of children – no longer seen purely as economic assets, children were increasingly viewed as individuals who should be educated and protected.

What drove this dramatic change in how society valued children? Viviana Zelizer’s (1985) influential socio-historical analysis provides a compelling explanation. Zelizer documents how, between the late 1800s and early 20th century, the prevailing social “worth” of children in Euro-American society underwent a reversal. As industrial economies developed and family prosperity grew, parents became less reliant on children’s labor. Simultaneously, cultural currents of the Victorian era stressed sentimental family bonds. The result was a transformation of the child from a contributor to the family economy into a focus of emotional value. In Zelizer’s famous formulation, the modern child became “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” (Zelizer, 1985). That is, even as children ceased to bring in wages, they became the objects of unprecedented love, devotion, and sentimental importance within the family. Concrete indicators of this shift included the emergence of child life insurance policies and changes in wrongful death compensation: whereas in earlier times a child’s death might not have been deemed a significant financial loss (since a child’s economic contribution was small), by the 1930s courts and insurers increasingly acknowledged the emotional harm of losing a child

(Zelizer, 1985). Similarly, emerging industrial-era ideals of childhood were shaped by gender norms – Victorian reformers, for example, often cast girls as needing moral protection while envisioning boys as future breadwinners (Cunningham, 1995; Zelizer, 1985).

By the mid-20th century, the ideal of the child-centered nuclear family had solidified, especially in Western contexts. In the post–World War II baby boom era, a cultural image took hold of the family as a haven organized around the well-being of its children (Coontz, 1992). Smaller family size and rising affluence meant parents could invest more time and resources in each child (Caldwell, 1976). Classic sociological theory also recognized this shift. Talcott Parsons famously suggested that the primary function of the modern nuclear family was the socialization and nurturing of children (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Indeed, many mid-20th-century parents reoriented their lives around their offspring: decisions about where to live, whom to socialize with, and how to spend time and money increasingly revolved around children’s needs. In the popular commentaries quipped that children had effectively moved “from being our employees to our bosses” in the family hierarchy (Senior, 2014). In other words, whereas a century earlier parents might have expected children to contribute substantially to the household, by the 1950s parents were expected to work and arrange their lives for the sake of their children. The symbolic child in this era assumed an almost sacred status – the innocent center of the family’s emotional universe. Harm to children became one of society’s greatest taboos; new laws against child abuse and neglect, as well as expanded child welfare services, emerged to enforce the idea that children deserved special protection and care.

3.3. The Digital Era: Blurring Boundaries Between Child and Adult

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the advent of mass media and digital technology ushered in another reconfiguration of childhood’s meaning. Today’s “digital native” children grow up immersed in media-saturated environments that simultaneously empower them with information and expose them to adult worlds at early ages (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Through television and, later, the internet and social media, many traditional boundaries between childhood and adulthood have been destabilized. Classic research by Neil Postman (1982) argued that the rise of television eroded the secrecy and segregation that once defined childhood, effectively causing the “disappearance of childhood” as a distinct, protected sphere.

In a similar vein, contemporary children often exhibit tastes, knowledge, and behaviors that previously would have been associated with older youth or adults. They have unprecedented access to information (and misinformation) about mature topics, are targeted by advertisers as independent consumers, and even cultivate public personas via social media or online gaming communities. Consequently, children today in some ways appear more “adultified” or older than their years – engaging with fashions, language, and concerns that earlier generations would have deemed beyond their childhood purview.

Paradoxically, this modern blurring of child–adult boundaries echoes certain aspects of preindustrial society, albeit in a new form. Just as in agrarian times young people were integrated early into adult work and social life, children now are integrated early into the adult-like realms of digital social networks and consumer culture. The result is a complex cultural picture. On one hand, society still idealizes children as innocent and vulnerable (we enforce age-based restrictions to shield them from harm, for instance), yet on the other hand, children are increasingly expected to navigate sophisticated networks of knowledge and socialization that resemble adult terrains. Some scholars suggest that childhood in the digital era is characterized by ambiguity: children alternate between being protected dependents and being competent actors with agency (Prout, 2005; Jenks, 1996).

For example, preteens today might be savvy enough to create and share content online or to participate in public debates (activities nearly unthinkable for children a few decades ago), yet they are also subject to new forms of oversight and concern (e.g., parental surveillance of their

online activity or anxieties about excessive “screen time”). In short, the digital age culture has complicated the symbolic figure of the child. The culturally defined line between child and adult – which the modern era had drawn sharply through schooling, labor laws, and age-segregated institutions – has, in many respects, become less distinct again (Postman, 1982). Even this blurring of childhood and adulthood has a gendered dimension: studies note that girls and boys often experience the digital world differently, reflecting ongoing gender-based variations in contemporary childhood (Holloway & Valentine, 2003).

3.4. Legal Personhood and the Rise of Children’s Rights

Accompanying the cultural shifts in the value and image of children have been landmark changes in children’s legal status. For much of history, children had virtually no independent legal personhood: they were considered dependents under the absolute authority of their parents (typically the father). In Roman law, for example, the doctrine of *patria potestas* granted the *paterfamilias* near-total power over his offspring. Similarly, in many legal systems through the 18th and 19th centuries, children were treated essentially as family property or wards with no autonomous rights. They could not own property, sign contracts, or bring cases to court on their own; any interests of the child were legally mediated by parents or guardians. Well into the 1800s, for instance, custody of children in cases of divorce or widowhood was typically awarded to fathers, reflecting the presumption of paternal control.

As cultural conceptions of childhood gradually shifted toward seeing children as vulnerable and in need of protection, legal reforms followed. An early milestone was the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. Although brief and lacking enforcement, this declaration was a moral statement that children have special entitlements to well-being and care. Authored by British child advocate Eglantyne Jebb, it proclaimed in principle that society owes its youngest members the best care and support it can offer. This set the stage for further developments. After World War II, the United Nations issued an expanded Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959, which outlined ten principles, including children’s rights to a name and nationality, to adequate nutrition and medical care, to education and play, and to protection from exploitation and discrimination. These early declarations were not legally binding, but they signified a global cultural shift: the child was increasingly seen as a rights-bearing individual rather than merely a passive ward of parents or charity.

The culmination of this trajectory was the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – a comprehensive international treaty that entered into force in 1990 and revolutionized the legal conception of childhood. The UNCRC recognizes children (defined as every human being under 18) as subjects of rights across three broad categories: protection rights (safeguarding children from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices), provision rights (entitlements to education, health care, social security, and an adequate standard of living), and participation rights (the child’s right to be heard and to have a say in matters affecting them, appropriate to their age and maturity) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The near-universal ratification of the UNCRC underscores the global acceptance of the idea that children have independent rights and a distinct legal personhood separate from their parents. This represents a profound change from earlier eras: it institutionalizes the notion that children are not just passive dependents or parental appendages, but individuals with their own voice and legitimate claims on society. Importantly, the expansion of children’s rights was accompanied by attention to gender equality, as late-20th-century frameworks insisted that girls and boys be afforded equal protection and voice under the law (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

These legal developments also altered the parent–child relationship and the cultural understanding of family. Modern family law in many countries now emphasizes “the best interests of the child” as the paramount consideration in decisions about custody, adoption, and child

welfare interventions. This principle often entails listening to the preferences of the child if they are old enough (reflecting the child's growing agency) and ensuring that children's safety and developmental needs trump other considerations. Culturally, the child's newfound legal standing symbolizes an elevation of childhood in society's moral hierarchy. The child is now cast as a trust of society – a vulnerable person to whom the greatest care and resources should be devoted. At the same time, framing children as rights-bearing individuals subtly reframes parenthood: parents are increasingly viewed not as owners of their children but as guardians with a responsibility to respect the child's individual rights and foster their development. In all, the rise of formal rights for children in the late 20th century further solidified the symbolic importance of the child, casting childhood as a stage of life that merits society's highest commitment and protection.

3.5. From Objects to Subjects: Recognizing Children's Agency

One of the most significant cultural shifts of late modernity has been the growing recognition of children's agency and voice. In academic discourse, this is epitomized by what James and Prout (2015) call the "new sociology of childhood," which challenges the old paradigm of the child as a passive object of socialization. Instead, children are understood as active social beings who help shape the world around them. Pioneering scholars began calling for this reconceptualization in the 1970s – for example, anthropologist Charlotte Hardman (2001) urged researchers to consider "the child's point of view" and to treat children as worthy subjects of study rather than mere appendages of adults. In subsequent decades, social scientists increasingly conducted research with children rather than just on children. For instance, sociologist William Corsaro's ethnographic studies of children's peer cultures revealed that children create and participate in their own sophisticated social worlds (Corsaro, 2015). Such work demonstrated that children contribute to cultural life – through play, language, and peer interactions – instead of simply internalizing adult teachings. Scholars note that recognizing children's agency also means acknowledging gender differences in childhood experiences, since girls and boys may assert their voices and agency in distinct ways (Corsaro, 2015; Mayall, 2002).

By the turn of the 21st century, the notion that children are "human beings" in the present (rather than solely "human becomings" on the way to adulthood) had gained wide acceptance (James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996). This reconceptualization had ripple effects beyond academia. Parenting literature, educational practice, and social policy began to emphasize listening to children and encouraging their participation.

In many contemporary families, the old archetype of the obedient, "seen-but-not-heard" child has given way to an expectation that children will express themselves and that their feelings and opinions will be taken into account. We see evidence of this cultural shift in various domains: schools have adopted more child-centered pedagogies that treat students as active learners, courts in some jurisdictions allow children's preferences to be heard in proceedings such as custody cases, and youth advisory councils or children's parliaments have been established to include young people's perspectives in community and policy decisions. All these trends mark a departure from the earlier, more hierarchical model of family life toward a more dialogical model in which intergenerational relationships are open to negotiation.

Importantly, the celebration of children's agency coexists with persistent protective impulses, resulting in a nuanced balancing act. Modern childhood is often characterized by paradox. On one hand, society accords children greater voice and acknowledges their rights; on the other hand, we also extend their period of dependence and close supervision. For example, children today spend more years in formal education and are often closely monitored by parents (through digital trackers, organized activities, etc.) in ways that would have been uncommon in past generations. We shield young people from many of the risks and hardships that children once routinely faced (hazardous labor, early marriage, unsupervised roaming), yet we also sometimes constrain their freedom to explore (for instance, free outdoor play without adult oversight has

diminished in many communities). This ongoing negotiation reflects the dual image of the child in contemporary culture: the child as competent social actor and the child as fragile innocent. A cultural-sociological perspective helps us recognize that both images are symbolic constructions that carry influence. Embracing children's agency means acknowledging children as meaningful contributors to family and society here-and-now; emphasizing their vulnerability means reaffirming a duty of care and protection. Modern families and institutions continually strive to strike a balance between these two imperatives.

3.6. Children Inside and Outside Family Structures

Our analysis thus far has focused on children reared within family units – the normative setting assumed for childrearing in most cultures. But not all young people grow up in stable family households. Examining the experiences of children raised outside of traditional family structures (for example, orphans and children in institutional care) provides a revealing counterpoint that underscores the cultural centrality of the family in defining childhood. It also highlights how children who fall outside the family paradigm have historically been assigned a different, often less valued, symbolic status.

Children without parental care have existed in every historical era, yet their social position has typically been precarious. In preindustrial societies, orphans or foundlings might be taken in by extended kin or charitable community members, placed as servants or apprentices in other households, or left to the meager provision of orphanages and poorhouses. Prior to the 20th century, institutional care for parentless children was generally rudimentary and often harsh. Many such children were expected to work in exchange for their upkeep – for instance, in 19th-century England and America, orphanages frequently sent children to labor on farms or learn trades.

These children were rarely afforded the sentimentalized treatment that biologically parented children in loving families might receive. In fact, the contrast between the ideal of family life and the reality of the orphan's lot was often stark. Orphans have long been figures of pity in cultural narratives (as evidenced by numerous forlorn or ill-used orphan characters in literature), but also figures of social marginalization.

Cultural sociologist J. A. Gibbons (2007), in her study of orphanages in Egypt, observes that orphans occupy an ambivalent symbolic status – they are “cared for, yet also shunned, verbally honored, yet shut away” (Gibbons, 2007). In other words, society expresses benevolence and duty toward parentless children, but simultaneously keeps them at the margins of social life because they lack a “normal” family identity. This pattern is not unique to any one culture; one finds similar ambivalence toward orphans and institutionalized children in many societies. Lacking the lineage and social capital conferred by family ties, these children are often viewed with suspicion or condescension, as outsiders to the usual family-based social order.

Starting in the late 19th and into the 20th century, reformers and policymakers launched efforts to better care for children without families, driven by the emerging belief that every child deserves a family environment. The “child-saving” movements of that era led to the founding of societies for the prevention of cruelty to children, the establishment of orphanages with improved (if still limited) conditions, and programs such as the orphan trains in the United States (which relocated orphans from crowded urban centers to live with rural families). Over time, foster care systems and formal adoption processes developed as more humane alternatives to long-term institutionalization. By the late 20th century, there was a strong professional consensus in child welfare that family-based care – whether with biological relatives, foster parents, or adoptive parents – is almost always preferable to institutional care for a child's healthy development (Allen & Nakonechnyi, 2022). This principle is even codified in international agreements like the UNCRC: Article 20 of the Convention asserts that a child deprived of a family environment is entitled to special protection and assistance, and it urges states to provide alternative family-like

care for such children (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The priority that modern societies place on finding family settings (or substitutes for family) for orphans underscores how deeply ingrained the notion is that a “proper” childhood occurs within a family.

Yet even as contemporary policies strive to include every child in a family, children outside traditional family structures still often experience disadvantages that go beyond simply lacking parental affection. They may have less consistent access to education, be more vulnerable to exploitation (some unaccompanied or orphaned youth are pushed into child labor or even trafficking), and generally lack strong advocates to champion their interests in society. Furthermore, gender shapes the experiences of children outside nuclear families: orphaned girls often encounter different social expectations and risks than orphaned boys, reflecting gender biases in institutional care (Allen & Nakonechnyi, 2022; Gibbons, 2007).

Even well-intentioned institutional settings can inadvertently deprive children of individuality and voice, as they tend to operate on a custodial model. Historically, orphans were expected to show humble gratitude for any care they received rather than to assert personal needs or rights – a cultural script that reinforced their passive, dependent role. Only recently have child welfare organizations begun to emphasize empowering children in care by listening to their preferences and involving them (when appropriate) in decisions about placements or transitions to independent living.

Incorporating the experiences of extra-familial children into our analysis reinforces the article’s central argument: to fully understand the family as a cultural institution, we must consider the child – all children. The very fact that modern societies seek to place orphans into families as quickly as possible illustrates the symbolic power of the family-child link. Culturally, a “normal” or ideal childhood is almost automatically assumed to mean growing up within a family. Thus, while we uphold an ideal that every child should be cherished in a loving family, those who grow up outside of families have often been marginalized as if their childhood were not fully “legitimate” until a family environment is provided. A child-centered sociology of the family must account for both this powerful normative ideal and the lived realities of children without families.

Appreciating this dynamic broadens our perspective on what “family” means from the standpoint of children themselves – including how children in unconventional circumstances seek out belonging and create surrogate familial bonds (for example, forming sibling-like relationships with peers in care, or finding mentors who become de facto family). In sum, the contrast between children reared inside versus outside family homes highlights a crucial insight: the family is culturally imagined as the rightful place for children, and children are culturally idealized as belonging in families. When that alignment is missing, it profoundly shapes how society perceives and treats those young individuals.

Discussion

The findings from Section 3 underscore that childhood is not a fixed biological stage but a fluid cultural construct that has undergone dramatic reinterpretation across historical eras (Ariès, 1962). By qualitatively examining historical narratives and symbols across agrarian, industrial, and digital contexts, we see that each period’s dominant image of “the child” carried distinct meanings which both reflected and reshaped family life. From a cultural sociology perspective, the family itself emerges as a symbolic institution: not just a set of roles or economic ties, but a system of meanings where the figure of the child mirrors societal values and anxieties (Alexander & Smith, 2003). Our interpretive, historical-comparative approach supports the “strong program” insight that cultural scripts are drivers of social change. In other words, as the symbolic meaning of the child changed, concrete shifts in family structure, parenting norms, and laws followed – reaffirming the theoretical premise that we must place the evolving symbolic child at the center of any analysis of the family (Alexander & Smith, 2003; James & Prout, 2015).

In agrarian and preindustrial contexts, the symbolic child was defined largely by economic utility and intergenerational duty. Section 3.1 showed that children were viewed as “miniature adults” integrated into adult society as soon as possible, valued primarily for their labor and future support (Ariès, 1962). The cultural narrative of childhood at this stage lacked the ideal of innocence or vulnerability; high mortality rates and agrarian necessity fostered a pragmatic view of children as contributors to household survival rather than tender beings in need of coddling. This finding aligns with historical sociology research demonstrating that childhood is a historically contingent category (Ariès, 1962; Heywood, 2001) – a reminder that what counts as “normal” childhood in agrarian families (hard work, early responsibility) was profoundly different from later eras. The family in this context was essentially a productive unit, and children’s role was symbolically tied to work and continuity of the family line. From a cultural sociology lens, the agrarian child functioned as a symbol of economic hope and lineage – their value lay in the concrete help they provided and the future they represented for the family’s survival.

The industrial era brought a transformative shift in the cultural script of childhood, redefining the child from a worker into a cherished dependent. As Section 3.2 detailed, industrialization initially exploited child labor, but by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reformist discourse and new laws (e.g. factory acts, compulsory schooling) began to sanctify childhood as a protected phase. Our findings echo Zelizer’s (1985) seminal observation that modern society underwent a revaluation of children’s worth, wherein children became “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” (Zelizer, 1985). In this era, the child’s symbolic role shifted to that of the innocent centerpiece of family life – an object of love, moral concern, and intensive investment. The emergence of the child-centered nuclear family ideal in the mid-20th century (Coontz, 1992) solidified this cultural script, as parents were expected to devote unprecedented time and resources to their offspring (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Caldwell, 1976). The family became reconceived as a haven organized around nurturing the child (Coontz, 1992), a stark departure from agrarian arrangements. Theoretically, this validates the notion that cultural meanings can drive structural change: once children were imagined as fragile innocents and future citizens, societies implemented schooling, child labor bans, and new parenting norms to embody those meanings (Zelizer, 1985). The industrial-era symbolic child thus illustrates the powerful interplay between cultural narrative and social policy – a clear case of meaning shaping practice, as the new ideology of childhood innocence became a guiding principle for family organization and state intervention.

In the contemporary digital era, the symbolic role of the child is evolving yet again, this time in complex and at times contradictory ways. Section 3.3 highlighted how mass media and digital technology have begun to blur the once-sharp boundary between childhood and adulthood. Today’s children are often immersed in adult-like information and consumer worlds from an early age, prompting Neil Postman’s (1982) famous argument about the “disappearance of childhood” as a distinct protected realm (Postman, 1982). Our analysis suggests that the modern cultural script of childhood is marked by paradox: on one hand, society continues to idealize the child as vulnerable and innocent (e.g. we enforce age restrictions and extended schooling to shield youth); on the other hand, children are increasingly expected to display adult-like savvy, autonomy, and digital literacy (Holloway & Valentine, 2003; Prout, 2005). Symbolically, the digital-age child straddles two narratives – that of the protected dependent and that of the precocious agent. Interestingly, this duality echoes certain aspects of the agrarian era (when children participated in adult work early) albeit in a new form: children now participate early in digital social networks and consumer culture, effectively joining adult spheres in virtual ways. The cultural sociology perspective helps us interpret this development: the meanings attached to childhood (innocent vs. competent) are in flux, leading to negotiations within families about children’s independence, privacy, and guidance. Parents and children today often co-create new norms, balancing screen time and online freedom with protection and oversight – a negotiation that signifies a new symbolic compact within the family. In line with the new sociology of childhood, we see children

increasingly recognized as active social participants (James & Prout, 2015) even as the impulse to safeguard them remains strong. Thus, the digital era's symbolic child is a hybrid: at once an empowered agent in the culture and a reminder of enduring childhood vulnerability, reflecting a cultural script that is more ambivalent and fluid than ever before.

Importantly, these shifts in the cultural image of the child have been accompanied by formal changes in how society and families structure their relationships to children. The extension of children's rights and personhood in the late 20th century (Section 3.4) is a direct institutional outcome of the new cultural conception of the child as an individual bearer of value and voice. For much of history, children held no independent legal standing, but as the cultural narrative shifted toward seeing children as precious and in need of protection, laws evolved to codify that status. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), for example, symbolizes this global acknowledgment of the child as a rights-bearing person rather than parental property. Culturally, the rise of children's rights reframed the family from a hierarchy (with the father or parents as sovereign) into a more child-centric and egalitarian space, where decisions must consider the "best interests of the child" and even the child's own wishes in certain cases. This legal and ethical elevation of children's status further solidifies the symbolic child as central to society's moral order – the family is now widely understood as the guardian of society's most "sacred" members, its children. In theoretical terms, this evolution resonates with the new sociology of childhood's emphasis on agency and voice: children are increasingly seen as active subjects with opinions and rights (James & Prout, 2015). At the same time, the enduring protective stance shows that the cultural script of vulnerability remains salient. Families must constantly balance these dual imperatives – respecting the child's agency while providing care – which is a key theme in contemporary family culture. It should be emphasized that these transformations in the symbolic child are not uniform; they are inflected by gender and class differences, underscoring that childhood experiences are intersectional rather than monolithic (Cunningham, 1995; Mayall, 2002).

Finally, our discussion extends to children who fall outside traditional family structures, which further illuminates how the family is conceived as a symbolic ideal. Section 3.6 pointed out that orphans and children in institutional care have historically held a marginalized symbolic status: lacking a family, they were often viewed with pity or suspicion and provided only rudimentary care (Gibbons, 2007). The very notion that every child ought to have a family testifies to how deeply ingrained the family-child link is in cultural narratives. Modern reforms – from the orphan "saving" movements of the 19th century to contemporary foster care and adoption systems – all stem from the belief that a "proper" childhood requires a family environment (Allen & Nakonechnyi, 2022). International norms like the UNCRC explicitly assert that a child deprived of family life is entitled to special protection and placement in a family setting, reaffirming that the family remains the symbolic locus of childhood. Thus, even as we acknowledge diverse family forms in today's world (single-parent households, same-sex parent families, transnational caregiving arrangements, etc.), the underlying cultural script continues to prize the family as the primary arena for raising children. The evolving role of the child across eras – from worker to cherished dependent to semi-autonomous participant – has continually prompted adjustments in what families are expected to be. Each historical reimagining of childhood came with a reimagining of family life: agrarian families organized around labor and obedience, industrial-age families around love and socialization, and postmodern families around negotiation and child empowerment. In sum, the symbolic child has been the barometer and catalyst of change in the family as an institution. Through an interpretive cultural analysis, we see that as our collective image of "the child" transforms, it both reflects evolving social conditions and actively reshapes the meaning of family in society.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how the culturally constructed image of the child – the “symbolic child” – and the child’s role within the family have evolved from agrarian societies through the industrial era to today’s digital age. By re-centering the child in sociological analysis, the research aimed to address a crucial gap: classical family sociology often overlooked children’s perspectives, treating them as passive dependents. Our inquiry, grounded in cultural sociology and the new sociology of childhood, is significant because it illuminates childhood as a key mirror of social change. By examining the shifting cultural narratives around children, we gain insight into broader transformations in family structures, norms, and values. In essence, understanding how each era envisioned “the child” provides a deeper understanding of the family as a cultural institution and of society’s evolving moral priorities.

The analysis revealed that the symbolic role of the child has changed profoundly across historical eras, directly answering our research question. In agrarian (preindustrial) societies, children were regarded as little adults – valued for their labor and economic contribution, with childhood scarcely recognized as a separate, innocent phase. During the industrial era, a cultural redefinition took place: children came to be seen as innocent and emotionally priceless, deserving of education and protection. This was the era of the child-centered nuclear family, where the child became the heart of family purpose and policy (e.g. labor laws, schooling) reinforced this new ideal. Finally, in the late 20th-century and digital era, the child’s role has become more ambivalent and dynamic. On one side, children remain highly protected and cherished, but on the other, they are increasingly imbued with agency – engaging with adult knowledge through media and often participating in family decisions and consumer culture in ways that blur age boundaries. We also found that alongside these era-specific shifts, there have been universal trends such as the rise of children’s rights and the recognition of children as active social actors. Together, these findings demonstrate that the symbolic child has evolved from a contributor in the family economy to the centerpiece of family affection and now to a complex figure who is both dependent and empowered. Each stage of this evolution has fundamentally altered how families are organized and understood, confirming that changes in the cultural meaning of childhood both reflect and drive changes in family life.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of the symbolic child–family relationship suggests a continued negotiation of childhood’s meaning in response to new social realities. As we move further into the digital age and beyond, children may increasingly be seen as competent participants in both family and society, wielding greater technological savvy and voice from early ages. We might envision a future symbolic child who is treated more as a junior partner – a digital citizen who contributes ideas and creativity within the family – yet who still requires guidance and protection in unique ways (for instance, regarding online safety and emotional well-being). This projection carries an implicit recommendation: that families, educators, and policymakers strive for a balanced cultural script for childhood. Such a script would continue to honor children’s agency and potential contributions (listening to their voices and empowering their skills) while steadfastly protecting their need for security, care, and healthy development. In practical terms, this means fostering family and social environments where children are neither infantilized nor prematurely adultified, but are supported as evolving individuals with their own rights and capacities. By remaining attentive to the symbolic narratives we create around children, society can better navigate the challenges and opportunities of the future, ensuring that the child–family relationship remains a source of strength, cohesion, and cultural meaning in the years to come.

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ETİK ve BİLİMSEL İLKELER SORUMLULUK BEYANI

Bu çalışmanın tüm hazırlanma süreçlerinde etik kurallara ve bilimsel atıf gösterme ilkelerine riayet edildiğini yazar(lar) beyan eder. Aksi bir durumun tespiti halinde Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi'nin hiçbir sorumluluğu olmayıp, tüm sorumluluk makale yazarlarına aittir.

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1. Yazar katkı oranı: %100