The Imbalance and Adaptation of Kinship Symbols: A Study of Kinship Estrangement (*Duanqin*) Among University Students from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

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Abstract: Grounded in symbolic interactionism, this study examines "kinship estrangement" (duanqin) among university students, which manifests through ritualized interactions, reconstructed symbolic meanings, and shrinking kinship networks. These patterns stem from the inefficacy of traditional kinship symbols, breakdowns in shared situational consensus, and conflicts in self-role identity. Such estrangement risks fragile emotional support systems, weakened family cohesion, and diminished social integration. To address these challenges, we propose reconstructing emotional symbols, building shared situational contexts, and reshaping interaction strategies to foster modern adaptation in kinship relations.

Keywords: Duanqin among university students; Symbolic interactionism; Kinship ties

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of "kinship estrangement" among university students, marked by ritualized interactions and reduced contact with extended family has drawn increasing academic attention [1]. It signifies a redefinition of traditional kinship ties during higher education. Symbolic interactionism, which posits that social reality is constructed through interpersonal symbolic negotiation, provides a fitting theoretical framework [2]. This study defines such estrangement as a multidimensional withdrawal by students (aged 18–25) from collateral kin across symbolic, situational, and role-identity dimensions, alongside a reinterpretation of traditional kinship symbols, while core ties with immediate family are maintained. This paper examines its manifestations, causes, impacts, and potential mitigation strategies.

2. Manifestations for university students' kinship estrangement

Symbolic interactionism foregrounds social reality as constructed via symbolic exchange and meaning interpretation. For university students, kinship estrangement the gradual weakening of collateral kinship ties, manifests prominently in

three dimensions: the ritualization of kinship interactions, shrinking kinship networks, and the reconstruction of kinship symbolic meanings.

2.1. Ritualization of kinship interactions

Kinship exchanges become highly ritualized, characterized by contextual limitation, content constraint, and simplified methods. Interactions are largely confined to major ceremonial occasions like weddings and funerals, with daily visits becoming rare [3,4]. The shared focus narrows to ritualistic small talk, lacking substantive depth and emotional investment [5]. College students often prefer high-efficiency, low-cost interaction methods to achieve limited kinship maintenance goals [6].

2.2. Contraction of kinship networks

The scale of traditional kinship networks exhibits a marked reduction. The core interactive circle shrinks to immediate family members. The frequency and vibrancy of symbolic exchange with extended kin diminish significantly, becoming less active than peer networks based on shared interests and academic ties [7,8]. Consequently, kinship relations are displaced from their primary position in students' daily interaction structures by these peer-based networks.

2.3. Reconstruction of kinship symbolic meanings

Guided by the principle that meaning arises from interactional interpretation, students fundamentally reconstruct traditional kinship symbols. Their interpretation shifts from an emotional to a predominantly instrumental framework [9]. When instrumental needs are unmet, interaction frequency often decreases [10]. Conversely, a fundamental reversal is occurring in the interpretation of symbolic meanings: inquiries once understood as expressions of care are now redefined as privacy intrusions, while exchanges embodying mutual assistance are reinterpreted as utilitarian transactions [11].

3. Causes for university students' kinship estrangement

Kinship estrangement among university students represents a rational restructuring of traditional kinship symbols. It originates from the dysfunction of these symbols, the collapse of interactional situational consensus, and conflicts in self-role identity.

3.1. Inefficacy of traditional kinship symbols

Globalization and digitization render traditional kinship symbols instrumentally obsolete and semantically disembedded. Their practical functions are supplanted by more efficient social systems, lowering the perceived return on investment for maintaining extensive ties [12]. Simultaneously, their symbolic meanings undergo negative reinterpretation across generations, transforming kinship from an emotional bond into a source of value conflict and psychological burden.

3.2. Rupture of situational consensus

Effective symbolic interaction requires a shared definition of the situation. The weakened connection between students and relatives stems from heterogeneous lifeworlds and divergent experiential systems [13]. Inhabiting social fields with different logics and rules, and lacking shared daily practices, they struggle to construct a common interactive context and shared foci.

3.3. Conflict of self-role identity

Mead distinguishes between the "I", which embodies an individual's spontaneous impulses and subjective desires, and the "Me," which encompasses internalized social expectations and role demands [14]. Structural conflict between the familial "Me" and the "I's" pursuit of autonomy causes cognitive dissonance [15]. Students thus consciously distance themselves

from interactions that trigger this role conflict to reduce psychological strain [16].

4. Impacts for university students' kinship estrangement

As an adaptive strategy for coping with modernity-induced pressures, "kinship estrangement" among university students may secure short-term autonomous space, yet it can also incur costs at the individual, family, and societal levels: increased fragility of individuals' emotional support systems, weakened family cohesion, and compromised social integration capacity.

4.1. Fragilized individual emotional support system

Kinship rupture leads to a less resilient emotional support system. The loss of collateral ties reduces support diversity, making individuals more vulnerable to disruptions in core relationships [7]. Furthermore, it weakens cultural rootedness, as these relatives are key carriers of family history and identity, thereby undermining the system's inherent resilience [11].

4.2. Impaired social integration

This phenomenon undermines family cohesion structurally and culturally. Structurally, it reduces weak ties and decreases relational closeness, loosening the network's foundational integrity [10]. Culturally, it disrupts the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital and erodes shared symbols and collective memory, fundamentally challenging the basis for family solidarity and continuity [12,17].

4.3. Impaired social integration

The role of kinship networks as bridges between the individual and society diminishes. Trust formation suffers as students rely more on situational, contractual relationships lacking the implicit commitments based on blood history [14]. The prevalence of kinship estrangement, *duanqin*, thus impairs individuals' capacity to identify with shared symbolic systems, leading to reliance on external institutions as the basis for establishing generalized trust. This shift introduces potential uncertainty for broader social cohesion [18].

5. Mitigation pathways for university students' kinship estrangement

To address the challenges posed by kinship estrangement, it is essential to guide university students in reconstructing emotional symbols, forging shared situational consensus, and reshaping their interaction strategies.

5.1. Reconstructing emotional symbols

The core response is to reconstruct the emotional symbol system [19]. This can be achieved by establishing regular thematic face-to-face activities, shifting symbolic meaning from obligation to shared exploration. Additionally, using digital media to share authentic, process-oriented life updates in small family groups can transform symbolic content and expand interactional boundaries.

5.2. Building consensus contexts

To repair situational consensus, themed community or clan workshops can create specific contexts for meaningful interaction [20]. Furthermore, collaborative projects like building a digital family archive, led by students with relative participation, can integrate fragmented memories into coherent narratives, strengthening identity and belonging through intergenerational cooperation [11].

5.3. Reshaping interaction strategies

Mitigation requires shifting students from passive distancing to active construction [21]. This involves guiding them to recognize the potential utility of extended networks, encouraging proactive efforts to co-construct new interaction meanings, and facilitating the establishment of a managed, diversified, and bounded weak-tie network for instrumental and emotional complementarity.

6. Conclusion

Based on symbolic interactionism, this study systematically investigates the manifestations, causes, and consequences of kinship estrangement among university students. It proposes that modern adaptation of kinship relations can be achieved through reconstructing emotional symbols, building shared situational contexts, and enhancing interactional competence. This research not only enriches theoretical perspectives on kinship estrangement but also offers practical insights for fostering healthy kinship dynamics in contemporary society. The emerging trend calls for scholarly and societal attention, and future work should employ empirical approaches, particularly longitudinal studies, to better capture the developmental trajectory of this phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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