



Parenting Styles in the Film *20th Century Women* (2016): An Issue of Generation Gap

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ABSTRACT

Parenting styles can be influenced by a number of sociocultural factors, one of which is generation gap. This study analyses the kinds of parenting styles evident in the film *20th Century Women* (2016). The study specifically focuses on the main character Dorothea's ways of raising her son Jamie, who is forty years apart in age. The analysis points to three different parenting styles adopted by Dorothea: (1) authoritative, (2) authoritarian, and (3) permissive. The study confirms that generation gap has influenced the kinds of parenting styles adopted by the character. This study has thus shed light on an important sociocultural as well as contextual factor influencing parenting style.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Parents play a critical role in children's lives, and whether they are aware or not, they have particular styles in raising their children so that their little ones have desirable attitudes and personalities (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Parents thus need to be careful in deciding which styles to adopt, as they influence their children's development. Parenting styles can be influenced by a number of factors: the characteristics of parents themselves, the characteristics of children, contextual as well as sociocultural factors (Lang, 2020). In regard to these factors, generation gap is a dominant issue that has been seen to impact parenting styles. Generation gap has been defined as a gap that emerges because two or more people were born in different generations and eras (Dhiman, 2016), which can result in differences in ways of thinking, doing and being. In addition, the experiences and childhood backgrounds of parents can also contribute to the generation gap. They can shape the parents' characters, perspectives, and values (Hanggarawati & Kismono, 2022). The issue of generation gap in parenting styles has been reflected in an American film entitled *20th Century Women* (2016).

20th Century Women is a film, directed by Mike Mills, that is about life in America in 1979, which was portrayed as a time of chaos and full of problems. The main characters in the film are Dorothea, a mother, and her son, Jamie. The age gap between them is around forty years. In the 1970s, at the time when Jamie grew up, America was facing many changes, movements, and rebellions—all of which indirectly influenced Dorothea's parenting styles. This study focuses on identifying Dorothea's parenting styles and how the generation gap impacts her decision making in raising her child. A number of studies have been done on the issues of parenting styles and generation gap (e.g., Al-Lawati, 2019; Buheji, 2019; Dhiman et al., 2016; Hanafiah & Zainon, 2020; Harradine & Ross, 2007; Wahab et al., 2022); however, research that uses films as data source is still scant. This study thus aims to answer the following question: what parenting styles are adopted by Dorothea as portrayed in the film *20th Century Women* (2016)?

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles are strategies that parents use to take care of and raise their children so that they acquire desirable character (Lang, 2020). Similarly, Kuppen and Ceulemans (2018) pointed that one of the key functions of parenting styles is to manage children's behaviours as this aspect is crucial for their overall development while also reflecting how their parents have raised them. Parents can adopt multiple strategies in raising their children; they can, for example, create their own ways to suit their children's characteristics, or they can imitate other parents. Lang (2020) highlights that parenting is influenced by one's generation and cultures. Parents can adopt their own parents' styles in raising their children. In this sense, the issue of generation is seen to be a prominent factor in the adoption of one's parenting style. Yet, parenting is also intertwined with one's cultural background; parental expectations are oftentimes also a reflection of certain cultural values they uphold. Due to this cultural dimension, certain strategies may not necessarily be applicable to all parents (Kuppen & Ceulemans, 2018). Parents may also draw on different styles to raise their children as they regard their different characteristics (Mensah & Kuranchie, 2013).

Referring to Baumrind's theory of parenting styles (as cited in Lang, 2020), which considers parents' responsiveness and demand toward their children, there are essentially four types of parenting styles: (1) authoritative parenting, (2) authoritarian parenting, (3) permissive parenting, and (4) uninvolved parenting. In authoritative parenting, parents are supportive, flexible, and warm; yet, they have high demands of their children. Although they

have high expectations for their children, this type of parents can still communicate and listen to their children well. They also have reasonable reasons for setting certain rules and do not easily punish when their children make mistakes. As a result, the children tend to be more open to their parents, and their behaviours are more 'manageable'. Merlin and Hess (2013) refer to this type as 'guiding parenting'. Different from the authoritative type, authoritarian parenting involves strict parents with high demands but are not very responsive to their children. Parents with this style have high expectations, but it is more like forcing their children to do what they want. They generally do not provide any explanation when making rules. Nonetheless, the rules are stated and structured clearly. This style is also known as 'controlling parenting' (Merlin & Hess, 2013). Such parenting style usually leads to rebellious children because they are not given the space to express their opinion. In regard to permissive parenting, parents of this type are typically indulgent parents with a low level of demandingness and responsiveness, also known as 'permitting parenting' (Merlin & Hess, 2013). Such parents normally have high support for whatever their children do, as they prefer to avoid confrontation with their children, and they tend to be flexible, while still monitoring their children's activities. This parenting style usually leads to carefree children who feel free to do whatever they desire. Uninvolved parenting, on the other hand, is associated with indifferent parents with a low level of demandingness and responsiveness. They neither set any rules nor expectations; they tend to give their children the freedom to do whatever they want. Such parenting is also often referred to 'neglecting parenting' (Merlin & Hess, 2013), as these parents do not seem interested in regulating their children. The impact of such parenting style on children is that the children will tend to behave carelessly.

Generation Gap

A generation is a group of people who live in the same period, location, and experience the same event (Strauss & Howe, 1997). People who live in the same generation tend to share similarities in ways of thinking and behaving. For this reason, one's generation can be said to make up one's identity. Further, each generation has its own characteristics because its people grow up in different periods, locations, and events. This is why generations are always related to particular time and history. According to Strauss and Howe (1997), generations are created by history and the combinations of life and time. The 'history' being referred to here is a collection of significant events that impact people's lives at the time. Thus, there are always stories attached to particular generations, life cycles and archetypes. Life cycles are known as phases of life and an archetype is a form of human emotions throughout life cycles.

Differences in generations often lead to a generation gap, which has been defined as a gap between two or more generations caused by differences in views, behaviours, thoughts, norms, habits, and cultures (Wahab et al., 2022). These differences, in turn, can lead to conflicts that ultimately stem from differences in social values and beliefs (Hanafiah & Zainon, 2020). Such issue is, in fact, common in parent-child relationships. Age differences between the two can trigger generational conflicts. A study by Dhiman et al. (2016) identified factors affecting generation gap. The first factor relates to differing expectations held by the different generations. The second one deals with communication gap, which may be triggered by different ways of speaking and unrelatable topics. The third is the system of traditional values. This factor refers to customs, myths, and beliefs that are perceived to be irrelevant by the younger generation. The final factor relates to the development of technology. This is the opposite of the previous factor, where it is the older generation that encounters problems keeping up with the technological advancements.

Character and Characterization in a Film

Characters are figures in a story and make the story itself become meaningful. Characters can be said to be the most important component in building a story as they make the story alive (Ratih et al., 2022). It is through the characters that the author's ideas are expressed and enable the audience to understand the plot of the story. Characterization, on the other hand, is a method for authors to reveal the characters' feelings, thoughts, and values depicted in their works (Pickering & Hoepfer, 1981). Characterization is used by the author to develop and build the characters' images. Through this method, the author also reveals the characters' personalities. Oftentimes, characterization helps the audience to understand the human nature better. Thus, to analyze characters, it is necessary to scrutinize the characters' actions, facial expressions and narrations in the film. Specifically, Pickering and Hoepfer (1981) identify two main ways to analyze characters: the direct and indirect method.

The direct method refers to the explicit narration of a character's characteristics, be it through dialogues or monologues. In the indirect method, however, the author reveals the characters' traits implicitly, such as through their appearance or names, as names can also provide clues regarding one's identity. With regard to the indirect characterization, audience may also obtain information regarding particular characters' traits and qualities from what other characters do and say. Nonetheless, the indirect method opens up differences in the audience's interpretations.

2. METHODS

Data Source

The data source of this study is the film *20th Century Women*, directed and written by Mike Mills. The movie was released in 2016 by the production companies A24, Annapurna Pictures, Modern People, and Archer Gray. The duration of the movie is about one hundred and eighteen minutes. This study particularly focuses on the film script in identifying the issue of parenting styles.

The film tells the story of Dorothea Fields, who struggled to raise her adult son in the chaotic situation in the late 1979s in the US. She struggled to raise her son, Jamie Fields, because of the huge age gap between them. Dorothea was born in 1924 and grew up during the Great Depression, followed by the Second World War. Dorothea's life was hard and full of challenges. Meanwhile, Jamie was born in 1964, and he grew up at a time where there were many movements, protests, changes, and rebellions. Dorothea felt that she was incapable of raising Jamie due to the different 'worlds' they lived in and could not relate to each other. With this backdrop, Dorothea felt that she had to adopt parenting styles that suit her circumstances, Jamie's characteristics, while using her own history as a point of reference.

In unravelling the most dominant parenting styles Dorothea adopted, this study drew on the four classifications of parenting styles (Lang, 2020). Specifically, the study focused on textual analysis (as proposed by Smith, 2017) of the film script and highlighted Dorothea's narrations and conversations with Jamie, her son.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

To reiterate, Lang (2020) classifies parenting styles into four: authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting, permissive parenting, and uninvolved parenting. She also notes that the issue of generation gap can be one of the influencing factors in adopting a particular

parenting style. In the case of Dorothea, however, she is found to adopt three different styles in raising Jamie, which, she feels, would regulate and save Jamie from the chaotic life.

a. Being an Authoritative Parent

Although the generation gap makes it difficult for Dorothea to take care of Jamie, she still does her role as a parent. She is shown to be responsive to Jamie's present life and future, as indicated in her being considerate of the current situation. Since Jamie was born, she realizes that life has become more and more chaotic and dangerous:

"My son was born in 1964. He grew up with a meaningless war. With protest. With Nixon. With nice cars and nice houses. Computers. Boredom. I know him less everyday. He said it was just a game. You breathe real hard and another kid pulls on your diaphragm. And you faint. He said you're supposed to come to a few seconds later. But it took Jamie almost a half an hour to wake up".

Dorothea: "Jamie, why would you do something? So dangerous?"

Jamie: "I don't know. I mean, everyone was doing it".

Dorothea: "So you just went along with it?"

Jamie: "It looked like fun".

Dorothea: "That's just dumb. Why you do something so stupid? Just following along? Do you know you almost died, right?" (15:16-18:02)

This excerpt is the narration of Dorothea telling the circumstances when she gave birth to Jamie. Following the narration, a scene is shown portraying an incident when Jamie is playing around with his friends, but the game that they play puts Jamie in danger. Dorothea is worried about Jamie because she thinks that her son's environment is too harsh.

This is one of the characteristics of an authoritative parenting style, namely being responsive parents. Dorothea's responsiveness towards Jamie is not only because she is his mother, but she is, at the same time, relating to her own childhood experiences. She realizes that the current situation is not safe for Jamie, especially because he is still in search of his own identity. She does not want Jamie to experience what she had been through as she herself was growing up. These thoughts are referred to as "Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs) trauma in Lang's (2000) terms. Yet, her childhood experiences have encouraged her to become more responsive to Jamie. She has some concerns regarding her son, but she feels helpless, and so she asks for help from two women who are of Jamie's age.

Dorothea: "I think maybe you guys can help me with Jamie. I think... He needs help in figuring out... How to be himself in all this mess. I can't be there with him. I have to let go".

Julie: "Is this because the fainting thing? He's fine".

Dorothea: "No. It's because of everything".

Abbie: "I don't understand. What are you asking?"

Dorothea: "How do you be a good man? What does that even mean nowadays? He has only got me. It's just... Think about it, it's not enough". (20:00-20:22)

The above excerpt shows Dorothea's concerns for Jamie, and so she is asking Abbie and Julie to help her take care of him. She explains that the generation difference between her and Jamie makes it difficult for her to properly look after him. She thus comes up with the idea of asking Abbie and Julie as they are of similar age to Jamie. She fears for Jamie's life because she witnesses changes that she did not experience at the time she grew up. It is apparent that she is still bound to her childhood experiences and always compared them to

the present life. This idea has been explained by Hanafiah and Zainon (2020) in their study as a sign of the wider generation gap.

However, Dorothea then regrets having given Abbie and Julie the responsibility to look after Jamie, as indicated in the following dialog:

Dorothea: "I thought they'd help".

Jamie: "Well... It just seemed like you couldn't deal with me anymore".

Dorothea: "Look... I don't want you to end up in the same place as me".

Jamie: "What does that mean?"

Dorothea: "Well... I wanted you to be happier. And I just didn't think I could do by myself".

Jamie: "You're right. I thought we were fine though just me and you". (01:42:58-01:44:00)

This dialogue shows another characteristic of authoritative parenting, namely being democratic. Dorothea saw that Abbie and Julie were not helping her take care of Jamie; instead, they made Jamie further drown in the chaotic situation. Knowing that Jamie was affected by the worsening situation, she took action to stop Jamie from being looked after by them both. It appears that Dorothea's adoption of authoritative parenting is motivated by her attempting to prevent Jamie from experiencing a difficult life as she had.

b. Being an Authoritarian Parent

The excerpt below shows another parenting style that Dorothea adopts in taking care of Jamie: authoritarian parenting. She adopts this parenting style because she has learned it from her past experiences:

The bank customer service: "I'm sorry, he is too young to have an account in his name only".

Dorothea: "Little guy? No, he's a person, he's not half of person, and he's not some cute little guy. He has vision, autonomy, and privacy. He needs a bank account. Can you do that for us?" (10:35-11:20)

In the above dialog, Dorothea can be seen to become a coercive parent for the sake of her son. This is one of the characteristics of authoritarian parenting. She used to have a difficult life, and to prevent it from happening to her son, she opens a bank account to save money for Jamie's future. However, to get what she wants, she forces the bank's customer service to open the account. In this dialogue, it is seen that Dorothea is showing her power as a parent. Her action seems to reflect the idea that she is still shackled by her past life. The generation difference makes Dorothea learn and fix the worst things from the past for Jamie. This characteristic is in line with what Mensah and Kuranchie (2013) noted in their study. They stated that parents with authoritarian parenting style always try to control and shape their children's lives and personalities to achieve the parents' predetermined standards.

Dorothea's coercive characteristic is also evident in the dialog below:

Jamie: "Help me with what?"

Dorothea: "All goes through this part of your life, it's not easy. It's not easy for anybody".

Jamie: "You asked them to help me?"

Dorothea: "Yeah. No, they get it".

Jamie: "So they say yes?"

Dorothea: "Yeah".

Jamie: "You just feel guilty 'cause it's just me and you".

Dorothea: "You don't know what I'm feeling".

Jamie: "Just tell me".

Dorothea: "Kid".

Jamie: "You never tell me what you're gonna do. You just do it". (21:51-22:28)

This dialogue indicates Jamie's anger and disappointment toward Dorothea because she forces him to be taken care of by Abbie and Julie without him knowing it. He becomes even more angry after knowing that the reason she asks for help is because she feels incapable of looking after him. As Merlin and Hess (2013) point out, being coercive parents will impact their children's attitudes. In Jamie's case, it is the outburst of emotions, thoughts, and feelings that Jamie shows against her mother's coercion. As a result, he dares to be 'mean' to Dorothea. Dorothea's coercive behaviour to Jamie appears to have the purpose of controlling his behaviour and psychology indirectly. Such action is called 'parental behaviour control' and 'parental psychological control' (as cited in Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). Evidently, Jamie's behaviour and psychology have been very much influenced by Dorothea's coercion.

c. Being a Permissive Parent

Another parenting style that Dorothea shows to adopt is the permissive style. In taking care of Jamie, she at times becomes a lenient parent. This is a characteristic of permissive parenting. The dialog below illustrates this parenting style:

William: "That was Jamie. He is in L.A. He and some friends went to a show. He wanted to tell you."

Dorothea: "Oh, okay".

Abbie: "Aren't you worried?"

Dorothea: "He's mad at me and this is his way of dealing with it. He has every right to be mad".

Abbie: "Yeah, but if it makes him this mad, then maybe it wasn't a good idea".
(38:00-38:48)

This dialogue appears in a scene when Jamie is mad at Dorothea because she has asked Abbie and Julie to take care of him and forces him to be taken care of by them. The way Jamie expresses his anger and disappointment is to escape from his mother and to go far away with his friends. Dorothea knows that it is his way to escape from the problem, and she is neither mad at the situation nor is worried about Jamie. Alizadeh et al. (2011) point out that parents with permissive parenting styles will let their children make their own decision, and they will not interfere with the decision. That is why Dorothea does not try to find Jamie. Nevertheless, Dorothea becomes a lenient parent for a clear reason: she wants to avoid confrontation with Jamie and does not want to complicate the problem. Moreover, she lets Jamie go with his friends and hopes that after he comes back home with a better feeling, their relationship will also get better.

Bangash and Habib (2022) maintain that generation gap influences personalities and characteristics of both generations. In this case, the generation gap appears to make Dorothea more sensitive to the situations around her. Yet, this also makes her a mother who at times accepts whatever Jamie does; despite Jamie's negative action, she simply accepts it without any questioning or denial. As a result, Jamie becomes impulsive and loses his control, and no one seems to be able to help him control himself externally. While thinking that being

permissive helps to solve problems they are encountering, it turns out that it actual widens the generation gap between herself and Jamie.

Discussion

The findings above show that Dorothea draws on different parenting styles to raise Jamie, and her choices appear to be influenced by contextual as well as sociocultural factors—the generation gap being an important one. While she dominantly displays being an authoritative parent, she, at times, is also authoritarian and permissive. The chaotic circumstances Jamie is growing up in and her bad childhood experiences make her become a responsive, democratic, and warm parent. Instead of forcing and restricting Jamie, she is more guarding and preparing Jamie to face difficult situations. Dorothea's supportive attitude, in turn, results in openness on both parts, although it sometimes leads to some bitter truths.

Dorothea's style in raising Jamie reflects the ways American parents raise their children in general. As Li (2023) points out, 46% of American parents adopt authoritative parenting to raise their children. Even though the population keeps growing, this type of parenting is seen to be relatively stable. In contrast, Asian parents tend to adopt authoritarian parenting in their child raising (Gillette, 2021). This approach has been seen by many Asian parents as the appropriate ways to help their children achieve goals and social standards. Today, however, it is more common to see parents 'mix' different parenting styles. A study by Anita and Hani (2021) notes that Indonesian parents tend to adopt different parenting styles that reflects their cultural hybridity. Such approach is seen to have positive impacts on the children's development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that generation gap can be an important factor that affects parenting styles. The film also indicates that it is common for parents to adopt different styles depending on the needs and circumstances. As portrayed by Dorothea, she adopts three types of parenting styles in raising Jamie, and these choices have been influenced by her own childhood experiences and the situations Jamie is growing up in. Each style appears to correspond to particular contexts and Jamie's behaviours. The adoption of Dorothea's differing parenting styles, however, intends to help Jamie regulate his life.

Of the three types of parenting styles Dorothea adopts, she ends up applying the authoritative parenting more dominantly. The generation gap makes Dorothea feels that she is responsible to better prepare Jamie for the future. Although the generation gap seems like a big problem between them, it has helped Dorothea to be more considerate of her own parenting styles and has led her to choose an approach that suits her son's circumstances the most.

This study, however, only focused Dorothea's parenting styles and has not much discussed Jamie's perspective as a child. Thus, it is recommended that future studies explore Jamie's side, such as the impacts of Dorothea's parenting styles on his identity. It is also recommended that future studies focus on more contemporary films in highlighting the issue of parenting styles, which allows comparison across generations.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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