Parenting Styles Expressed in the Hit Television Show *Modern Family*

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Abstract

This study focuses on parenting styles and the effect they have on children. The analysis is based off of three very diverse families in the hit television show Modern Family. The three families were categorized based off of three different parenting styles including, authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive-indulgent. Based off of their interactions with their children the families were evaluated on whether their parenting style was beneficial to the child or not. The findings indicate that the usage of positive communication in families is extremely effective on the child’s success. Parents tend to base their parenting off of what they see and media is a common visual for parents to base their teachings off of. This study indicates the extremity to which children are affected by parenting styles and whether it is a positive or negative effect. The results of this study will serve as a first step into parent-child communication and it will segue into future research that will examine the effect the media has on parenting.
The communication patterns between families have been a very interesting topic area for decades. Past researchers have investigated parenting styles and their effect, but very little research has been done on the impact of parenting styles that are expressed through the media. This study investigates how important parent’s interaction with their children is and how their children will eventually be affected by a particular parenting style.

In this study the hit television show *Modern Family* is examined based off of how the three different families interact with their children. The researchers examined season four of the television show and randomly selected three episodes. The researchers were able to study the effects of parent-child communication in these three episodes and how the child was influenced by such communication.

It is important to investigate the effects of parent-child communication because it affects every single human being; everyone is or once was a child. Parental guidance essentially effects how we communicate, act, react, and our overall thought process. This study will provide information on just how large of an impact our parents have, as well as, how parents and children are perceived to communicate based off of contemporary mass media productions such as *Modern Family*.

The way a parent interacts with their child effects every aspect of their child’s life and depending on what type of parenting style that parent fits into eventually determines the fate of their child. This study investigates three different parenting styles (authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive-indulgent) and then explains how the child will eventually act in the future due to the parenting style they grew up with. This study holds a great deal of importance because knowing that a specific parenting style can effect a child in a certain way will cause parents to re-evaluate the way they are parenting their child and determine whether it is the way they should
be or not. This study will shed light on the most beneficial way to parent and the least beneficial way to parent, thus, providing adults all around the world with information on how to make their child have a more bright and promising future based off the parenting style they use.

**Review of Literature**

Past research has discovered that a child’s competency in communication directly relates to the way their parent communicates and the way a child behaves. This research supports the belief that socialization of communication competencies is directly related to parental communication with children (Young, 2009). Families are children’s first primary socialization agents and the communication patterns within the family have been linked to children’s communication behaviors in terms of negotiation, risk behaviors, communication apprehension, reticence, unwillingness to communicate, personality, openness, etc. (Zhang, 2007). Communication competency refers to the awareness of what to say, how to say it, to whom, and at what time.

Burleson et al.’s theory of position based on person-centered parenting and position-centered parenting found that conversation orientation, emotion coaching, communication competence, and emotional competence are all effective forms of parenting, whereas, emotion dismissing is not (Young, 2009). Reflection-encouraging communication individuals were more likely to view themselves as communicatively and emotionally competent as opposed to reflection-discouraging communication (Young, 2009). Burleson’s study shows that parents have a very large impact on their children and how their children feel about communication and how good of a communicator they are and will grow into being. Exploring the extent to which children are able to functionally communicate through their parental upbringing and how they
feel about themselves as a communicator will shed light on how successful they will be as they grow up.

Zhang’s study examined the impact of family communication patterns on children’s conflict styles. His study found that present day Chinese family communication patterns are more conversation-oriented than conformity-oriented. Chinese families embrace more constructive and face-saving collaborating styles for the most success (Zhang, 2007). Zhang’s study provides insight on the way parents solve problems involving their children and the positive and negative effects will eventually affect the way children react in problematic situations which will affect their future behaviors and interactions with other individuals.

Family communication patterns research argues that communication in families is a force that influences how children experience and respond to their surroundings and circumstances (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Fitzpatrick and Ritchie’s study investigates the relationship between family communication patterns and the conforming and disconfirming communication children report receiving from their parents. This research seeks to determine how these elements of family communication influence children’s self-esteem and their perceptions of the relationship that they have with their parent (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). She found that there is a huge difference between the way parents raise sons and daughters, daughters receive more attention thus they need more attention and affection to feel more self-confident (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Males, on the other hand, do not require as much affection to feel good about themselves (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Self-esteem definitely plays a large role in the way individuals treat other individuals thus parental upbringing plays a large role in how their children’s future relationships will go and whether they will be successful or not.
The Way Media Portrays Families

All the research that has been previously mentions only provides information based on parenting styles and how they affect the communication of their children but these studies do not evaluate how the parents learn how to parent their children and the way media portrays different types of parenting. The preceding information will guide us into how big of an impact media has become will lend us into the research based off of how parenting styles are represented and the way that affects society.

Larson conducted a study researching sibling communication and how they are viewed by society watching the three most highly viewed sitcoms in 1989, The Cosby Show, Family Ties and Growing Pains. This study showed that viewers whose perceptions of sibling relationships are rooted in their observations of television would perceive the sibling relationship as fairly unsupportive (Larson, 1989). The viewer of Growing Pains might well develop a perception of sibling relationships as especially unpleasant because 56.5% of sibling behavior on that program was negative (Larson, 1989).

Sibling behavior on these hit shows provide false implications on how a family really should act. The families act in more of a business manner than a family; siblings on television seem to negotiate for direct services in a positive way, they exchange favors, bargain for goods and services, and ask for and receive information in a positive manner (Larson, 1989). Sibling behavior in television is rather unrealistic and I think it is important to note that not everything someone sees on television should be believed and thought as the correct way to do something. This study will give readers the opportunity to compare and contrast parenting styles and their children’s behavior with a common television show and real life.
Family values have always been a hot topic, and television presentations of families have come under much scrutiny in the popular press in the past (Heintz, 1992). Previous content analyses of television families have addressed issues of representation of family structure, interaction strategies, and portrayal of conflict, this study goes further will this information and examines how children will be affected due to the parenting style. Content analyses of prime-time programming indicate that two-parent, white, and middle-class families are overrepresented, while single-parent, non-white, and working-class families are underrepresented (Heintz, 1992).

*Modern Family* contains three different families who are all very diverse from one another. The first family consists of a husband, wife, and three children, the oldest being a girl, the youngest a boy, and the middle child also a girl. The second family consists of two gay men who adopt a little girl from the Philippines and the last family consists of an older man and a young attractive Latino woman who has a young boy. It is important for there to be research on such family structures because different parenting styles exist in different types of families. Being able to research a diverse set of families will provide insight on how differences in age, differences in homosexuality, and differences in step-parents effect the child, as well as, the different communication patterns being displayed by each parent in the couple.

In order to conduct research on the parenting styles of the three families in the television show *Modern Family*, and how they affect their children, we will first have define these parenting styles.

**Parenting Styles**

The three parenting styles that we will be evaluating include authoritarian parenting, authoritative parenting, and permissive-indulgent parenting. We chose these three parenting
styles because they are all different from one another and they all produce different types of child behaviors and communication competencies.

Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parents have weak conversation orientation but strong conformity orientation. These types of parents emphasize obedience; they believe that as parents they should be making decisions for their families and little is gained by discussing these plans with their children (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Communication skills are neither valued nor practiced in protective families, such as authoritarian families. Family members may lack the ability to resolve differences and disagreements due to the lack of openness within the family structure (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Children rarely act independently and aren’t encouraged to participate in family discussions causing children to doubt their capacity for making decisions (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Authoritarian parenting styles enforce rigid rules and will withdrawal from love or affection toward their child to force them to conform to set guidelines (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). These parents are more likely to have physical punishments or verbal insults to try and correct bad behavior that their children have involved in. Authoritarian parents also tend to lack warmth and seem detached from their children (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). The way authoritarian parents treat their children affects them in many different ways.

Children of authoritarian parents could be well-behaved, but they are also likely to have mood swings and be anxious. Since children of authoritarian parents tend to be followers instead of leaders they are found to be more passive in relationships (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). These children tend to be less trusting and let people walk all over them since their parents are very detached and uninterested (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). Communications in these relationships face
many problems and these children tend to be more insecure due to the lack of assurance from their parents.

**Authoritative Parenting**

The authoritative parenting style relates to the “ideal” parenting style and seems to produce children with a high level of self-esteem and independence (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). Authoritative parents are high on conversation orientation and high on conformity orientation (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). These types of parents encourage an open exchange of ideas and have unconstrained discussions involving all family members (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Authoritative parents genuinely want to hear what the children have to say but also believe that as parents they should make decisions on behalf of the family. These parents see conflict as a threat to family harmony and strive to resolve it when it occurs (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Authoritative parents hold high expectations for their children but aren’t too overwhelming (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). These parents monitor their child’s behavior, use discipline based on reasoning and reassure children to make decisions and learn from their mistakes (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). These parents are warm and nurturing; they treat their children with respect and expect the same in return.

Children of authoritative parenting easily adopt the beliefs and values of their parents without being forced. These children are socially responsible and achievement-oriented (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). The parenting styles of authoritative parents benefits their children and these parents allow their children to encounter positive and strong communicative relationships in their futures (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). Children of authoritative parents are the most successful in terms of their interaction with their peers and significant others in future relationships (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008).
**Permissive-Indulgent Parenting**

Permissive-indulgent parents are low in both conversation and conformity orientation (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Permissive-indulgent parents are overwhelming open and accepting of their children (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008), however, their interactions with their children are infrequent, un-involving, and topically-restricted (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). These parents are overwhelmingly friendly and set few or no limits at all, even if the child’s safety is at risk. Although these parents are very friendly they are considered to be emotionally divorced from their children (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). Permissive-indulgent parents have few demands for maturity or performance, and they often enforce no consequences for bad behavior (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008).

Children of permissive-indulgent parents are found to have problems with controlling their impulses; they are immature and reluctant to accept responsibility (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). Permissive-indulgent children are more attached and attention seeking due to the neglect of their parents. Since permissive-indulgent parents are emotionally divorced from their children, the children tend to be influenced by external social groups, which could be potentially very harmful (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 2008). These parents are care free which gives the child the impression that they don’t really care what happens to them or goes on in their life and that effects the child’s communication with others; children will be more detached and less open because they believe their peers don’t care just because their parents don’t (Isaacs & Koerner, 2008). Children that are subject to this type of parenting have some of the worst relationship communication skills and thus some of the worst relationships.
Importance of Research

It is very important to determine the effects that parenting styles have on children because we are all children and everyone is affected in a different way based off their parent’s style. It is important for individuals to understand why they are the way they are and understand why they communicate the way they do with other people. Parents’ essentially hold the key to their children’s future the day that the child is born; the way they choose to parent their child determines that child’s fate from day one.

This study examines three different parenting styles and how it affects each child. This study will prove that parent-child communication is the most influential aspect of communication. Since the child learns from their parent and the parent is the first person the child ever communicates with this communication starts as a foundation to how their child will communicate with their peers and whether or not they will be able to build positive long lasting networks.

Modern Family allows us to take a step back and observe three families in action with potential real life situations and examine how each family deals with the situation. Examining how the parents react to hard times, as well as, the good times will shed light into how the child will react to hard times and the good times and whether it is a successful behavior or not. Children imitate what they observe, thus, parents have the biggest impact on how their child will behave, communicate, and feel about themselves. This research will determine which parenting styles lead to what kind of child.

In order to judge the connection between parents and their children we have come up with the following research questions:

R1: What parenting styles are being used in the hit television show Modern Family?
R2: How does each of these parenting styles effect parent-child communication and the child in general?

We will test our research questions and hypotheses through observation that will be described in the methods section proceeding.

Method

In order to test the proposed research questions, this study uses a content analysis approach. This tactic allows researchers to observe a specific television show in order to gather information that can then be generalized to the overall population. In order to do this, researchers analyzed several episodes to best depict parenting styles in modern American families.

*Modern Family* is the television sitcom that is analyzed in this study. There were a number of different reasons the researchers focused only on one program. First, researchers wanted to choose a contemporary sitcom in order to portray the most common American families. Next, *Modern Family* is a popular sitcom to date, as it is has won several Golden Globe and Emmy awards since its start date in 2009. Finally, *Modern Family* depicts very diverse family types, which can better relate to family types and parenting styles that are portrayed in current American families. The first family consists of two Caucasian parents, one male and one female, with three children, the youngest being a boy and the middle and oldest children girls. The next family, also Caucasian, are both male and are a homosexual couple with one adopted child, a girl from the Philippines. The final family has one male Caucasian step parent and one female Latina parent that has one child, a boy. Because this sitcom has multiple examples of parent-child interactions, researchers were able to better analyze various characteristics that indicate different parenting styles.

The season that was chosen to study was the fourth season of the series. This season was chosen because it is the most recent complete season. In order to choose a sample for this study, all 24 episodes in season four were assigned a number. Three episodes were then chosen at
random by the researchers picking the numbers out of a hat. The three episodes that were chosen were episodes one, five, and twelve.

**Data Collection Procedure**

The data were collected via the researchers watching the three full episodes of *Modern Family*. While watching the episodes, researchers looked for those in a parental role exhibiting different types of characteristics when interacting with their children. Those characteristics included but were not limited to discipline, encouragement, reasoning, and reassurance. In each of the three families, there are two people who are both in a parental position over their children. Researchers took note of every instance that was found in each episode when a parent-child interaction was exhibited. Each interaction was then analyzed to see which characteristics were demonstrated, and in turn, which parenting style those characteristics fell into. Not only were the various parenting styles assessed, but the children’s affect from those styles was also analyzed. This analysis was based off of whether the child was positively or negatively affected by the interactions with their parent(s).

**Measures**

**Parenting Styles**

In our study we are evaluating parenting styles in order to assess which of the three parenting styles the six parents fit into. The three parenting styles being studied in this experiment are authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive-indulgent. Researchers specifically looked for specific examples of parenting styles that would fit the three styles at hand. For example, the permissive-indulgent style would be associated with the parental traits of passiveness and being uninvolved. The authoritarian style would be associated with the parental traits of strictness with a focus on ensuring obedience. Finally, the authoritative style would be
identified with openness and a high level of reasoning and encouragement. After evaluation, each parent will fall into one of the three categories. Based on the category that the parent had the majority of their characteristics fall into, researchers will be able to analyze which parenting style that parent most often engages in.

Effect on the Child

In this study, researchers not only assessed what parenting styles were most prevalent in Modern Family, but they also analyzed how those parenting styles affected the children. Researchers observed the children of the three families in order to analyze their reactions to assess whether they were positively or negatively affected by their guardians’ parenting styles. Past research has shown that children dealing with parents with an authoritarian or permissive-indulgent style tend to have a more negative effect, while those children dealing with authoritative parenting styles are affecting more positively.

Variables

The primary variable we tested was parenting style. Once this variable was assessed through the various interactions in these episodes, we were then able to come to conclusions on which parenting styles seem to be the most prevalent in the Modern Family sitcom.

Our measurement process involved the three researchers serving as coders. We looked for indicators of each of the parenting styles identified in the theory.

All of the researchers watched the three families and then together discussed how many times each of them noticed a specific form of parenting. Once this was established researchers then conversed on why or why not they agreed or disagreed with the various conclusions. Once this analysis was done, the researchers were able to reach the final conclusions on which parenting styles were the most prevalent in Modern Family, and also how those styles affected
the children in the series.

**Results**

According to the researchers’ observations in this research, each parent in *Modern Family* shows characteristics of both permissive-indulgent and authoritative parenting styles. Each researcher observed that all three sets of parents demonstrated both parenting styles throughout the chosen episodes. Unanimously, the researchers agreed that Jay, Cameron, Mitchell, Claire, and Phil all showed actions of the permissive-indulgent parenting style. However, the researchers were unable to come to an agreement that Gloria shows characteristics of permissive-indulgent parenting. It was also unanimously agreed upon that Jay, Gloria, Cameron, Claire, and Phil showed characteristics of an authoritative parenting style. However, the researchers disagreed on whether Mitchell portrayed authoritative parenting styles or not. Authoritarian parenting was not identified by any of the researchers in any of the three episodes that were observed.

**Reliability and Validity**

Before the researchers get into the discussion of the findings it is important to note the reliability and validity of the results. Our measures were both valid and reliable because the episodes were chosen at random, in order to avoid researcher biases. Our research can be generalized because of the diversity of the sitcom we chose to analyze. We made a point to select a television series that portrayed parental characters as diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity to make a broader overview of results. *Modern Family* is a good representation of contemporary American families, which in turn results in the relatable accuracy of this sitcom with common parenting styles today. The interactions and characters in *Modern Family* that we were able to analyze in our study represent just a small piece of the world but they were able to provide information into a very interesting topic area that has never been studied in this context before.
Discussion

Parenting Styles Expressed in Modern Family

The researchers found that only two out of the three parenting styles were displayed in the three *Modern Family* episodes that were chosen. Permissive-indulgent and authoritative parenting were displayed multiple times in each episode, however, after thorough discussion the researchers came to a conclusion that not each parent displayed both sets of parenting styles. In the case of Gloria and Mitchell, the researchers found that the two displayed only one parenting style, while the other parents displayed both throughout the three episodes.

Throughout all three episodes, every parent besides Gloria displayed actions of the permissive-indulgent parenting style. For example, Phil and Claire in all three of the episodes showed little to no concern for their son Luke's whereabouts, punishment, or problems. Each researcher noted that Phil and Claire did not enforce any punishment with Luke for misbehaving or showing disrespect towards others. There was only one particular moment that showed an attempt by Claire to punish Luke, but that was easily dropped with little effort. Both parents also showed no concern for their son's whereabouts. In several episodes, Luke was left to his own devices without any parental guidance or chaperon.

It was agreed by all three researchers that Mitchell and Cameron portrayed the permissive-indulgent parenting style, although both parents may seem to appear that they are attentive to their daughter Lily and her well-being, their actions prove otherwise. In several instances throughout all three episodes, both parents were oblivious to their daughter's actions or distress. It was also observed that Mitchell and Cameron for the majority of the episodes, did not talk directly to Lily or answer her questions fully. Instead, either parent would attempt to distract their daughter because they did not feel like dealing with any of the issues at hand.
Jay was the only parent in his family-set that portrayed a permissive-indulgent parenting style. Even though Jay tries to be an active parent to Manny in front of Gloria, for the majority of the episodes he shows little interest in his step-son's actions or whereabouts. Gloria was the only parent to not portray permissive-indulgent characteristics. She is very dedicated to Manny and tries to make him as happy as possible. Most of her actions are driven by the guilt she feels for getting pregnant and making Manny share her with another child. Gloria knows that Manny is a very educated child and talks to him like such. She rarely punishes him, but instead discusses with Manny in a rational tone when she needs to explain something to him.

All of parents in Modern Family except for Mitchell showed characteristics of authoritative parenting styles. Claire and Phil showed authoritativeness throughout the three episodes. When their daughter Haley drops out of college, Phil and Claire decide to teach Haley the value of money by making her pay rent and they explain to her why it is important.

The researchers all agreed that Jay and Gloria displayed authoritative parenting. They tried to express their support of his writing career by sending him to a poetry camp during the summer. Even when Manny thought he would be replaced by his little brother, Jay and Gloria sat Manny down to explain to him the meaning of love and how he could never be replaced.

Cameron, however, was the only parent in his family-set to display authoritative parenting. The researchers noted that Cameron was always ready to discuss with Lily when he knew that she was very upset. When it was time for Lily to know the truth about her mother, Cameron was ready to sit down with his daughter even though it made him uncomfortable. Mitchell, however, failed to display authoritative parenting. The researchers did not see any examples of Mitchell attempting to talk to his daughter about serious events. When Lily found out that she wasn't getting a little brother, Mitchell avoided talking to her about the serious event
and instead tried to keep her distracted. For example, when Lily started demanding a cat Mitchell avoided responding by doing a trick with the car to stop Lily from talking.

The researchers were unable to find any examples of authoritarian parenting in the *Modern Family* episodes. The parents only displayed characteristics of permissive-indulgent and authoritative parenting in the three episodes observed.

**Modern Family Parenting Styles Effect on Children**

In the 1960s, psychologist Diana Baumrind identified four important dimensions of parenting after conducting a study on over 100 pre-school children using parental interviews and naturalistic observations. The four dimensions of parenting she identified were discipline strategies, warmth and nurturance, communication styles, and expectations of maturity and control (Issacs & Koerner, 2008). Baumrind studied these four dimensions through four different parenting styles, authoritarian, authoritative, permissive-indulgent, and permissive-uninvolved. In this study we only looked to observe authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive-indulgent parenting styles because they have the most profound differences in parenting structure. In this section we will indicate how each parenting style the children were faced with in *Modern Family* will affect the children based off of Baumrind’s theory of parenting styles.

Each family used permissive-indulgent and authoritative ways of parenting and these parenting styles will affect their children in a very significant way. According to Baumrind’s theory of parenting styles the children of permissive-indulgent parenting often have problems with controlling their impulses and they may display immaturity and be reluctant to accept responsibility (Issacs & Koerner, 2008). In episode 12 of *Modern Family*, Jay encourages Gloria to drive through a pay station without paying for a ticket, showing that breaking the rules is completely ok. This type of parenting will show Manny to be reluctant to responsibility; he will
think he can get out of things simply because he doesn’t want to do something, just how Gloria and Jay didn’t want to pay so they talked about just driving through a ticket station.

Baumrind also found that children exposed to authoritative parenting will be cheerful and outgoing, achievement oriented and they often strive to meet their own goals. They also cope well with stress and have good relationships with their peers (Issacs & Koerner, 2008). In this season of *Modern Family* the children all achieved some of their own goals that they set for themselves and it was obvious that they were very proud of themselves because of their hard work. In the first episode of the season, Manny is trying to figure out which camp he should go to. They are all academic focused camps and it is obvious that Manny really wants to go to gain more knowledge and be the best person he can be. Also in the first episode of the season, Alex joins a band and has a gig at a local restaurant. Her mother and Haley come to watch and find out that Alex has an amazing voice that they never knew about. It is obvious in this episode that Alex was very proud of her accomplishments and strives musically that she wanted her mother and sister to come see how good she had gotten.

The two parenting styles that were expressed in *Modern Family* will have effects on the children that will continue to be apparent in continuing seasons. The small indications of parental effect on the children came through in some of the episodes we watched but watching an entire season will make the effects much more prominent which can cause future research on how the children started out behaving and how they ended up due to their parents.

**Further Research**

An obvious further research study that could occur based off of this study is one of media and the effect the media has on society. Since there have been extreme technological advances in
the past decade the mediums impact has increased as well. It is a common thought that the media has a very large impact on society so it would be interesting to investigate how and in what ways the media effects society. It would also be very interesting and beneficial to society to investigate how the media affects the way parents interact with their children, as well as, how children respond to their parents parenting styles.

This study only focuses on a television show observation of parenting leaving room for future researchers to observe parenting styles in real life. A research study could be formed off of this study by other researchers surveying young adults and asking them specific questions to see which type of parenting style they are/were faced with. Surveying young adults will allow the researcher to see how the child grew and formed into the person they are due to the specific parenting style that they were raised with. Young adults are away from home and not completely encompassed with the parenting style anymore so they are the best subjects to study. Since we were only focusing on three episodes of Modern Family another research study could be done on *Modern Family* but on all episodes in season four or on several seasons.

As noted above the researchers only observed three different episodes from a specific season. Our small observation area gave us a limited view at the families parenting styles and the way that these specific styles affected their children. A future study could be conducted on multiple different seasons to see how the children progress in each season, as well as, how the parents change. Conducting a study on a wider variety of episodes will give future researchers a lot more information to come to a more clear and concise prediction of which exactly parenting style the parents fit into and how the children’s behaviors are going to be and have become over time. This research study acts as a stepping stone into future research that will provide a more conducive gathering of information.
Works Cited


