

“I LOVE YOU, BUT SHUT UP AND DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.”: AN APPRAISAL
THEORY EXPLORATION OF TOUGH LOVE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
Communication

June 2019

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to better understand tough love as a communication interaction, specifically focusing on defining and understand tough love from a receiver's perspective. Thirteen respondents between the ages of 18-28 were recruited from a mid-sized Midwestern university. Flexible in-depth interviews were conducted given the exploratory nature of this study. Lazarus' Appraisal Theory was used as a lens to better understand tough love as a process. Analysis of the data found that emotions in the primary appraisal phase are often negative, with codes such as *hurt*, *angry*, and *embarrassed* arising in the data. The secondary phase demonstrated the intentionality of this message, with respondents understanding the purpose of tough love as *encouraging resilience* or *teaching a lesson*. Reappraisals often occurred when respondents realized the message was tough love. Relational factors such as *closeness* and *authority* were determinants in whether this message was received positively or negatively.

Keywords: tough love, appraisal theory, relational closeness, compliance-gaining

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to start by thanking my dedicated advisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Ann Burnett. Without her guidance, I would not have been able to accomplish all that this study came to be. She was always an open ear, a shoulder to lean on for support, and a swift kick in the butt when I needed it the most. Your passion for advising and counsel in my thesis-writing journey was insurmountable. Thank you for being a great support both academically and personally. I sincerely cannot thank you enough.

A heartfelt thank you as well to my committee members Dr. Abby Gold and Dr. Carrie Anne Platt. Dr. Abby Gold was crucial in the development of my thesis topic, guiding me in directions of research that were necessary for the success of this study. Dr. Carrie Anne Platt offered an abundance of knowledge in both areas of theory and data collection. Your qualitative research methods course prepared me to take on this thesis work, and I cannot thank you enough for that, Dr. Platt.

I thank my family for being a continual system of support throughout my academic adventures.

Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Ryan Archer, for being my rock. Whenever my studies would become overwhelming, you would always be there to ground me. You continually kept my spirits high in down days, picked me up when I was feeling overwhelmed, and instilled in me the ability to be mindful of my growth and personal skills. You are wonderful and so kind. Your assistance in getting me through this degree does not go without recognition. Your presence was crucial in my completion of this study and degree.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As interconnected and relational beings, we are often tasked with mediating and analyzing different types of communication messages. These messages can range from positive to negative, helpful to unhelpful, and necessary to unnecessary, dependent on our appraisals of messages (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus, 1991), how we cope with them (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b), and how we perceive their intentionality (Malle & Knobe, 1997). These messages can include communication of social support, especially in stressful situations (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Communication messages may also be conferred in a less positive light, such as messages that express interpersonal conflict (De Clercq, Thongpapanl, & Dimov, 2009; Deutsch, 1969; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996; Rahmin, 1983; Thomas, 1976), which are likely to evoke emotions of hurt (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Though there is plenty of research on these types of messages, there seems to be a lack of recognition of the related communication phenomenon of *tough love*.

Tough love is likely a type of communication that many individuals have experienced in varying degrees, whether they use it or receive it. Some people may experience a tough love message in explicit terms. When facing an interaction of tough love, a sender might illuminate their intention by saying, “I love you, but I’m going to be tough on you,” or “I know this is tough, but I love you and you need to hear this.” Conversely, individuals may derive intentionality as a message of tough love, in which they may hear a relational partner implicitly being tough on them without the sender explicitly stating so.

When reflecting on the phenomenon of tough love, it is reasonable to assume that it exists in a plethora of relationships, from parent-child and siblings to supervisor-subordinate and coaching relationships. Though it seems that such a well-known and experienced phenomenon would be extensively researched, scholars have primarily focused on tough love in tense interpersonal relationships from a sender point-of-view, such as strained parent-child relationships (Pieper & Pieper, 1992; Siennick, 2011) and relationships with drug addicts (Burns & Peyrot, 2003; Clark, 2012). There is a lack of research regarding how tough love is perceived by the receiver, as well as how individuals understand the intentionality of the message. The purpose of the present study is to better understand how tough love is received in everyday relational interactions, without constraint on the type of relationship between the sender and the receiver.

1.1. Defining Tough Love

Though the concept of tough love does not have a clear definition, Milliken and Meredith, in their 1968 book *Toughlove*, are credited with the phrase's origination (Hawkes, 2016). Milliken (2007) describes tough love in the following expression: "I don't care how this makes you feel toward me. You may hate my guts, but I love you, and I am doing this because I love you" (p. 45). The act of tough love has also been conceptualized as addressing "principles before popularity" (Hawkes, 2016, p. 63). Tough love in this context is a harshly communicated, especially in regard to language choice, message of support, often with the intent of aiding in someone's long-term well-being. In regard to harshness, this conception also communicates a lack of caring in which the sender does not care what others personally think about them or their use of tough love. Definitions of tough love have been narrowed and enhanced since this first conception.

More modern definitions of tough love focus on strained or tense relationships. In fact, the Google definition directly refers to relationships including “an addict, child, or criminal.” Other definitions have been less directive in citing specific relationships. Urban Dictionary’s most popular definition of tough love defines the phenomenon as “being cruel to be kind,” (VG, 2007) with hopes of paining someone in the present so they do not experience future pain. Tough love is communicated to protect individuals from future “interference from third parties” (VG, 2007). Further, Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines tough love as “love or affectionate concern expressed in a stern or unsentimental manner (as through discipline) especially to promote responsible behavior” (Tough love). There seems to be a consensus across definitions that tough love is concerned with the promotion of welfare, but these definitions lack consensus on how this message is expressed and received. Considering the lack of relational research in the communication discipline on tough love, as well as less-than-consistent definitions of tough love, the necessity of this exploratory study arises.

1.2. Rationale

Tough love is a colloquial term often used by lay persons to describe a communication phenomenon that has lacked research in the field of communication. This lack of explication of the phrase ‘tough love’ begs the necessity of further research into not only what tough love is, but how recipients perceive the intentionality of tough love. Often, tough love is excused as an appropriate way to promote the welfare of another. This paper aims to address how this message is received, how receivers appraise, or make sense of, this message, and in what circumstances receivers come to understand tough love’s supportive qualities. Research has yet to explore whether this form of communication, from a receiver’s perspective, is constructive and positive, or negative and hurtful, or perhaps some of both. Past research has neglected not only where to

situate tough love regarding the type of communication it is, but who uses it, what relationships it often exists between, and how the recipient perceives the intentionality of such message. To gain a better understanding of the concept of tough love as a communication phenomenon, this thesis will focus on how recipients define the term and how perceptions of intentionality impact the reception of this message. To guide this project, appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b) will be used as an initial framework. That theory, along with the current state of research on tough love, will be described in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will outline the study's protocol; Chapters 4 and 5 will focus on the results and discussion, respectively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Tough Love

The application of tough love is often explored through tense and strained relationships. While some articles focus on student-teacher relationships in college (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012; Salas, 2008), others are focused on less-positive tensions, such as drug addiction (Burns & Peyrot, 2003; Clark, 2012) and misbehaving children (Pieper & Pieper, 1992; Siennick, 2011). Much of modern research has focused on the latter, especially with a focus on delinquency, criminality, and drug use in children. Often, this research is sender-focused, exploring how senders can effectively communicate tough love to a receiver, in hopes to give the receiver the love, support, and direction they need in tough times. This approach illuminates practices for senders to demand cooperation when facing troubled situations and relationships (York & York, 1980).

2.2. Arguments for the Tough Love Approach

Tough love was first referred to in addiction research by York and York in their 1980 book *Toughlove*, where the authors attempted to address tough love strategies used in parent-child relationships involving rebellious teenagers. Toughlove operates through self-help groups and peaked in national attention in the 1980s, giving parents a means to “stand up to their problem children” (Moore, 1981). The movement encouraged parents to get tough on rebellious children, learn to say “no,” and not treat their children as if they were impotent and penniless. York and York founded Toughlove Solutions, a local support group in New Hope, Pennsylvania in 1978 (York & York, 1980). The movement was so popular, 200 chapters of Toughlove Solutions were formed in only 5 years after its conception, spreading throughout the United

States and Canada (Moore, 1981). The “solution” provided many families with a means for communicating their struggles and learning how to stand up to their misbehaving children.

When Toughlove was first introduced, one could say that their ideas of handling out-of-control teenagers and children was quite radical. Pieper and Pieper (1992) illuminate this approach as stringent, as professionals would:

...tell parents whose adolescents take drugs, skip school, steal, and talk back to present the teen with strict, unconditional rules for acceptable behavior. If the teen does not adhere to these demands, parents are to mete out stern responses that range from withholding privileges to actually changing the locks to bar the difficult teen from the house (p. 369).

Tough love approaches highlighted in past literature are concerned with the orientation of the message from the sender. This approach is meant to reflect sternness and inflexibility from the sender to a misbehaving individual. More recent applications of tough love are reflected in current intervention techniques concerning children and addiction.

The Foundations Recovery Network goes as far to say that “tough love may save your child’s life” (Interventions with heart, 2018). Tough love in interventions are especially concerned with consequences. If an addicted person or problem child does not change, tough love encourages and utilizes harsh consequences and repercussions for poor choices and actions. For instance, in situations concerning an addict, the Foundation Recovery Network outlines the following consequences: (a) shifting legal custody of children if applicable, (b) advising that the addicted individual leave their home, and (c) refusing to give any financial or legal assistance if necessary. These consequences of tough love are centered on persuading an addicted person by giving them no choice in the continuance of their undesired behavior (Interventions with heart,

2018). Tough love also extends into less serious situations, such as dealing with unruly teenagers. Current conceptions of tough love are more concerned with tough love being a healthy balance of “tough” and “love.”

The tough love approach is often confused as being authoritarian in nature, “my way or the highway” (Morin, 2018). According to Morin, this approach can be equally empathetic and involved, while also being assertive and strict. The goal of tough love is to allow parents to hold their children accountable for their actions, while implementing consequences for risky and unethical behavior. Morin advocates for: (a) consistently setting and enforcing limits and expectations, (b) taking a stand of authority when necessary or when a child is putting him/herself in unsafe situations, and (c) seeking a necessary balance of freedom and constraint. While seeking this healthy balance, Morin (2018) states it is important for children to make mistakes and experience consequences, while also being aware of parents’ love and affection.

The benefits of the tough love approach have also been conferred by academic studies. Demos, a qualitative, think-tank focused research company, conducted a ground-breaking study on tough love parenting that included 9,000 family households. The study *Building Character* is a longitudinal study of children born in the same week of April 2001 that aimed to better understand how parents assist children in building character. The authors produced a taxonomy of parenting styles: laissez-faire, authoritarian, disengaged, and tough love, which were placed on two axes of demandingness and responsiveness (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009).

The Building Character report synthesized that children whose parents possess a laissez-faire parenting style are less likely to develop vital skills for building character compared to parents utilizing a tough love approach (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009; Shields, 2011). The tough

love approach, centered between both a controlling and warm parenting style, is defined by Lexmond and Reeves (2009) as parents who:

...combine a warm and responsive approach to child rearing with firm rules and clear boundaries. They are assertive without being aggressive or restrictive and the aim of their disciplinary methods is to reason with and support their child rather than to be punitive. Children from ‘tough loving’ families are characterized as cooperative, self-regulating and socially responsible (p. 46).

The tough love parenting approach has also been applied by Demos to binge drinking in their study *Under the Influence*. This study found that the tough love parenting style reduces the prevalence of excessive drinking in adolescence (Bartlett, Grist, & Hahn, 2012) and is “the best protection against young people drinking hazardously” (Birdwell, Vandore, & Hahn, 2012, p. 112). Demos studies provide support for the tough love approach in its ability to positively impact parent-child relationships. Though there has been significant support for the tough love approach in parenting, some scholars express reservations when using tough love, especially concerning the extent to which tough love is more hurtful than helpful for the recipient.

2.3. Arguments Against the Tough Love Approach

A tough love method of communication presents challenges, as past research seems to be torn in whether it is an effective or ineffective communication approach. While plenty of sources support tough love, there are a number of adverse opinions on the approach, both in scholarly research and colloquial knowledge. Evo Health and Wellness, a treatment center in California, advocates against the tough love approach. Though it is common for caregivers to want to “call out” individuals for their wrong behavior and serve ultimatums, Evo states that this approach is unnecessary due to the “internal tough love” that individuals are already experiencing (Milles,

2018). Evo situates tough love as a *confrontation approach*, and deems it ineffective in dealing with individuals struggling with addiction.

The confrontation approach was explored by White and Miller (2007) in their research on addiction treatment. Therapeutic confrontation is defined “as the process by which a therapist provides direct, reality-oriented feedback to a client regarding the client’s own thoughts, feelings, or behavior (Forrest, 1982)” (White & Miller, 2007, p. 13). Addiction counselors began to embody this approach in the mid-twentieth century, but the approach transformed drastically upon this adaptation. Addiction counselors began to justify aggressive verbal confrontation, like using profanities and purposeful ridicule and humiliation, as a means for handling clients’ addictions. The *Minnesota Model*, introduced in the 1940s and 1950s as an approach to chemical dependency, adapted the confrontation approach. The first stage of this approach was called “tough love” (White & Miller, 2007).

Tough love was derived from a concept within Alcoholic Anonymous and was later integrated into the Minnesota Model for treating chemical dependency. This stage focused on confronting alcoholics directly about their behavior, while also illuminating consequences of their actions. Tough love was instilled to combat *enabling*, which entails behavior on part of the caregiver to protect an alcoholic from consequences, and thus enabling the individual to continue drinking or using illicit drugs. Tough love was thought to speed up the process of recovery by pushing alcoholics to “hit rock bottom” and eventually seek the help they so badly need (White & Miller, 2007). Overall, White and Miller (2007) discourage uses of confrontation approaches, and thus tough love, citing them as “ineffective, potentially harmful, and professionally inappropriate” (p. 12). This recommendation is also supported by researchers focused on tough love in parent-child relationships.

Though tough love has previously been crowned the best parenting style when raising children with character (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009), other scholars have questioned its positive application in a variety of relationships. Nonetheless, since tough love research seems to be especially concerned with parent-child relationships, research on negative aspects of tough love follow in suit. Pieper & Pieper (1992) refer to tough love as a “desperate remedy” (p. 370) specifically formulated in the 1960s to control unruly, drug-taking young adults. The principle of this movement was to use sternness and toughness in parenting to create its equal opposite: well-tempered children who chose to stay out of trouble, not cause parents extra stress (Pieper & Pieper, 1992). There may be negative repercussions, though, to instilling this approach to parenting children.

The ideological nature of tough love lives in a pessimistic worldview, where children are automatically assumed to be mischievous and troublesome (Pieper & Pieper, 1992). This approach is troubling due to the encouragement of skepticism in parents to constantly reflect and read into a child’s motives, good or bad in appearance. Pieper and Pieper (1992) assert that children with tough love parents will never experience “positive, accepting, and nurturing” parenting styles (p. 370). Instead, they will experience parenting that includes an abundance of questions and mistrust, though they may not have earned that treatment. Communication scholars Hollihan and Riley (1987) confer, stating that this program is too readily able to consider all children as mischievous and all situations as troublesome.

Hollihan and Riley (1987), in their rhetorical critique of the Toughlove Solutions by York and York (1980), observed several of these support groups in hopes to better understand this “risky” approach to parenting. Upon observation, the researchers experienced this pessimistic state of mind ruminating amongst parental figures. The assumption of motivation for bad

behavior in children was often associated with adverse choices rather than legitimate behavioral problems. For instance, when parents brought up bad behavior in conjunction with questions of psychological or emotional issues, these conceptions were automatically dismissed and concluded to be influenced by “bad drugs or ‘bad crowd’” (p. 24). It seems these support groups were all too often producing like-mindedness in choosing to ignore a child’s mental health issues in exchange for a naturally pessimistic view of children and their motives.

This approach cultivates such a negative worldview for the parents that it persuades parents to “be prepared to sacrifice their child to save the child from himself” (Pieper & Pieper, 1992, p. 371). Though parents may deem their acts as completely selfless and best for the child, this sacrifice often results in an ultimatum, leaving a child with little freedom of personal decision making. Often, a child receiving tough love is faced with a polarized decision: either get over their troublesome behavior or leave the house. Hollihan and Riley (1987) evaluated with aversion the concept of ejecting children from their homes.

One of the tenets of the Toughlove approach to parenting misbehaving children was that resorting to removing a child from the home, or “kicking them out,” was acceptable. Hollihan and Riley (1987) illuminate the story of John Hinckley, whose parents were following the Toughlove Solutions approach. Upon ejecting him from the house and declaring his financial independence, Hinckley shot three men, along with President Reagan. Hinckley’s father highlights misconceptions and misguidances from the Toughlove Solutions groups:

For heaven’s sake don’t kick somebody out of the house when they can’t cope. But I’d never heard that before, and it (kicking John out of the house) seemed to make a lot of sense at the time (“Hinckley’s Family,” 1984, p. 12)” (Hollihan & Riley, 1987, p. 24).

This tragic loss begs the question of not only how effective this approach is, but the implications that it has on the receiver.

The Toughlove approach is harnessed as a “solution” to parents’ problems with misbehaving adolescents (York & York, 1980). This approach outlines the purposes of the sender (parent) in communicating tough love messages to the receiver (child). The approach provides a guideline for how senders should respond to disruptive behavior, in hopes that their response will “solve” these issues and keep them from arising in the future. What this approach neglects to capture is how the respondent interprets and appraises this approach. It also fails to examine tough love in relationships other than parent-unruly teenager. How do receivers perceive tough love? How effective is this approach in furthering an individual’s well-being? To better understand the reception of tough love on part of the receiver, this research study aims to use Appraisal Theory as a theoretical framework for better understanding tough love messages not only in parent-child relationships, but in a much broader context of relationships.

2.4. Appraisal Theory

Appraisals are derived from work by Arnold (1960a, 1960b, 1970) on emotions and personality, specifically in his proposal “that an emotion can occur only after the situation is perceived and appraised” (Arnold, 1960b, p. 30). The concepts of *cognitive appraisal* and *coping* were furthered by Lazarus and a number of his colleagues through research done on psychological stress (Coyne & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984b). Coping and cognitive appraisals are crucial mediators in stressful interpersonal interactions, especially regarding the immediate and long-term repercussions of these events (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

2.4.1. Appraisals

Appraisals are defined by Lazarus (1991) as evaluations that people make about situations, environments, and circumstances. Cognitive appraisal involves the process in which an individual “evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her well-being” (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986, p. 572). If this evaluation brings about feelings of relevancy, this appraisal will be further considered. In lay terms, cognitive appraisals inform individuals on how to make judgements about their environment, as well as how to emotionally react to this environment (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; McLaren & Solomon, 2010). When faced with tough love, appraisals may play a large part in determining the efficacy and intentionality of this message.

2.4.2. Primary Appraisals

Lazarus (1991) proposes three different types of appraisals: *primary appraisals*, *secondary appraisals*, and *reappraisals*. Primary appraisals are the initial appraisal when faced with an evaluation of event. The purpose of primary appraisals is to assess what has occurred and if the event will impact one’s personal well-being or if there is anything at stake with the interaction (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Individuals in the primary appraisal process may ask “what's going on?” (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). Personal characteristics, such as personal values or self-esteem beliefs, will impact how the situation is appraised (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Tough love is an interpersonal interaction that is often concerned with the well-being of the recipient. Tough love may invoke a primary appraisal in which a recipient is forced to assess the validity and relevancy of the message to their well-being.

There are three different primary appraisal processes outlined by Folkman and Lazarus (1985): threat, loss, and challenge. Primary appraisals assessed as a threat see the situation as hostile and distressful. A situation appraised as loss is typically associated with feelings of sadness and heartache. Primary appraisals can also be assessed more positively, such as in challenging appraisals, where individuals view the situation as impacting their personal development and growth. Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox (1999) assert that challenge appraisals are more likely to be associated with positive psychological adjustment than loss or threat appraisals, which impact how individuals assess these messages in the secondary appraisal phase.

2.4.3. Secondary Appraisals

If a recipient deems that an interaction has interfered with their emotions or personal goals, they will proceed with a secondary appraisal (Lazarus, 1991). Recipients often use the secondary appraisal process to “prevent harm or improve their circumstances” (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, Alexander, 2005, p. 444; also see Lazarus, 1991). This appraisal involves coping on part of the recipient, in which an individual evaluates their primary appraisal and assesses whether there is anything that can be done to meliorate the situation. *Coping* refers to a person’s emotional and cognitive ability to mediate an environmental and interpersonal transaction. This process is often taxing on a person’s emotional health. Coping methods may include “changing the situation, accepting it, seeking more information, or holding back from acting impulsively (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986, p. 572). In coping, individuals may ask questions like “why is this happening?” (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). Together, how individuals approach primary and secondary appraisals determines how harmful, threatening, and challenging the interaction is perceived (Folkman, 2008). This can, in turn, effect how intentionality of a message is perceived.

2.4.4. Intentionality in Secondary Appraisals

Perceived intentionality is a crucial aspect of secondary appraisals, as this level of appraisal asks deeper questions into *why* a message or event is occurring. Malle and Knobe (1997) provide a framework for intentionality that will be observed in this research study, clarifying intentionality as:

...actions that were performed intentionally. In contrast, when we speak of an action that was intended (i.e., preceded by an intention), we should not automatically infer that such an action was performed intentionally; for if awareness or skill were missing, the action would be intended but not performed intentionally (p. 115).

The present study will orient itself on intentionality as an action that is performed intentionally, not by accident. Intentionality appraisals are a crucial aspect of secondary appraisals because they impact the seriousness of another's behavior, as well as decide how excusable this behavior is (Malle & Knobe, 1997). If a behavior is considered intentional, this appraisal may negatively impact the sender's personality and character (Shaver, 1985). If an individual perceives behavior as unintentional, there is a less negative impact on the relationship (Weiner, 1995). Intentionality in messages has primarily focused on hurtful messages, as perceived intentionality is associated with long-term relational effects (Feeney, 2004), decreased relational satisfaction (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998), and relational distancing (Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Perceptions of intentionality in messages of tough love are important to understand, as these perceptions could shift a tough love message from being positively impactful to negatively impactful, hurtful to not hurtful. Intentionality may impact conceptions of tough love messages, but how we cope with these messages may also be telling of how we assess intentionality.

2.4.5. Coping in Appraisals

Coping processes are typically elicited in response to an appraisal. How these coping processes are enacted depend on the type of appraisals and situation the individual is experiencing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a). Central to research on coping are methods considered successful in terms of promoting psychological and emotional well-being (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984a). In a year-long study on the relationship between appraisals and coping with stressful episodes, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found that people approached psychological stress with two different coping processes: *problem-focused* and *emotional-focused*. A problem-focused approach focuses on situations where something could feasibly be done to curb psychological stress. A problem-based approach focuses on “altering the troubled person-environment relation causing distress” (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986, p. 993). Emotion-focused processes were enacted in situations necessary to adapt to, thus focusing on regulating emotional distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984b). No matter the initial appraisal or coping process utilized to approach tough love, individuals have the opportunity to reappraise these messages.

2.4.6. Reappraisals

When faced with stress, individuals have the opportunity to reappraise, or re-evaluate, a situation in a positive light. Positive reappraisals are “an adaptive process by which stressful events are reconstructed as benign, valuable, or beneficial” (Saintives & Lunardo, 2016, p. 346; see also Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Individuals may negatively approach appraised situations with confrontation or relational distancing. However, being proactive in problem-solving and approaching the reappraisal process positively has been shown to have positive outcomes

(Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). The reappraisal process could significantly impact the outcome of tough love situations and messages.

Though the appraisal process seems linear in nature, Lazarus (1999) insists the process is fluid, in which individuals can vary between stages of the appraisal process at any given time. Therefore, it is pertinent to explore the stages of the tough love process to better determine at what stage a tough love appraisal comes to fruition. Appraisal theory is a fruitful lens for this study as it allows for the opportunity to understand how individuals, who have directly experienced tough love, come to not only understand this type of message, but how they evaluate and perceive its impact on themselves and their relationship with the sender.

2.5. Adding to the Conversation

There is a significant gap between scholarly research and colloquial knowledge regarding the phenomenon of tough love. Past research has often focused on tough love through a pop-psychology perspective rather than a communicative and interactive, sender *and* receiver perspective. Further, research orientations towards tough love appear to be different, with the pop-psychological perspective of tough love being much more positive than scholarly perspectives. Past applications of tough love include troubled parent-child relationships (Pieper & Pieper, 1992; Siennick, 2011) and addiction (Burns & Peyrot, 2003; Clark, 2012; White & Miller, 2007). These explorations have focused on tough love from the sender perspective, such as how a parent can effectively communicate tough love to a misbehaving child or how caregivers can implement tough love to put a stop to addiction-related behavior (York & York, 1980). This study aims to shift this focus on tough love from a positive, pop-psychology phenomenon, to an important yet under-researched communication interaction. In doing this, the present study will shift the narrative on tough love from a sender-focused to recipient-focused

exploration. A qualitative approach will be used to explore how recipients of tough love appraise communication interactions with senders of tough love.

This study aims to explore how individuals experience the tough love process to better understand the saliency of tough love messages. This study includes parent-child examples, but also expands to cover tough love in other types of relationships. Although there is a lack of research as to what constitutes tough love messages in the communication field, the research objective of this study is to qualitatively explore this phenomenon from a receiver's perspective in order to better understand how individuals define the phenomenon of tough love, how these messages are appraised, and how intentionality is derived from these appraisals.

2.6. Research Questions

Past research has lacked in understanding tough love from a communication interaction standpoint. Recipients of tough love have lacked scholarly recognition in their importance in the communication of tough love, as to how this message is defined, appraised, and understood. Therefore, the following research questions are asserted concerning tough love in relationships:

RQ1: How do recipients define tough love?

RQ2: How do receivers of tough love perceive the intentionality of this message?

3. METHODS

Given the exploratory state of research on tough love, a qualitative approach was implemented to answer the research questions. A qualitative method was the best approach to this study because of the desire to assess individual values and beliefs surrounding this communication phenomenon, an approach that quantitative methods would not achieve due to lack of research surrounding this topic (Saldaña, 2016). Data were collected through in-depth interviews given the researcher's desire to learn more about this issue (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews were conducted rather than focus groups due to the sensitive nature of the subject. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of tough love from a receiver's perspective. By implementing a qualitative approach, the researcher aimed to assess the "mental maps" of participants surrounding how they defined tough love and how the appraisal process impacted the reception of the message (Luker, 2008).

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling from a mid-sized public Midwestern university through a variety of lower- and upper-level Communication courses. Initially, the researcher intended to recruit solely from the COMM 110: Fundamentals of Public Speaking research pool. A Blackboard announcement was created, explaining the nature of the study and indicating the requirement that individuals must self-identify as having a tough love experience. This message explained that participants would be asked to take part in a 30 minute to one-hour interview and would receive 10 research participation points for doing so. Upon signing up for an interview time on Calendly.com, participants were emailed a short introduction to the study that offered an example of what tough love might look like. Potential participants were asked to email the researcher, indicating whether or not they identified as having a tough

love experience similar to the ones mentioned in the email. It is the researcher's belief that these follow-up emails discouraged potential respondents from participating for one of two reasons: (a) the email was intimidating, therefore discouraging participants from responding, or (b) potential interviewees did not align with the tough love scenarios and decided not to respond.

The university acted as the only site for data collection. After multiple failed attempts to secure interviews from the COMM 110 pool, other upper communication and general education courses were solicited for participation. Three communication courses as well as a women and gender studies course were added to the data collection pool, with each course offering a varying amount of extra credit points for participation.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private room in the Communication Department over the course of 4 weeks in March of 2019. The researcher aimed to gather a participant pool of 10 to 15 people varying in both age and gender. Twenty-five students from COMM 110 and other Communication or general education courses expressed interest in the study via Calendly.com. Of these students, thirteen showed up to the interview. Participants in this study were mostly white (n=8) with 3 Black/African American and 2 Asian/Pacific Islander respondents. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28, with the majority being 18-20 years old. Of the transcribed interviews, only 10 were used in the final results section with a mix of positive (n=8) and negative (n=2) experiences, as the researcher felt these interviews best fit the goal of this study.¹ Of these 10 interview respondents, 6 were male, and 4

¹ Three interviews were excluded from data analysis because of they did not match the intent of the study. One interviewee talked about a friend who had autism and did not have the capacity to understand social cues. This respondent thought his friend was using "tough love" when he said derogatory statements. Another participant talked about his relationship with his father but had a simplistic understanding of tough love that did not offer depth of experience of this message. The third interview spoke of a relationship with her brother which erred on the side of verbal aggression with a lack of perceived love. Thus, these interviews were not included in the final results.

were female. Relationships discussed included parent-child (n=8), friends (n=1) and client-therapist (n=1).

3.2. Interview Methodology

Given the lack of research on tough love as a communication phenomenon, in-depth interviews were employed to gather data on participants' mental maps and lived experiences with tough love. Interviews employed a semi-structured protocol that provided a specific set of questions regarding tough love experiences (see Appendix A). Flexibility in interview protocol allowed for probing and follow-up questions, as needed. Questions ascended in difficulty, starting with simple reflective questions on their experience, working up to questions about emotions and possible relationship impacts. The interview protocol was created in a way that assessed respondents' appraisals of tough love. Interview questions reflected each phase in the appraisal process (i.e. primary, secondary, and reappraisals). For instance, primary appraisal questions asked "how did you feel in the moment?", as well as "how did you view this message when you heard it?" Reappraisal questions asked "what do you think about this experience now that you are reflecting on it?" and "how did this message encourage you to reflect on yourself?" At the end of the interview, participants were asked to personally define tough love as a communication phenomenon. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms in the transcriptions.

3.3. Data Analysis and Transcription

Thirteen interviews were conducted and fully transcribed using an automated service called Temi.com. Transcriptions were cross-referenced with original audio files to ensure accuracy. Notes and analytic memos were also created for each interview, and material from these notes is included in the results section for this study. The data collection process provided

an abundance of themes. Common themes began to occur halfway through the data collection process, though it would be necessary to conduct further interviews to gain full theoretical saturation (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data analysis of the first research question concerning the definition of tough love used *Participant Definitional Analysis* (PDA; Manning, 2013). According to Manning and South (2018), “PDA is an analytical tool developed specifically to provide empirical support for new or understudied concepts in social science literature” (p. 3; see Manning, 2013). Manning and South (2018) indicate three qualities that must be present in the data in order to use PDA: “(a) participants explicitly providing a definition of the term or concept being examined; (b) examples or stories that illustrate or demonstrate that term or concept; and (c) discussion about the term or concept that is not necessarily definition-oriented” (p. 3). The researcher collected data in such a manner that these three qualities were present and identifiable within the interview protocol.

An inductive approach of analysis was applied to the second research question to gather a list of common themes across the data. Analysis started immediately after the first interview. Analytic memos were created to reflect on “the emergent patterns, categories, and sub-categories, themes, and concepts” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44) within the data collection process. Interviews were open-coded during the transcription process while cross-checking manuscripts for accuracy. This process was not guided by any certain coding methods, but allowed the researcher to look at the transcription with an open perspective. After the first round of open coding, affective coding methods, which include *emotion*, *values*, and *process coding*, were instilled to understand better the “subjective qualities of human experience (i.e., emotions, values, conflicts, judgements)” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 124).

Emotion coding was applied to label emotions of the participants both during the tough love message and after (Saldaña, 2016). Second, *values coding* was applied. Value codes “reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 130) and were used to highlight respondents’ perceptions of a tough love message. Lastly, *process coding* was employed “to connote action in the data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 111). Process coding was used to identify actions on part of both the sender and the receiver of a tough love message in order to better understand tough love as a process from a receiver’s perspective. Codes developed out of the first-round coding methods were organized *by coding mapping*, a post-first cycle coding method that condenses initial codes into central concepts and themes. Final codes reflect themes across interviews that were privileged in frequency and occurrence. Analysis of data yielded a total of 36 codes, all of which were maintained and organized in second cycle coding.

This study used second cycle coding as a means for advancing the organization and conceptualization of first round codes. The goal of second cycle coding in this study was to better understand how the initial codes intertwined with Lazarus’ appraisal theory tenets of primary appraisals, secondary appraisals, and reappraisals. *Pattern coding* was utilized to group initial codes into smaller and distinct themes, relating to the appraisal theory process (i.e., Primary Appraisals of Tough Love). Pattern coding was an appropriate coding method for this level of the research study because it created more meaningful connections between otherwise distinct first cycle codes. All categories created in data analysis were tied to Lazarus’ framework of Appraisal Theory.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Defining Tough Love

The following chapter aims to analyze data in hopes to better understand the following research questions:

RQ1: How do recipients define tough love?

RQ2: How do receivers of tough love perceive the intentionality of this message?

The criterion for participants was self-identification of having experienced or received a tough love message. The results from the participant definitional analysis, responding to RQ1, reflect that the participants shared common conceptions, based on personal experience, of what tough love is and what the intentions are of this message. Based on the analysis of data, participants defined tough love as *harshly communicating love, typically against the receiver's desires, to promote personal well-being*. This definition, however, is contingent on the receiver's relationship with the sender, which will be discussed later in this chapter. This definition relates to past conceptions of tough love, illustrating a close relation to common knowledge and scholarly research of this experience. The following sections contribute nuances of this constructed definition.

4.2. Communicating Love

A central tenant of tough love is that love needs to be present in the communication of this message. Darren described that the primary goal of tough love is "to show love." Comments such as "give someone love, well-needed advice, in a tough way" help situate the necessary balance of both toughness and love. Through and through, receivers of tough love must feel the sender is "being ultimately kind... presenting love to this person" (Lawrence). If there is an absence of love felt, this message will not be tough love, but rather hurtful and merely *tough*.

4.3. Against Receiver's Desires

In communicating love, receivers often feel that the sender is going against their immediate desires in order to promote betterment in the long-term. A tough love message often causes “in the immediate, harm or detriment to the persons being presented to” (Lawrence). Participants communicated this as doing “the opposite of what [receivers] want” (Tyler). Lawrence noted that in communicating tough love, “you’re acting against what they want... You’re not acting in what they feel is their best interest, even if it really is.” Elements of love and well-being are fundamentally necessary in this communication in order to obtain a “positive result” (Tyler) from a tough love message.

4.4. Harsh Manner

Even though the basis of tough love rests in the communication of love, participants expressed that this message almost always is communicated in a “harsher way” (Darren). Harshness is often concerning “the way [senders] say it” (Nala), reflecting on the sender's tone of voice, attitude, demeanor, and language choice. Even if the sender's language and tone are harsh, receivers still need to feel sympathy behind the message: “...he tried to convey it to me and tell me why, where he was coming from. He was trying to be sympathetic, even if he was being pretty harsh about it” (Lawrence). Therefore, within this harshness, there must be a sense of the sender’s intent to emphasize the well-being of the receiver.

4.5. Emphasizing Well-Being

Along with love, receivers need to feel there is a positive motivation for using this type of communication. Participants need to think that the sender cares about their well-being, helping them to become “a better person or to help you through something” (Emily). Comments such as “to make you stronger,” “to be better disciplined” and to “create a more well-rounded person”

represent the objective of tough love is to promote personal growth and overall well-being. It is necessary for participants to feel as if senders are coming from a place of love as “a place where they want you to succeed” (Darren). Because this is a necessary element of tough love, the receiver needs to feel that the tough love message's "end result will lead to a better result... Or a result that will strengthen them in the long run" (Tyler). Tyler described tough love, distinguishing where tough love becomes more tough than loving:

...It's hard for me to think of an instance where someone shows tough love when they do not want you to succeed. Because then it wouldn't be called tough love. There would be no love in that, in my opinion... I think that actually wanting a positive result to come from it is the only valid definition of tough love. I think that would be essential for it to be considered tough love. Otherwise, if there isn't a goal or hoping for you to succeed, I don't think that that would even fall into the category of tough love.

Tough love cannot be tough love without the intention of promoting the well-being of the receiver, whether that be in messages to encourage success, strength, or personal growth.

4.6. Primary Appraisals of Tough Love

In order to answer RQ2, the analysis now focuses on primary, secondary, and reappraisal stages according to Lazarus' (1991) model. Primary appraisals are the initial appraisal when faced with an evaluation of an event. The purpose of a primary appraisal is to assess a message and decide if the message impacts one's well-being (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). When addressing primary appraisals of tough love in interviews, participants often described this as an emotion-driven stage of the tough love process, in which the tough love message is threatening, frustrating, upsetting, and, at times, embarrassing. Primary appraisals of tough love are at the beginning of the tough love message, where receivers are

attempting to make sense of what is going on in their environment. The following sections, *threatening at first*, *emotions of the receiver*, and *perceived attitude of the sender*, address participants' primary appraisals of a tough love message.

4.7. Threatening at First

Participants often appraised the tough love message as a type of *threat*, hostile and distressful, aligning with Folkman and Lazarus' (1985) assertion of this concept (see Figure 1). These threatening notions were assessed in the primary appraisal when senders initially communicated the message. This stage of the tough love process is an *emotional* stage, in which receivers face the task of handling messages that impacted their well-being.

4.8. Emotions of the Receiver

Tough love messages are often unexpected and sudden, enhancing the threatening perception of the message, while also impacting its reception. The threatening nature of tough love messages in the primary appraisal stage is an emotional experience for receivers. In this stage, receivers experience an array of negative emotions, from being *upset and angry* and *hurt* to, in some instances, feeling *embarrassed and exposed* (see Figure 1). The following subsections address these negative emotions.

4.8.1. Hurt

Tough love messages were often unexpected and came as a surprise to participants. The suddenness of these messages often provoked receivers to express emotions of hurt. Emily described an experience in which her best friend exposed a self-described "flaw" in her personality and values regarding sexual behavior:

I feel like that's why it hurt... Because it was true. Like, I get that ... sometimes I do kind of try to use my body as like a way to escape my loneliness, which kind of sucks.

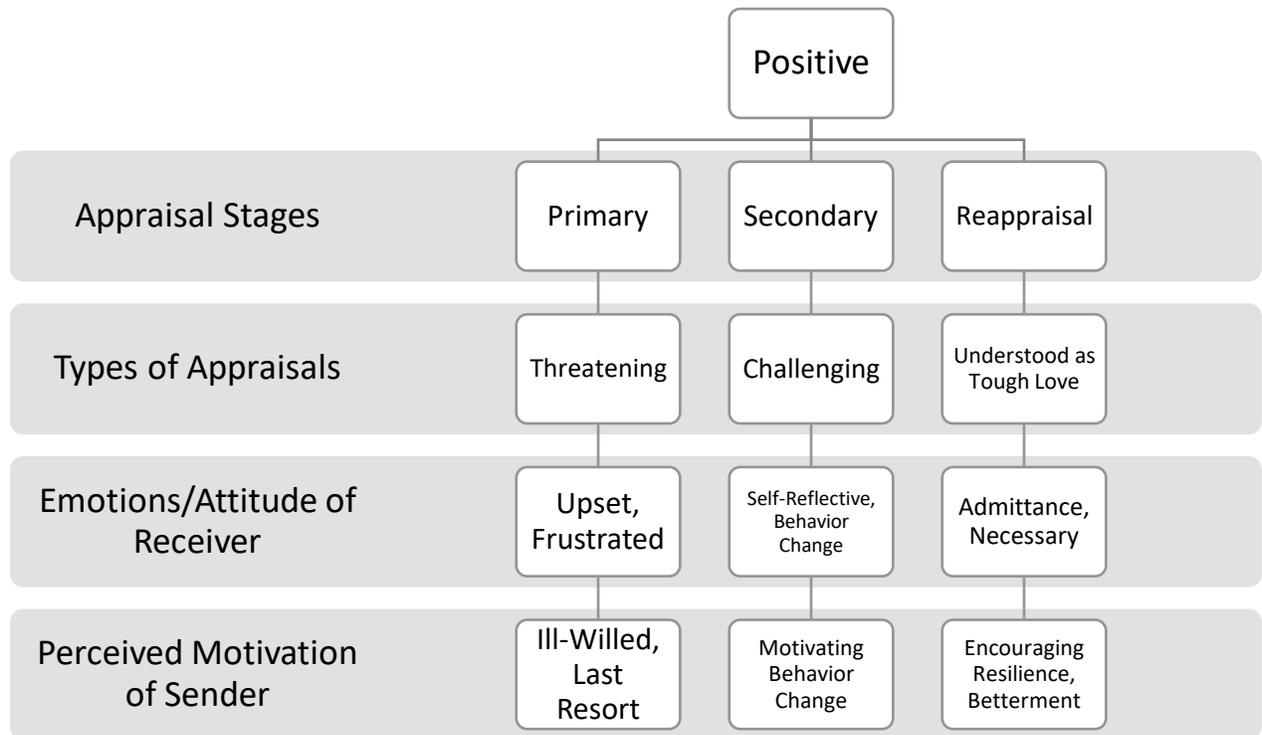


Figure 1. Positive Appraisal of Tough Love

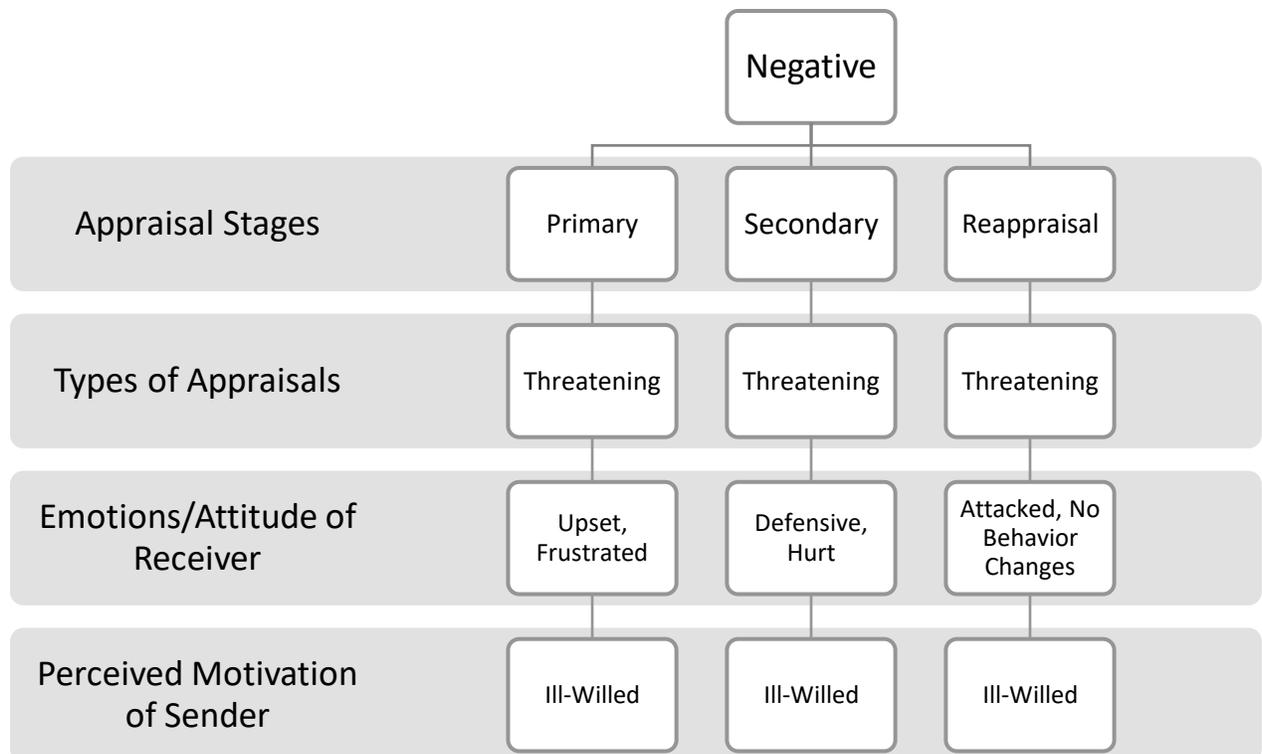


Figure 2. Negative Appraisal of Tough Love

realize... I feel like that's probably why it hurt my pride and my feelings is because it was true. (Emily)

For Emily, the tough love message expressed by her friend hurt her in the primary appraisal stages because it was exposing and personally defaming: Emily stated her friend's tough love made it seem like "she was attack[ing]... Not attacking, but like really shining a very bright light on like the inner depths of my soul... It wasn't really what I needed..." Greta reminisced on her experience with a therapist who embodied the tough love approach, stating that, at times, her approach would have negative impacts on her self-esteem: "I mean, sometimes it would hurt -- some of the things like she said because it's like hard to realize certain things about yourself."

Kameela shared her ongoing experiences of tough love with her mother and questioned her mother's motive for using it:

So what's the point of this? Like are you trying to hurt me? Like, are you trying to instill fear instead of actually, you know, trying to be like, I'm doing this. And then the thing is like when they do it, and then, later on, they say, "Oh, I'm doing out of love." And it's kind of like I, but I didn't feel any love. Like even the way like you betrayed yourself... Like your body language... It just isn't anything. Like there's no way I would be seeing that as love.

For Kameela, her relationship with her mother was negatively impacted by this communication, resulting in an ongoing strained relationship. When receivers of tough love put into question the authenticity of the message, they may question the hurtful nature of the tough love message.

4.8.2. Upset and Angry

Some receivers of tough love expressed that, upon hearing the threatening nature of the tough love message, they felt angry, upset, and frustrated. Tyler described his complacency regarding losing weight in high school, to which his father responded with tough love. Tyler expressed he was "upset when he said it. I was angry." For some receivers, their anger was *more* than just anger inside: it was an emotion expressed in this interaction. Lawrence described a tough love experience with his father, who revoked multiple privileges because of failing grades: "I remember being very upset. I don't remember if I cried. I, although I might have. But I just remember being very upset... I *did* yell at him." Lawrence expressed his frustration was out of a lack of understanding as to why his father was punishing him so much: "But at the time, you know, I really didn't understand it. I didn't think it was fair. I thought it was unreasonable. I remember being very, very upset." Some participants expressed that the threatening nature of the tough love message was embarrassing as if it was exposing a side of their character that was previously untouched.

4.8.3. Embarrassed and Exposed

When Darren was not performing at his best in baseball, his father told him he could either "choose to feel sorry for" himself or put in more effort to make improvements. Darren expressed feeling embarrassed for having not noticed his role in making these self-improvements: "You're almost like a little bit embarrassed, I guess... You look like you were trying to blame someone else and you're embarrassed that you were trying to do it when it was all your fault." Emily described an experience in which her best friend exposed a self-described "flaw" in her personality and values regarding sexual behavior:

[I felt] embarrassment and a little bit of shame... Because it was based around a sexual thing that I felt shame... Which is dumb because it's 2019 and you shouldn't feel shameful. But I just felt like, well, if my best friend thinks this, then what do other people think?

Emily was a unique participant in that the embarrassment she felt in her tough love experience not only happened in the conversation but pervaded into other aspects of her life. While having her face put into question by a friend, she felt exposed to the possibility of face threats in light of other individuals.

4.9. Perceived Attitude/Emotions of the Sender

Feelings of hurt, anger, and embarrassment are primarily dependent on the receiver's perception of the sender's emotions and attitude. Recipients of tough love paid particular attention to the demeanor and attitude of the senders, as this often impacted the saliency of the message. Receivers quite frequently perceived the sender's position as being both *sympathetic* and *unsympathetic*.

4.10. Unsympathetic

When interpreting the emotions of the sender in primary appraisals, receivers coined senders' attitudes as being *unsympathetic* (see Figure 1). This perceived lack of sympathy was about either what the sender explicitly said or *how* the sender verbally and non-verbally addressed the message. Darren described his father's unsympathetic response regarding his poor athletic performance. For Darren, the unsympathetic nature of his father's tough love message was directly from the language he used and how the message was framed: "Well, there wasn't a lot of sympathy really. Just kind of a more, just kind of told it like it is. He's like, 'You need to

shoot straight.”” Other participants gathered this perception in the communication of the message.

Lawrence, in his experience with tough love from his father, stated that, though he felt his father sympathized with what he was going through in his parents’ divorce, he did not communicate this well when speaking to him:

...he tried to convey it to me and tell me why, where he was coming from. He was trying to be sympathetic, even if he was being pretty harsh about it. But at the time, you know, I really didn't understand it. I didn't think it was fair.

Lawrence went on further to describe his experience in performing poorly in school due to his unstable personal life. His father’s use of tough love resulted in a tense relationship, with them often arguing and fighting. Although, Lawrence perceived his parents’ lack of sympathy as a means to encourage him to be resilient in the face of personal peril:

I definitely felt like they couldn't relate to what I was going through or that they didn't have any sympathy for the fact that I was having a tough time in school... Because I felt that I was having a tough time in school, you know because my parents separated. School didn't seem to matter anymore... My parents really emphasized that I needed to continue to do well and when I didn't... They weren't sympathetic.

For some participants, the lack of sympathy was a divergence from what they typically expected from the sender. Tyler communicated that he and his father "have a fantastic relationship, always have." But when his father decided to quit enabling his behaviors surrounding his weight gain, the lack of sympathy came as a shock:

And I think that's when... When he had said it surprised me because I was, you know... I was expecting sympathy and, you know, just 'help me feel good about the situation.

Don't call me out on the situation.'

Whether this perceived lack of sympathy was sufficient or not was dependent on other factors concerning the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Most importantly, the sender's perceived intentionality, whether negative or positive, was likely to impact the positive or negative reception of this message. A primary appraisal of tough love is associated with negative self-esteem implications, therefore making it a risky message to enact on the part of the sender. This risk is primarily dependent on the perceived closeness in the relationship between the sender and receiver, which future sections will discuss.

4.11. Secondary Appraisals of Tough Love

A recipient of tough love almost always enters the secondary appraisal process with the understanding that this message is interfering with their emotions, goals, or well-being. In this stage, recipients aim to "prevent harm or improve their circumstances" (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, Alexander, 2005, p. 444; also see Lazarus, 1991). In re-evaluating their primary appraisal, recipients of tough love often convert their appraisal from a threat to a *challenge appraisal*. In part, this is because recipients have sensed the weight of the tough love message on their well-being and have decided to engage in *coping* strategies to mediate this interaction.

4.12. Challenge Appraisals

When appraising a message as challenging, participants expressed the situation as impacting their personal development and growth. Similar to Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox (1999), these appraisals were associated with positive psychological adjustment. Across

interviews, reappraising a tough love message as challenging seemed to be a coping mechanism in and of itself; the original message was often too harsh for receivers to allow it to continue impacting their well-being. Thus, their appraisal of the tough love message as well as their attitude about it shifted from a negative to a more positive appraisal.

4.13. Positive Intentionality of Sender

Perceptions of intentionality begin developing at the outset of the tough love message. Initially, perceptions of the message are seen as bewildering and off-setting, aiding in why receivers typically appraise these messages as threatening in the primary stage. Once entering the secondary appraisal stage, receivers begin to change their initial conceptions, hence becoming a challenging appraisal (see Figure 1). Thus, it is crucial that the perceived intentionality of the message also shifts if this message is to become positive. If the perceived intentionality does not change from a threat proposal, the appraisals of receivers change, which will be discussed in a later section.

4.13.1. Seeking Betterment

Communication of tough love happens when a sender views that the receiver needs to make improvements to themselves or their behavior. Thus, an essential perceived intention of the sender is that they are seeking to better the receiver's life, whether or not it comes at the cost of emotional well-being for the receiver. Greta spoke about a therapist that embodied the tough love approach. Greta stated that, though sometimes this approach was emotionally risky, she knew her intention was “to help me understand what was going on and to help me... I knew for certain she was trying to help me.” While it may seem obvious that a therapist would position him or herself only to be helpful, similar conceptions of intentionality were present in other relationships. For Hal, the message of betterment was more explicit, with his father stating things such as, “I'm

giving you these really strict punishments because they're going to make you a better person.'”

In re-evaluation of his father’s tough love messages, Hal was able to see where these tough love messages made him a more self-aware person.

Emily discussed that, though the tough love message from her friend seemed quite threatening at first, she was able to step back and re-evaluate the message as encouraging personal growth. In the following passage, she specifically reflects on the tough love message as a significant force in seeing the value in her self-worth:

For me to not feel like men can take away my sense of purpose. She wanted me to feel like a bad bitch, but first, she had to like weigh out the truth for me. Like, ‘if you want to be a bad bitch, here's the steps you gotta take...’ You can't just expect it to happen. You have to value yourself. And so I think ... her reason for saying all of this was for me to grow from it and be a better person and love myself more...

Emily described her friend’s tough love as a necessity for her to grow, be resilient in tough situations, and, above all, value herself as a strong and confident young woman. An essential aspect of tough love is that the receiver has to feel that the sender intends to promote growth, resilience, and betterment in light of a tough conversation.

4.13.2. Teaching a Lesson

The intention of teaching a lesson was most present in relationships concerning parents and children. Hal talked about his strained relationship with his step-father when he was in high school. Tough love responses of privilege revocations were a go-to in his household. With these revocations would come with a stern life lesson. When Hal forgot to lock the door to the garage before leaving for drama practice, he received the following tough love lesson:

I think his intentions were to show me that there are consequences for actions if I'm not thinking through what I'm doing. His big phrase was "you can prevent accidents from happening." If you prevent the thing that causes the accident, you don't have to worry about an accident happening... He was really big on thinking that accidents are preventable and they shouldn't happen.

Hal stated that his step-father gave him tough love by grounding him and taking away cellphone privileges. Other interviewees expressed practical lessons of learning. Alexander talked about the tense relationship between his mother and him, revealing that his mother was strict when it came to practicing his musical instruments. Though it was tough at the time, he expressed now that he sees the values in her sternness:

Now I can play... When I look at the music sheet, I can play pretty much almost everything. Except for like classic... But, like, pop or whatever I want to play, I actually can play... Now I kind of feel like she was kind of right. That's why she was kind of hoping for me to have the skill sets and knowledge.

For Hal, the lessons his stepfather relayed were practical, like remembering to lock the door upon leaving the house. Though this may be a small, practical lesson in practice, these lessons left a broader impact. Hal communicated that these lessons taught him about the "world," being hardworking, and maintaining a strong work ethic:

I think that he tried to teach me things and to help me learn about the world. When I was really young, they instilled like a really strong work ethic in me. I talk about that all the time, that my parents, you know, help me have a really strong work ethic and really... I'm a really hard worker because of the things that they taught me.

Lessons learned are a crucial aspect of tough love, especially in parent-child relationships. For some participants, these lessons gave them a feeling of personal growth and resilience in what was otherwise a tough experience.

4.13.3. Encouraging Perseverance

Recipients communicated the perceived intentionality of the sender as being a message of perseverance or encouraging them to continue pushing through a tough time, though it may be difficult. Participants expressed messages of perseverance as experiences of personal growth and resilience. Greta explained that tough love is necessarily a situation in which the sender wants "someone else to become a better person ... To help someone grow and improve themselves. To help someone become a better person and [be] happier in their life." Darren communicated that his father encouraged him to persevere through a tough time in sports, which consequently resulted in a behavior change in real life:

I think that he just wanted me to persevere a little bit and put in a little extra work and then it will start to get better. And it did pretty shortly after he did that and I put in a little more work and then it really turned it around.

Darren expressed that, indeed, his athletic performance did improve after his father's tough love treatment. A similar reflection of perseverance happened to Tyler, whose father encouraged him to lose weight after high school. Though the messages were often tough to hear, Tyler reflected that he knew "his intention was hopefully to push me in the direction of doing something about it." The attitude of the sender throughout the secondary appraisal process also impacts a tough love message's saliency.

4.14. Coping and Attitude Changes of Receiver

When receivers appraise a tough love message, they engage in behaviors of self-reflection to make sense of the intention behind the message. Just as secondary appraisals ask questions of "why" (McLaren & Solomon, 2008), receivers in this stage of the tough love process asked, "why did this happen and how should I regard it?" Thus, receivers began to reflect on the message, weighing its impact on their well-being. Tyler described this experience by saying that it "put me in my place and it made me reflect." Tyler described is the reflection process immediately after the tough love message:

I remember I just got quiet and I think I thought about it for a while and started being like, 'Okay, well I guess that is what it's going to take to make me do, to make this happen.' [...] So I mean, in the moment, it basically, I just kind of shut up and didn't really talk, just started reflecting and thinking about it.

For others, the tough love message needed further evaluation. Nonetheless, Emily engaged in self-reflection as soon as the next day: "...the next day I kind of thought about it, and I was like, 'she's probably right...'" According to Emily, engaging in self-reflection allowed her to "take a step back and just look at who I am and what I want to present and the force I want to exude."

4.15. Positive Reappraisals of Tough Love

Reappraisals are the time in which individuals understand, and ultimately accept, that the message communicated to them is tough love (see Figure 1). This message must be reappraised positively in order for this message to be tough love. Negative reappraisals may sway this understanding. While some receivers come to this conclusion sooner than others, it is essential for recipients of this message to make it to this stage in order for this message to be considered tough love. Positive reappraisals, though, have contingencies that lie in the perceived strength of

the relationship between the sender and receiver, as well as the perceived authority the sender has over the receiver. The secondary appraisal phase of attitude change was marked by a shift in self-realization, prompting receivers to reflect on their past behavior.

When faced with tough love messages, receivers have the opportunity to reappraise the message positively, evaluating the message as ultimately valuable or beneficial to their well-being (Saintives & Lunardo, 2016). If the receiver views the message positively in the secondary appraisal, they are likely to reappraise this message as indeed tough love: a message that is necessary and communicated out of love for the betterment of themselves.

4.15.1. Emotional Admittance/Acceptance

Positive reappraisals of tough love messages contain a sense of emotional acceptance or admittance. After having time to work through the emotional distress of the primary appraisal stage and they self-reflect in secondary process, the reappraisal stage offers the chance to re-evaluate the tough love message. Though these messages are tough and hard to accept, receivers who self-identified a positive experience with tough love admitted the necessity of the message. Darren states that, though his father's tough love message seemed to be mean at first, "deep down I knew it was 100% right." Darren was later able to admit that what his father communicated to him "was true." Emily also expressed that, after having time to re-evaluate the message, she decided "she's [her friend] probably right." For some receivers, admittance or acceptance towards a tough love message can take longer. Tyler explained that he can "see it now how it benefited me" now that "I'm in a different stage of life."

4.15.2. Timeline of Reappraisals

Reappraisals can vary in time, ranging from an immediate realization, to years, before re-evaluation of the tough love message. Greta expressed that her awareness of her therapist's tough love approach happened "pretty much instantly":

She was very straightforward... I came in with like a list of things to talk about, and I came in and read the list off to her and she like right away was like, 'Yeah, you got issues. You brought a paper in because you were like concerned about different things. That's weird. The fact that you have to like have it that organized and put that much detail into it...' And so pretty much within the first session... I was like, 'Okay, yup. She's going to tell me how it is.'

Greta stated that though tough, her therapist's use of tough love encouraged her to find mental resilience through her problems.

Other participants expressed a slower realization of this being a tough love message. Darren revealed that it took him hours to reappraise a tough love message, stating, "the next morning I woke up and I just realized" that the message was tough love. Tyler did not reappraise his father's tough love message concerning his weight gain until years later:

I would say it probably wasn't until just a couple of years ago... I think there's probably a couple of years after I lost my way that I thanked my dad for that because ... I was upset when he said it. I was angry and stuff, but I realized a couple of years after that that was the push that made me do something about it.

The timeline in which reappraisals were enacted depends on many factors, including the severity of the message and the relationship at stake.

4.16. Authority

When receivers were asked to reflect on the tough love message, notions of authority, or the sender's given ability or permission to use tough love, was brought up. Authority was spoken about in a variety of different relationship contexts, including best friend, mother-son, father-son, and mother-daughter relationships. If the receiver deemed the sender to have the authority to use tough love on them, this message was more likely to be received positively. The following sections, *parental authority*, *permission granted*, *similar experiences*, *relational closeness*, and *desensitization*, expand on this concept.

4.17. Parental Authority

The majority of receivers talked about tough love communicated in parental relationships. The topic of parental authority is unsurprising, as much prior research on tough love focuses on its use in these relationships. Upon being asked to reflect on a tough love message, receivers reflected on whether they felt the sender had such a stance, or authority, in their life to communicate it. When it came to parental relationships, receivers automatically gave their parents the authority to use tough love, just because of their hierarchical relationship. Tyler stated that, when it came to doing poorly in high school and gaining weight, "both my parents had the authority to use tough love on me." Lawrence also described a hierarchical father-son relationship, explaining that his reason for giving his father authority to use tough love after his parents' divorce:

I think that my father, in this case, had a lot more authority, not just because he was my father, but also because when my parents separated, my mom was the one that moved out. She moved to an apartment. So, you know, my father not only was he my father, you know, an important figure.

Other receivers were more direct in stating that, because the sender was their parent, they automatically held the ability to communicate tough love.

When talking about her mother's tough love in response to her complacency in school and failing grades, Kameela said: "I think she does [have authority to use tough love on me]. Cause she did raise me." When asked why her father has the authority to use tough love on her, Nala responded: "Because he is a father and I guess you have to have some sort of tough love so the kids don't always think you're a softy and that they could do whatever they want..." Though Nala and Kameela justified their parents' use of tough love, they also distinguished when this parental communication went too far. For instance, Nala expressed that her father rarely communicated loving emotions or messages. Therefore, she described that though tough love is appropriate at times, it is not always justified, stating that tough love "shouldn't go this far" and be communicated in every conversation. Kameela also distinguished that, when it comes to the age of the child, there need to be some considerations when communicating these messages: So she has [the right to communicate tough love]. But at the same time, I am old enough now... So I feel as if we could talk as adults. More not so, like, forceful... Just a regular conversation between two people.

4.18. Permission Granted

Though past research has focused primarily on parent-child relationships, the concept of authority is also present in friend relationships. Unlike parental authority, which is typically assumed by the receiver, this theme was titled "Permission Granted" because the authority was not implied but purposefully given by the receiver. Emily, conversing about her relationship with her best friend, mentioned that she verbally gave her friend permission to use tough love in their relationship, in the case that the sender, in their best judgment, felt the receiver was

engaging in thoughts or behavior that was against their well-being. When asked whether her friend had authority to use tough love on her, Emily responded:

An authority that I gave her. We both kind of gave each other some authority in each other's lives. There's things that we know about each other that nobody else does that we trust with this person. And that's giving them a sort of form of authority or power over each other... Hearing it from my best friend is probably the person that I would want to hear it from.

Granting permission was only mentioned once in the interviews but alludes to an important dimension of tough love: the receiver must feel that the sender has the position in their relationship to communicate tough love. This concept is further explored in regard to similar experiences.

4.19. Similar Experiences

Another dimension of authority discussed by receivers is whether the sender shared a similar experience with the receiver, further offering justification for the sender's use of tough love. Receivers understood similar experiences as their perception as to whether the sender was justified sending a tough love message based on whether the sender had (a) gone through such situation themselves or (b) known the receiver to go through a similar situation before. Darren stated that he felt his father was justified in using tough love against his poor athletic performance because "he's gone through high school as being a guy... He was also a baseball player, too. So he kind of knows [what I'm going through]." Darren found solace in understanding that his father grasped his position. Similarly, Tyler expressed that understanding his father struggled with weight gain helped him better understand his use of tough love:

My Dad told me a story when he was in high school or right out of high school. He was always a track guy, in pretty good shape, but he had been kind of just relaxing... He was driving, and a girl turned over... She was like, 'Hey, look at your belly jiggling.' He looked down, and he realized he had a belly and he could see it moving going over bumps. And he said for him that was his motivation... He was like, 'Okay, I need to do something.' So he did something about it... I'm sure that was part of his, like, 'You got to do something about it...'

For receivers, it was crucial to feel as if the sender not only had reason to communicate tough love but that they experientially understood what the receiver was going through.

4.20. Relational Closeness

A common theme identified from receivers is that, for there to be a positive reception of a tough love message, there needed to be a sense of relational closeness between the sender and receiver. While some participants did not explicitly state they had a close relationship with the sender, this concept was felt through their language surrounding their experience. Emily conveyed respect for her friend throughout her interview, communicating their inherent closeness and love. Lawrence expressed that, following his parents' divorce, his relationship "has been much closer with my father [...] than with my mother." Consequently, Lawrence deemed that he felt it more appropriate for his father to communicate tough love rather than his mother, based merely on perceived closeness.

Tyler described a similar experience in his relationship with his father. When asked why his father had authority to use tough love on him, he responded:

I would say, just sort of my respect for my dad... I'm closest with him. I think that there's people in my life that I'm close to and have a strong relationship with and trust... You

know, what I'm feeling, what I'm going through. I feel like all those people would have authority to call me out or use tough love, and I would receive it well from them because I know that they have that place in my life.

Tyler also distinguished that tough love would be taken seriously in close relationships versus relationships that are not as close. When asked to reflect on what it would be like to receive tough love from a less personal relationship, Tyler stated:

I would've been offended. Very much offended and argumentative... I think probably more defensive about it... I've got friends that they could say something like that to me and I would think about and be like, 'Okay.' And there's some that I'd be, I'd be like, 'No... Screw you. I'm walking away' kind of deal.

Closeness is an important aspect of a positively-received tough love message. If closeness is lacking in the communication of this message, it may become negative.

4.21. Negative Experiences of Tough Love

Though the majority of receivers expressed positive experiences with tough love, there were either dimensions of these experiences that were negative or individuals who self-identified as having a negative experience. The previous sections have discussed what it means to receive a *positive* tough love message. Positive appraisals of tough love typically run through the whole appraisal process; negative appraisals are different. Usually, receivers primarily appraise tough love as embarrassing, exposing, and hurtful. Negative appraisals negate from positive in the secondary appraisal phase, where receivers do *not* perceive the intentionality of the message positively. Instead, the appraisal process stops, allowing the “tough” message to linger in hurtfulness or insincerity. Participants who had a negative tough love experience referenced the communication interaction as being “jaded” (Nala), leaving the receiver feeling “attacked”

(Kameela). This negative perception of the tough love message greatly impacted the appraisal of this message in the secondary stage.

Where perceptions of positive tough love messages become *challenging* in the secondary appraisal, negative experiences of tough love remain *threatening* in negatively perceived tough love interactions (see Figure 2). The following sections, *experiential disconnect*, *nonverbal tone*, *distorted intentions*, *immediate use*, *gender considerations*, and *masculinity*, aim to address where tough love goes awry and becomes a tougher, rather than loving, experience.

4.22. Experiential Disconnect

Similar experiences of the sender are essential in making a tough love message meaningful, as they provide the receiver with justification for being able to communicate such a message. Sharing experiences becomes different, though, when the experience of the sender is used *against* the receiver. This experiential disconnect happens in one of two ways: (a) the sender uses their "tougher" experiences against the receiver or (b) the sender uses their experiences as an excuse to continue unhealthy tough love practices. Nala came from an immigrant family and talked about the cultural differences she saw in her parents' use of tough love. Though she thinks that her father was attempting to use tough love to make her a stronger person, she feels as if he was attempting it in the wrong way by using his childhood experiences against her:

I think he's just doing all that to like make me a strong person or whatever. But it's just like... It doesn't work for everybody, you know? I was never at war, so it's not like I fully, like [...] ran for my life and stuff... He would always be like, 'Oh, do you know how it felt being in war and everything?' Or like, 'It was so traumatizing...' Yeah, I understand.

But that wasn't my experience, you know? [...] You're strong because of that. But I never had that experience, so I can't be strong like the way you are because of your experience. Though using personal experiences when communicating tough love can be helpful in specific contexts, a sender using their experience against a receiver can negatively impact the reception of this message. This is because receivers feel as if their experiences are minimized at the hands of a worse, more troubling life experience. Kameela communicated similar experiences about her immigrant mother:

...She's an immigrant, so she talks about her life experiences, and she talks about what she had to go through at my age. And then she was just like, 'I had to do this, this, this, this, and this. And all you have to do is go to school, and you think your life is hard.' And I'm just like, 'Well...' Even though I didn't experience what she experienced, it can still be hard.

When using experiences against a receiver, senders risk minimizing the experiences of the receiver. Therefore, receivers, like Kameela and Nala, felt that their experiences were being trivialized, discounted, and undervalued. This can especially happen when the receiver feels as if the sender is focusing more on their life than of the receiver:

...The whole time she's talking about herself. The whole time I'm just like, 'Well, at this moment, at this present time, I feel like this. So stop talking and stop trying to compare me to your experiences when you should be [...] at least there for me.'

After expressing what it feels like to have her mother's experience used against her, Kameela stated how she thinks shared experiences should be present in tough love messages: "[It should] be like, 'Okay, so I understand you're going through this. But, you know, I went through this, and I got through it, too.'"

4.23. Nonverbal Tone

Tough love messages may also be appraised as unfavorable if the receiver feels as if the sender's nonverbal communication is dismissive. The way senders present themselves in tough love conversations is vital to receivers. If receivers perceive the sender's attitude to be callous or insensitive, the message could also be threatening. Receivers who experienced this were mainly concerned with the sender's nonverbal orientation, especially in regard to their tone of voice. Emily stated that a tough love message from her friend "hurt a lot because she said it with such a tone." Emily expressed conflicting feelings towards this tone because it was unlike any conversation she had previously had with this friend. Emily's tough love message seemed to lack emotion, which was also conveyed by Nala. In this following passage, Nala talks about her father's desire for her to be a pharmacy major, though Nala wants to be in engineering:

It's just the way he would say it and stuff... It would never be emotional, you know? It was always facts... It was just straight facts... But it was just like, what about me wanting to be [an engineer]? You've never said like, 'Oh, you know, you're this and that' or 'I think this is better and stuff.' It was just like, 'I'm saying it, I'm giving you that information, take it.' That's about it... I could never be like, 'Oh Dad, I don't want to do this.' And I could never really talk to him on like what I wanted to be in the future.

Nala's experience was two-fold. Not only did she feel tension in not being able to communicate her desires to her father, but she was fighting her father's "my way or the highway" personality. As a receiver, Nala felt that her father's tone, as well as attitude, inhibited him from communicating an effective tough love message. Kameela, also relaying an instance of experiential disconnect, stated:

I guess she was trying to motivate me because it was like, ‘Oh, I did all of these things and you should be capable of doing it.’ But just the way she said it and her tone of voice was just not as appreciative... Her way of executing wasn't as nice as it could have been. She wasn't really catering to my emotions...

A loving and caring tone were part of making a tough love message *loving*. Without this tone, receivers may perceive the tough love message as only *tough*, lacking kindness or genuine concern for the well-being of the receiver. Similar notions are also experienced when the receiver perceives the intention of the tough love message as dismissive.

4.24. Distorted Intentions

Tough love messages go sour when a receiver perceives the message to go against their well-being, even if the sender might intend the message to focus on well-being. Distorted intentions refer to the perception that a tough love message (a) is not indeed intended to promote the well-being of the receiver or (b) is communicated in such a way that the sender seems inauthentic in their message. A message of tough love needs to be more than just a message of this will “probably to make you stronger” (Kameela). Nala and Kameela are two interviewees that self-identified as having a negative experience with tough love, in which the receivers did not perceive the message to enhance their well-being. For Kameela, her mother’s message of tough love felt inauthentic and uncaring:

I always feel like she's not trying to be like harsh or anything, but I always felt like maybe she's never really experienced someone be emotionally there for her, so she doesn't know how to go about it... I guess there's times where I do understand... But at the same time it's like, can you at least try?

Though Kameela understands that her mother might not know how to effectively communicate tough love or caring, she still felt that her mother's intentions were distorted by how she delivered the tough love message. Nala had a similar experience with her father, in which she felt as if his intended message did not match his inauthentic behavior:

Well, during the moment, I clearly know it's like, 'No, I'm not feeling it. I'm mad at you' and stuff like that... But if I think about it and everything, it's like... He doesn't really want to be like, 'Oh, I love you, and this is what I want to do.' [...] I feel like he just wants me to be living in like a better life... But, like, the way he goes about it is just different... I kind of see his picture, but it's [...] not matching by the way you're telling me, you know? It's just different.

After his parents' divorce, Lawrence found himself struggling to keep up his grades. As a result, he started to fail classes. When his father communicated tough love about this situation, he felt there were other intentions behind the message:

I know that he said specifically it was about grades... That I wasn't doing well academically and it was important to him, not just because he wanted me to be successful. Which he did, that was the most significant part of it. But also, my father was a school administrator... He supervised a number of principals in the district. And it reflected very, very poorly on him when his kids did very, very poorly. So part of it, too, was his image.

When Lawrence was doing poorly in school, he felt as if his father was unusually strict due to his position within the school system. Lawrence felt that it was not just his betterment at stake, but his father's reputation. Perceived intentions of a tough love message can manifest in multiple ways, but when the receiver perceives that the sender is inauthentic in their communication of

this message, whether because of lack of effort or the sender's face-saving efforts, it can become a more negative than positive experience. The following sections explore less common but critical negative experiences of tough love.

4.25. Masculinity

An interesting theme to arise was that of *masculinity*. Receivers who brought about this topic were discussing father and stepfather relationships in which they felt the sender was pushing negative masculine messages of coping onto the receiver. When asked what she felt the overall goal of her father's tough love message was, Nala responded:

Pretty much is like, 'I love you, but this is what I need to say to you in order for you to, I don't know, grow up or like... It's [a] masculinity thing. It's like 'be a man' type of thing.

But like for everybody it's just like be that strong person that you're supposed to be.

Nala also illuminated masculine values when she communicated that her family was very "hierarchical" in terms of the father using a "my way or the highway" mentality. Liam also illuminated the idea of "my way or the highway." When describing two different working scenarios with his father, Liam illuminated how these situations were different in terms of appraising one as tough love, the other as simply "tough." Liam described that his father upheld a more emotionless, "do it" and do not complain attitude in his negative experience with tough love, thus categorizing his more negative experience in light of his father's masculine approach.

4.26. Immediate Use

Timing is an essential aspect of understanding the reception of tough love. Emily described the time her friend used tough love a little too soon after she had a negative experience on a date. In this situation, the immediate use of tough love by the sender was hurtful and unexpected:

I've never had someone like legit walk out with somebody else on me... I felt like it was my fault, that this was all happening... And I was like, 'Why? Why me? Why this?' [...] And then [my friend] goes, 'Do you ever feel like maybe you should just not?' I was like, 'Just not what?' 'Just not have sex with people and not have sex with guys right away and just focus on yourself and not care so much about men or anybody you have sex with and just focus on you? I feel like you need or crave that attention or that feeling that you get with someone else caring about you...' And I was upset for a moment. I was like, 'Well, what the hell do you mean?' [...] It hurt. Like, it hurt a lot.

The use of tough love immediately following a situation was not only unanticipated but a source of self-doubt for Emily. Consequently, this immediate message was especially hurtful for Emily. But, because of Emily's self-described closeness with her friend, it turned out to be a positive experience:

I think that her timing could have been better, but it was something that I'm glad she said... I mean bro, your timing could have been better like the next day, but it was still the truth, and it was still something good.

This example also illuminated the concept of the *needing time*, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.27. A Timeline for Tough Love

Receivers of tough love referenced a timeline in which tough love messages happened. The tough love process usually ensued as follows: (a) the sender communicated a tough love message, (b) the receiver processed and decoded the message, (c) individuals engaged in discussion, (d) the receiver or sender exited the conversation, and, (e) thereafter exiting the situation, the receiver engaged in self-reflection of the conversation. Positive receptions of the

tough love message, though, depended on the context and time at which it was communicated. Multiple interviewees indicated that the time in which the sender communicated this message was valuable.

Emily expressed that waiting to talk about her situation would have been better for her emotional well-being: "I will wait until I'm not crying five hours long to talk about this. I wanted to avoid it at that time..." However, Emily expressed notions of timing similar to others, in which she said they "came back and talked about it the next day," and at that time, it became a much easier message to swallow. Other participants talked about *needing time*, in which the participant needed time, either a half-day or overnight, to process, ponder, and evaluate the tough love message. Lawrence stated that he "slept for 12 hours" and that he was "just kind of emotionally exhausted" after dealing with a tough love message from his father. This separation helped him evaluate the message, which was similar to a tough love experience expressed by Darren:

When I went to bed, I thought about it a little bit. Then the next morning I woke up and... I just realized that it's on me and that he was giving me the message that it's time for me to step it up... To step it up a little bit and not blame anyone else.

Considering the time in which tough love is used could impact its positive or negative reception. The following chapter offers analysis and discussion of the results reported in this chapter.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand conceptions of tough love from a receiver's perspective. This study used appraisal theory developed by Lazarus (1991) to analyze tough love interactions to understand better when an interaction is perceived as tough love. This study examined the lived-experiences of 10 participants who claimed to have personally experienced a tough love interaction, allowing the researcher to illuminate better the perceptions of and emotions surrounding these interactions from a receiver's perspective. Lazarus' appraisal theory (1991) provided the necessary groundwork for understanding this phenomenon as an interaction, which involves multiple aspects of interpretation and stages of realization. These findings prompted the model presented in this study (see Figures 1 and 2), which aims to show tough love as a process, addressing basic emotions felt and intentionality interpreted on the part of the receiver. The proposed research questions will be answered with particular attention placed on the necessity of relational closeness in tough love interactions. Subsequently, implications will be provided with direction as to what should be considered when enacting and receiving tough love. To conclude, limitations to this study and recommendations for future research will be addressed as they pertain to this work.

5.1. RQ1: How do recipients define tough love?

Participants defined tough love as *harshly communicating love, typically against the receiver's desires, to promote personal well-being*. Respondents had conceptions of tough love similar to Milliken and Meredith's (1968) definition: "I don't care how this makes you feel toward me. You may hate my guts, but I love you, and I am doing this because I love you" (p. 45). There were multiple dimensions of tough love that arose out of the interviews. An important aspect is that, first and foremost, receivers need to feel that the sender is *communicating love*. In

doing so, receivers need to feel as if the message is intended to promote personal well-being, resilience, or growth.

Tough love can be a positive force in a multitude of relationships, but can also be a *tough* experience. Respondents stated that tough love might be a *loving* message, but it is communicated in a *harsh* manner. A relatable definition for this comes from Urban Dictionary, in which tough love is cited as “being cruel to be kind” (VG, 2007). Respondents in this study stated that when sending a tough love message, senders need to be aware of their language, vocal tone, nonverbal gestures, and their power in the relationship. This concept of communicating love is intricately tied with the receiver’s perception of relational closeness in their relationship, which will be further discussed in the next question. Often, respondents related the promotion of love and well-being as being directly connected to the strength of relationship with the sender. Thus, the lesser the perceived closeness of the relationship, the less likely the receiver will feel the sender has their well-being in mind.

This message, though, is not contained to parent-child relationships or relationships with addicts, as some definitions entail (i.e., Google). Tough love does not merely exist in *tense* relationships; it can extend into a plethora of relationships, both positive and negative, tense or mutually supportive. Respondents for this research study came from parent-child, stepparent-child, and friend relationships. Multiple respondents self-described having positive relationships with their parents, although tough love was often used. One respondent described tough love with her best friend, in which they mutually agreed to provide each other tough love when necessary. Therefore, tough love need not be equated to only tense parent-child or individual-addict relationships.

Perhaps the most relatable definition of tough love comes from Merriam-Webster, which defines tough love as “love or affectionate concern expressed in a stern or unsentimental manner (as through discipline) especially to promote responsible behavior” (Tough love). Though this definition is relatable to respondents’ conceptions of tough love, the participants in this study pushed the boundaries beyond promoting responsible behavior. The dictionary definition, like many others, seems parent-child or individual-addict focused, in which the purpose of tough love is to encourage a change in behavior, such as listening to instructions better or putting down an addictive habit. While tough love exists in these spaces, respondents also shed light on other appropriate scenarios.

Tough love can also be used to promote resilience. One respondent described a time in which a friend used tough love to encourage personal growth after a negative experience on a date. In this issue, tough love was not necessarily *only* used to promote behavior change; it was also used to encourage the receiver to value herself in ways she had not previously. Another participant also illuminated growth beyond behavior change when he realized his mentality was impacting his physical ability to perform athletically. Thus, tough love should not be equated to purely physical behavior change, but also a change in mental and emotional resilience and strength.

Based on these interviews, one conclusion in understanding the definition of tough love relates, again, back to the necessity of *love* or *care*. It is important to note that tough love cannot be so without the perception or intention of lovingness. As a sender, one’s intentions must align to communicate love or care and promote growth or resilience. If this intention is lost or absent, the message will no longer be tough love. Instead, receivers will consider it to be a tough, harsh,

and hurtful message, likely communicating the opposite of what is intended: insensitivity, uncaring, and lack of empathy.

Nonetheless, interviews showed that though individuals had a common understanding of tough love, not all experiences of tough love are the same. Therefore, it is difficult to wholly narrow in on one single definition of tough love, though interviews did provide an abundance of evidence to support that tough love can extend beyond relationships with parents, children, or addicts. There was also sufficient evidence to suggest that tough love is a receiver-centric, as well as a sender-centric, communication interaction, and future research should continue to regard it as such.

5.2. RQ2: How do receivers of tough love perceive the intentionality of this message?

Perceptions of intentionality of tough love extend across multiple components of a tough love interaction. The receivers' perceptions of the intentionality of tough love messages are largely determined by relational connections to the sender. This section will go through the appraisal process and focus on the *authority*, *similar experiences*, and *permission granted* in relation to relational closeness, compliance-gaining, and hurtful messages.

The appraisal process of tough love can be a slippery slope if senders are not equipped with the knowledge of the receiver's disposition or understanding of their temperament and intentions. The appraisal process provides insight into how we can use this process to better understand receptions of tough love. Lazarus' (1991) appraisal theory guided this study, in which the objective was to understand better how individuals evaluate tough love messages.

Respondents' statements were examined in conjunction with Lazarus' (1991) three types of appraisals: primary, secondary, and reappraisals. In reviewing past literature on appraisal theory

and tough love, this theory has yet to be examined in light of this communication issue. Even so, respondents provided evidence of the appraisal process when receiving a tough love message.

When individuals are faced with interactions, primary appraisals act as their first understanding of the environment around them. The purpose of a primary appraisal is to assess whether an interaction has implications on a person's well-being (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Folkman and Lazarus (1985) describe three types of appraisals: threat, challenge, and loss. Respondents stated that the primary appraisal in a tough love interaction is often appraised as *threatening*. Following appraisal theory, receivers are often emotional at the outset of tough love, feeling angry, upset, frustrated, and even embarrassed. This response is due to the perceived attitude of the sender being unempathetic and stern. This response results in appraisal of a threatening nature because the receiver feels as if their well-being is at risk or being attacked (see Figure 2).

This appraisal changes from threatening to challenging when receivers enter the secondary appraisal stage. As receivers enter the secondary stage of a *positive* appraisal of tough love, they will ask questions such as "why is this happening?" (McLaren & Solomon, 2008) to prevent harm to their well-being (Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, Alexander, 2005). Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, and Gruen (1986) refer to this stage as *coping*, in which individuals try to change, accept, or seek more information about an interaction. This stage of appraisal is mimicked in the process of tough love. As receivers enter this stage, they often appraise the tough love message as a *challenge*; an act of communication intended to improve their well-being. This challenge appraisal results in attitude changes of the receiver, wherein they become more self-reflective, motivated, and their behaviors begin to shift as a result of this interaction. The perceptions of the intentionality of the sender also change. Instead

of being strictly harsh and unempathetic, the sender is reappraised as more caring and as a person who wants to encourage resilience and promote personal growth.

The final appraisal stage, the reappraisal stage, marks when receivers recognize the message as tough love. Reappraisals act as “an adaptive process by which stressful events are reconstructed as benign, valuable, or beneficial” (Saintives & Lunardo, 2016, p. 346; see also Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Receivers’ conceptions of tough love are much different in the reappraisal than in the primary. Individuals who are confronted with tough love are more likely to see a message as tough love when they have had time to think about it. This process might only take hours; for some, this process takes years. Receivers will *only* enter the reappraisal stage if they have experienced a *positive* encounter with tough love.

The line between positive and negative appraisals of a tough love message is thin and complex. The appraisal process changes when individuals identify a "tough love" message as being negative. For instance, the primary appraisal stage tends to stay the same; individuals are typically shocked, upset, and angry, perceiving the sender to be harsh and unempathetic. The fundamental difference between positive and negative appraisals of tough love is that the primary appraisal remains *threatening* and receivers do not see the message as ever being in their interest. The secondary stage of a negative appraisal becomes more defensive, with receivers feeling hurt or simply disregarding the message. Therefore, there is not positive reappraisal, and the behavior or attitude of the receiver does not change.

5.2.1. Tough Love and Relational Closeness

Most participants mentioned relational closeness as being an essential factor when communicating tough love. According to Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997), relational closeness is an essential variable in most interpersonal relationships, including family, friend, and romantic

relationships. In lay terms, relational closeness refers to the emotional bond felt between two individuals, but more specifically is defined as “the degree of mutual dependence between two people, including the frequency of their impact on one another, and the strength of impact per occurrence” (Dibble & Levine, 2009, p. 4). Relational closeness is a crucial part of tough love, as all respondents stated that feeling close, or strength in connection to the sender, was vital to the message being positive. Without this connection, tough love was not viewed as loving, but as a purely harsh or insensitive message.

Dibble and Levine (2009) regard relational closeness as *interdependence*, in which two people behave and feel close (see Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Understanding relational closeness and interdependence allows for this experience to transcend and potentially impact many types of relationships, including friendships, parent-child relationships, and romantic relationships (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Though much of past research focuses on parent-child relationships, tough love appears to exist in many close relationships. The concept of interdependence relates well to respondents’ conceptions of where tough love can exist, as tough love was discussed in parent-child, friend, romantic, and sibling relationships.

Aron and Fraley (1999) expand on the concept of relational closeness, stating that when close, individuals will see themselves in the other. Aron and colleagues (1992) state that “in a close relationship the individual acts as if some or all aspects of the partner are partially the individual’s own” (p. 598). When people engage in tough love, they may feel a sense of interdependence in the relationship, and thereby put the closeness of the relationship at risk to communicate well-being. Relational closeness cannot be *assumed*; relational closeness must be established prior to the tough love message.

5.2.2. Compliance-Gaining as Tough Love

A dimension that might impact perceptions of relational closeness and intentionality of tough love messages is *compliance-gaining theory*. According to Wilson (1998), compliance gaining interactions happen “whenever a message source attempts to induce a target individual to perform some desired behavior that the target otherwise might not perform” (p. 273). Tough love messages are often enacted with the purpose of gaining compliance on part of the receiver. Results from this study suggest that tough love is used as a means to promote the sender to change their behaviors or attitudes. Therefore, tough love can stretch beyond the bounds of purely behavioral change suggested in compliance-gaining theory and influence individuals to view their environment differently, promoting mental and emotional growth and resilience.

French and Raven (1960) discussed concepts of power in relation to compliance-gaining in their work, *The base of social power*. Five bases of power are explored: reward power, coercive power, expert power, legitimate power, and referent power. The two types that will be discussed in this analysis are coercive power and expert power. Marwell and Schmitt (2019) refer to coercive power as: “the actor has the ability to mediate salient rewards and punishments” (p. 353). The concept of coercive power relates best to the code of *authority* in this study, in which receivers, often in parent-child relationships, feel as if they are required to be compliant based on impending punishment. Expert power illuminates the concept of *similar experiences*, in which receiver perceives “the influencer has valuable knowledge, information, or skills in a relevant area” (Busch & Wilson, 1976). Thus, receivers are more likely to be compliant towards tough love messages if they feel the sender has expert power in the form of similar experiences. *Permission granted* may take place in both coercive and expert power, as this code involves a

perceived relational closeness, a possible perceived punishment with non-compliance, and the perception of knowledge on part of the sender.

Compliance-gaining interactions are viewed as forms of interpersonal persuasion, common in close interpersonal relationships, extending into friendships, parent-child relationships, and romantic partners (Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994). The current study illuminated a plethora of relationships in which tough love existed, adding to past research on relationships in compliance-gaining interactions. Tough love does not simply exist in parent-child relationships, as prior research on tough love might portray. Indeed, tough love can delve into relationships involving friends, romantic partners, and likely much more. Still, perceptions of relational closeness are necessary in communicating tough love, so much that they might impact the compliance of the receiver.

Compliance-gaining interactions relate to past research on tough love, as this theory is primarily concerned with “active rather than reactive communicators,” (Golish, 1999, p. 15, also see Lee, Levine, & Cambra, 1997) meaning this interaction is more concerned with senders than receivers. McQuillen, Higginbotham, and Cummings (1984) solidify similarities to tough love research by stating that compliance-gaining interactions “focus on message selection rather than on message impact” (p. 748). Prior research on tough love is often situated from a sender’s perspective, corroborating the sender-focused orientation of compliance-gaining theory. The present study adds to the necessity of better understanding tough love as a compliance-gaining strategy from a receiver’s perspective.

5.2.3. Tough Love and Hurtful Communication Messages

If senders do not consider the closeness of their relationship to the receiver, along with the experiences they bring to the intentionality of the message, they risk their tough love

becoming a *hurtful message*. Hurt is defined as an elicited emotion that is present when an individual's message communicates the devaluation of another (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). This devaluation of another can be associated with emotional elicitation, which often is characterized as being an inherent part of interpersonal relationships and happenings (Planalp, 1998). Tough love, in and of itself, is meant to be an empowering message. Tough love is a message intended to be loving yet, in the beginning, harsh and potentially hurtful. Regardless of intention, based on this study, tough love should never be a hurtful message. Respondents stated that tough love could not be tough love without the essence of love or care. If the message is strictly hurtful, receivers lack the feeling of love communicated in this message. Tough love becomes a hurtful message when a receiver perceives the sender to be uncaring towards their emotional state and lacking the establishment to deliver such a message. Such messages do not get reappraised. Therefore, relational closeness and consideration of delivering a hurtful message needs to be strongly considered when using this type of communication.

According to McLaren and Solomon (2010), hurt is often associated with these interpersonal experiences because "it is rooted in social interactions and often occurs between relational partners" (p. 193). Fundamentally, when individuals interact, they face the risk of discussing emotionally-involved issues (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987). Hurtful messages often elicit negative emotions and reactions, including lowered self-esteem (Mills, Nazar, & Farrell, 2002), relational distancing (Vangelisti, 2001; Vangelisti & Young, 2000), and decreased relational intimacy (Feeney, 2004). When individuals are faced with a tough love message that is received as a hurtful message, receivers are likely to become defensive or

dismissive towards the "tough love" message. If the receiver does not report strength in closeness, relational distancing increase and relational intimacy will decrease.

5.3. Limitations

This study contained several limitations which should be considered in future research. One limitation was access to a variety of relationships. This study was saturated in parent-child relationships, lacking the perspectives of others. In addition, when defining tough love, it was necessary for respondents to self-identify as having a tough love experience. When seeking respondents, the researcher filtered potential respondents by offering them examples of what tough love could look like. In doing this, the researcher received multiple emails from individuals indicating they either (a) did not self-identify as having a tough love experience or (b) they had never heard of such a message. Though most of the respondents seemed to have a firm grasp on what tough love is and how it is communicated, there were three participants included in this sample who waived from the researcher's conceptions and previous definitions of tough love. In addition, although responses became repetitive, and ten interviewees were sufficient to establish qualitative validity; in the future, researchers should seek additional respondents to provide greater richness of data.

5.4. Suggestions for Future Research

A plethora of directions for future research exists concerning tough love as a communication message and interaction. The present study aimed to understand the perceptions of tough love from a receiver's perspective. Future research should, first and foremost, continue to gain a better understanding of these perceptions and the implications behind them. Since tough love is receiver- as well as sender-centric, researchers should make an effort to examine individual dispositions in regard to tough love. These studies may look further in-depth into

communication conflict styles, personality dimensions, and power differentials in relationships. This study helped form a foundation that argues that, unlike prior research, tough love should focus on reception from a receiver's perspective, as receivers are just as crucial in the saliency of a tough love message as the sender.

Two interview participants who self-described as having negative tough love experiences situated tough love as a masculine way of communicating affection or concern. These respondents mainly related the dimensions of "harsh" and "un-empathetic" as being directly related to and upholding masculine values. Future research should also attempt to examine understandings of masculinity and its impact on tough love messages, particularly its effects on the saliency of a tough love message, considering that all respondents in this study described their experiences as unfavorable.

In regard to negative experiences of tough love, future research should also aim to further examine the dimensions of these negative experiences. The appraisal process is fluid. Therefore, individuals adapt and may change their orientations toward tough love messages over time. For instance, Nala expressed that although her experience was negative overall, there were still positive aspects of her tough love experience. Future research should better address this distinction, examining how individuals may have positive appraisals during but reappraise a tough love experience as negative overall and vice versa.

While examining a plethora of perspectives on tough love, culture and ethnicity should be taken into account. This study focused on a small number of students, primarily white, at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Future research should aim to collect data from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. One participant in this study discussed her family's culture in relation to uses of tough love. Further consideration should be given to cultural influence in the

communication of tough love and how these factors impact the reception of this message. Further, gendered uses of tough love may also lead to interesting discussions. One participant illuminated that his transition from female to male impacted his step-father's use of tough love. Future research should consider examining not only how messages of tough love different from gender to gender, but to those within the LGBTQ+ community.

5.5. Recommendations

Past literature has consistently focused on how senders should communicate a tough love message with little regard as to how this message might impact the receiver. Respondents, who self-identified as being a receiver of tough love, highlighted a variety of factors that are necessary for consideration when communicating tough love. The following recommendations aim to bridge the gap between tough love as not only a sender- but a receiver-centric communication interaction. When communicating a message of tough love:

1. *Consider your relationship.* Tough love might be a colloquial term, but it should not be used lightly. Senders may want to consider the strength of the relationship to the receiver when communicating tough love messages. Conditions senders might consider are: (a) their status in relation to the sender, (b) the closeness in relationship they have to the receiver, (c) how often they communicate with one another, and (d) how positive their typical interactions are. These determinations may allow the sender to evaluate in advance whether a tough love message will be successful or not.
2. *Consider your experiences.* Senders should consider whether they have had a similar experience to the receiver, as this may impact the credibility of the tough love message. If the receiver feels the sender understands what they are going through, they will more likely accept the tough love message. If the sender's experience is not shared, or if the

sender lacks similar experience altogether, senders will likely risk the relationship. All in all, senders should consider *never* using personal experience against a receiver. If similar experiences are used in a derogatory way, the sender risks leaving the receiver feeling as if their feelings are inadequate and minimized.

3. *Know when it is too far.* Respondents discussed many ways in which tough love was either (a) too much too soon or (b) overused. As a sender, it is essential to be mindful of timing. Tough love takes time. Allow a receiver to "cool down" before communicating tough love. Tough love too soon could result in a higher risk of hurt feelings. On the other hand, tough love should be used in modesty and with purposefulness. Repeated use of tough love could risk being perceived as hurtful.

The present study also aims to illuminate the importance of receivers in recognizing and deciphering tough love messages. Therefore, the following recommendations should be considered when on the receiving side of tough love:

1. *Tough love is shocking at first.* This is especially the case if the receiver is someone who is not conditioned to hearing such messages. As a receiver, one should recognize the emotional process of tough love as being just that: a process. Feelings of hurt, shock, or disagreement are normal in the primary stage of this process.
2. *Understanding intentions comes with time.* The tough love process is a process that takes time; for some people it takes hours or days, others it takes years. Allowing for time to reflect after a tough love message will aid in the process of self-reflection with the ultimate goal of allowing the receiver to grow as a result.
3. *If you are not close to the sender, tough love will likely be perceived as harsh.* Instead of appraising such message as tough love, it will likely remain harsh or ill-willed. As a

receiver, if the “tough love” message is harsh and remains harsh, reflection on the relationship to the sender may be necessary, as this might reveal tensions requiring addressing.

5.6. Conclusion

This study contributes to interpersonal scholarship by developing a conceptual model of tough love through an appraisal theory lens. Results from this study identified contextual factors, like closeness in relationship and timing, which are likely to impact the positive reception of tough love messages. Though this study was exploratory in nature and sampled from a small group of students from a mid-sized Midwestern university, the findings point to fruitful future opportunities to learn more about tough love in a variety of relationships and settings.

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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Now that we're able to have a face-to-face conversation, tell me about your experience with tough love.
 - With whom?
 - What about the conversation made you think it was tough love?
 - When did you determine this was tough love?
2. How did you view this message when you heard it?
 - How did you feel in the moment?
 - What did you think the person's intention was?
3. How did you respond after hearing the tough love message?
 - What did you say? / What did you do?
 - How did this message encourage you to reflect on yourself?
4. What do you think about the experience now that you are reflecting on it?
 - Did the person's gender impact your reception of this message?
 - Do you feel this person had authority to use tough love on you?
5. How did this experience impact your relationship with this person?
 - Do you think this person used tough love because they had a similar experience to you?
 - Had this person previously used tough love on you?
6. I'm trying to get a better understanding of tough love. So after explaining your experience with tough love, can you provide your definition of tough love?
 - What do you think the overall goal of tough love is?
7. Is there anything I missed that you would like to add?