
Keynote-puheenvuoro

Putting Listening in Its Place

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When stressed, we often want someone to listen. People who feel “listened to” or “heard” experience a range of positive outcomes from heightened relational satisfaction to better mental and physical health. But what exactly contributes to a person feeling listened to? Although the role of effective listening in supportive interaction has been recognized for decades, until recently the concrete behaviors that constitute actual listening have remained largely unexplored. Indeed, the term listening is often used as a catch all with little empirical scrutiny as to its conceptual makeup. Unfortunately, it is far easier to find praise of listening as an important component of supportive communication than it is to find clear articulations of just what listening is or details concerning what listeners do. Ultimately, the place of listening at the theoretical table of support research is uncertain. This talk situates listening as the sine qua non of providing, perceiving, and receiving beneficial support. I will explore listening as a key activity engaged by helpers as well as by those seeking help and provide a framework for understanding the role and place of listening in theories of supportive communication.

So, in thinking about this talk, I decided to slightly revise its title – calling it Putting Listening in Its Place.

On the one hand there is evidence that listening is underappreciated, undervalued, and under-taught. It has been called the Cinderella skill of language learning, and teaching efforts on listening pale in comparison to a focus on how to deliver effective presentations. I agree with this evidence and have spent my academic life

trying to rectify this situation – to make a case that listening deserves a place at the larger table of skills that are appreciated and taught from grade school to continuing education needs of adults in various professional roles.

On the other hand, if listening is to have such a place, we should be more careful in how to conceptualize, measure, and ultimately prescribe it. If listening is indeed as powerful as proponents claim – with abilities to bring opposing sides to-

gether or to heal relational wounds – we should treat it more seriously. Unfortunately, the same proponents who would like to see more attention afforded to listening often don't agree on what listening is or the purposes it serves.

Let me tell you two stories to illustrate.

The first story comes from my own experience. Indeed, I remember the scene vividly. I entered the classroom and my leg was immediately grasped in a bear hug. After making sure I maintained my balance, I scanned the room for my daughter's teacher, Ms. Kyra, so I could check on Eden Brooks's day. After assuring me that nothing was out of the ordinary, Ms. Kyra proceeded to tell me something I'll never forget, "She is such a great listener!"

I mean, how much prouder could I be? As a parent, this is a compliment worth its weight in gold. As a listening scholar, to be told my daughter is engaging in one of the most powerful of all human behaviors, well there isn't much better.

Of course, like any parent would, I replayed this comment in my head and smiled. I know I have great kids, and I am glad that other people think so as well. But as a lifelong student of human communication, I could not help but scrutinize just exactly what it meant. What did Ms. Kyra mean by saying Eden Brooks is a good listener?

What I have come to learn is this: saying my daughters are good listeners does not mean they adequately attend to and processes the content of teachers' messages. It also doesn't necessarily mean that they display adequate levels of eye contact and ask appropriate questions or that they are able to take the perspective of the teacher and understand multiple sides of a complex issue.

Instead, labeling my daughters as good listeners means they do what the teachers says when they say it; that there is little need for the teachers to repeat themselves; that they line up to wash hands on the way to lunch, and that they keep their hands to themselves. To listen is to obey.

The second story comes from an experience I read about a few years back.

At age 17, Byron Pitts was a first year college student a midterm away from flunking out. One particularly memorable day began as his English professor handed back his most recent essay marked with a D+. He entered the professor's office later that day only to hear, "You are wasting my time and the government's money." So, Mr. Pitts made his way to academic affairs and began filling out the papers to withdraw from school. Fortunately for Mr. Pitts, a stranger took the time to listen to his story. As Mr. Pitts described it, "She stopped. She helped me...She was encouraging, just like my mother and other people in my life, and she planted seeds of kindness in me and optimism".

What this story suggests is that integral to every interpersonal relationship activity, be it creating, repairing, maintaining, or ending it, is one simple yet vastly understudied human ability: the ability to listen. In this case, listening is more than following directions or obedience; listening is an attitude to be open to others and to remain open as those others express their thoughts and feelings. It is a willingness to slow down for a moment and take time to be there. To be present, supportive. To listen is to enter into a relationship.

So, which view is right? Is listening mere obedience or is it something deeper?

Is it an attitude or something that can be observed? Is it a process that occurs inside the mind of an individual or a set of behaviors that signal to others they have been heard?

The simple answer is YES!

Listening is all these things, and so we are back where we started – and I would like to talk today about how to bring some clarity to these issues.

Specifically, I will attempt to answer three primary questions, each of which illustrates my general mission as a scholar: to improve the theoretical and empirical state of listening research.

Those questions are

1. What is listening?
2. What is the current place of listening within supportive communication scholarship?
3. What is the proper place of listening within supportive communication scholarship?

So what is listening?

Regardless of who you ask, you are likely to get agreement on at least three points:

First, listening is important. We are told from a variety of sources from romantic partners to parents to friends, teachers, supervisors, and so on that listening is important.

Second, listening is a complex competency, not a unitary skill. In the academic literature, listening is defined along affective, cognitive, and behavioral terms – that is, listening is simultaneously an attitude or willingness to listen, a set of cognitive procedures people employ to work on orally-delivered information, and a set of behaviors people enact when they are called on to

be certain types of listeners. Non-scholars also recognize these three dimensions of listening.

Finally, most agree that listening is an acquired art, not an inherited capacity. While the capabilities of listening seem hardwired, artful listening involves an ability to work through obstacles in relationships over time, to give of oneself to another consistently rather than unpredictably, and to consider that things could be other than what we had assumed them to be. It involves abilities to sustain attention and focus as well as abilities to refrain from judgment and offer thoughtful critique. As such, listening is challenging and contingent, rarely done to the satisfaction of all interlocutors.

Untrained observers (at least in the US) have a standard set of expectations for what constitutes good listening. We call these expectations implicit theories of listening.

In a series of studies, my research team has examined the general constructs people associate with good listening and the specific behaviors associated with these constructs.

Our theoretical approach was informed by an assumption common to social cognition, namely that people are naïve scientists. Kruglanski's (1990) lay epistemic theory is an inferential theory about knowledge formation processes and proposes that people validate their hypotheses on the basis of evidence that is either a result of logical (if-then), or probabilistic and statistical inferences (half of all Americans vote). Applied to our context, we wanted to examine listening attributes (e.g., what listening is) and the behavioral indicators that are associated with these attributes (e.g., what listeners do). Much like personal constructs, attributes are beliefs about what an object is and behavioral indicators are beliefs about what an object does.

In a set of three studies we found that people view competent listeners as possessing five attributes – I call these the big five of listening: attentiveness, understanding, responsiveness, friendliness, and the ability to sustain conversational flow. Attributes, such as intelligence, confidence, humor, and clarity were not highly

related to listening competence. These five attributes become salient when judging others as good or bad listeners.

Our studies also revealed a range of specific behavioral indicators that are associated with these five attributes and that are thus relevant to

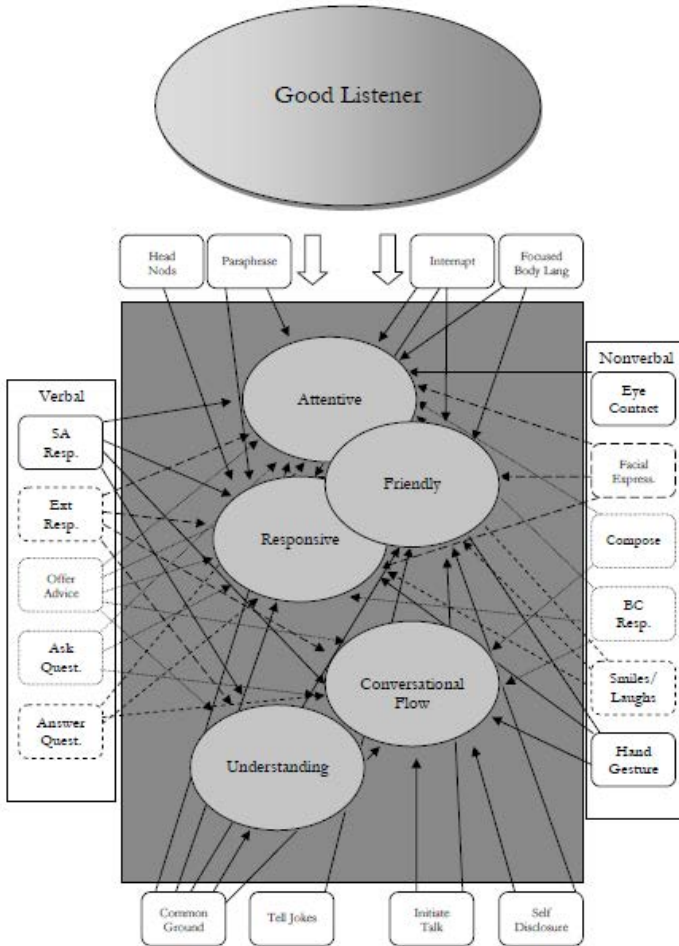


Figure 1. Graphical depiction of an implicit theory of listening. This figure should be considered a preliminary framework and used to guide future theory building and research and not a final model.

FIGURE 1. Graphical depiction of an implicit theory of listening

Note: This figure was originally published in Bodie, G. D., St. Cyr, K., Pence, M., Rold, M., & Honeycutt, J. M. (2012). Listening competence in initial interactions I: Distinguishing between what listening is and what listeners do. *International Journal of Listening*, 26, 1-28. doi:10.1080/10904018.2012.639645. Used with permission of Taylor & Francis.

supportive conversations: (a) eye contact is primarily associated with attentiveness, (b) smiling and laughing with friendliness, (c) verbal and physical composure with conversational flow, and (d) asking questions with understanding and responsiveness.

It seems that people have implicit expectations or mental representations about good listening and subsequently “look for” certain kinds of behaviors that fulfill these expectations.

We have since replicated these results with a convenience sample of adults who were asked to map out characteristics of good physicians with respect to listening – a similar set of attributes and behaviors seem to define listening in that context as well.

In two follow-up studies, we found that the propositional structure of this cognitive map goes from behavior to attributes and not the other way around – so the causal order seems to be people are exposed to behaviors that then trigger macro level attributes that then signal the mezzo level good listener prototype.

So we know how people think about listening, how they define the construct and the behaviors that can trigger judgements during interaction. But do these behaviors matter? Does this actually bear out in conversational settings – when people are judging others with whom they are interacting?

I'd like you to think about the last conversation you had in which you shared with another person some stressful experience – maybe it was something mundane and everyday such as not being able to find your car keys or ruining your new shirt in the wash. Or maybe it was more serious – maybe you disclosed something heavy, a burden that you needed to talk

through. Whatever it was that you disclosed, after the conversation, did you feel better? Worse? About the same? What about over the next 24 hours? 3 days? Week? Month? Did that conversation matter to your well-being? And if it did matter – if that conversation made you feel better or worse about your stressor – were the outcomes merely produced at the macro level or is there an advantage to exploring the micrometery movements that occurred during the conversation? In more formal language, at what level of an interaction – micro, macro, mezzo, or beyond – does interpersonal emotion regulation happen?

This is the context in which I situate myself – I study listening, not as a general human capacity or set of abilities, but as a specific set of attitudes, cognitive processes, and behaviors that occur in troubles talk – conversation in which stressors are shared among strangers, friends, romantic partners, family members, and a number of other informal helpers.

So we are now addressing our second questions – what is the place of listening in supportive communication?

It is important to note that I do not study formal helping – therapy, counseling, and the like. I am interested in everyday instances of support – these are common, and research from communication studies, epidemiology, social psychology, and health promotion converge to show the extensive health benefits of having a supportive set of relationships, people you can turn to in times of need. Having a supportive social network has health benefits on par with smoking cessation and alcohol consumption; and it is a better predictor of morbidity than obesity and physical exercise combined!

Most of the work in supportive communication does not, however, explain how social relationships convey health benefits – what is it about them? Why are some people judged as more supportive than others?

In the popular press and textbook literatures, the advice is to act like a therapist: to be supportive, you should do what good therapists do. And what do good therapists do? Generically, they listen.

The most popular model of therapeutic listening comes from the work of Carl Rogers and is colloquially known as active listening. In his framework, active listening refers to the enactment of nonverbal and verbal behaviors that function to demonstrate attention, understanding, responsiveness, and empathy; to encourage continued expression of thoughts and feelings; and to aid in relational maintenance. In other words, the attributes that we have found as indicative of good listening.

In terms of nonverbal behaviors, active listening typically is cast as nonverbal immediacy (NVI)—behaviors such as head nods, eye contact and forward body lean that reflect the degree of psychological distance between (or closeness with) others.

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Much more research attention has been afforded to verbal support behaviors than to nonverbal involvement. So we'll start there.

As a bit of a background, the key finding in supportive communication research is that message content matters – it matters what someone says to you when trying to help you work through problematic emotions. People expect you to talk as a listener – not too much, but indeed listeners do more than sit idly and nod their heads!

In particular, messages that aim to provide emotional support--those intended to comfort, reduce suffering, and relieve distress--can powerfully affect the feelings, coping behavior, personal relationships, and even physical health of the recipient.

Several features of emotion support have been studied, with findings generally pointing to the effectiveness of messages that express genuine empathy, validate and provide legitimacy for emotions, help preserve face, and are oriented toward expressing emotions and creating closeness.

My own research has focused on a quality of messages known as person centeredness or the extent to which the feelings and perspective of the recipient are legitimated and explored.

The quality of messages most often explored in studies of supportive communication is message person centeredness or the extent to which the feelings and perspective of the recipient are legitimated and explored.

VPC lies on a continuum from relatively low to relatively high levels of the construct.

Highly person-centered messages acknowledge, elaborate, and legitimize the feelings of distressed others and encourage them to express and explore their feelings. I'll play a message that represents a response of an acquaintance to hearing a classmate has earned a D in a course that requires a B to enter a particular major.

At the lowest end of the continuum are low person-centered messages which challenge the legitimacy of the distressed other's feelings and perspective (at least implicitly), often telling the other how he or she should feel about or act in the troubling situation. I'll play an example from the same hypothetical situation.

Across 23 studies conducted over the course of three decades with more than 5,000 participants, the pattern of results is clear: HPC messages are both functionally and formally better forms of verbal support. One of the main critiques highlighted by High and Dillard's meta-analysis, however, is that studies have primarily used vignette-based designs in which participants imagine themselves experiencing a stressor then read one or more messages attributed to some source; then they evaluate these messages for their perceived helpfulness. Clearly there are differences between imagining one's self in a stressful situation and actually experiencing a stressful situation.

So, as much as these studies tell us about the importance of validating and providing legitimacy of emotions, the methods used clearly take behavior out of its conversational context. Most important to me is that these methods afford no attention to the listener – the person who is providing the support; what do listeners do when called on to provide support, and do their behaviors in context matter?

We have one dataset from the work of Susanne Jones that situated PC in conversations between strangers in a laboratory setting.

After training 9 advanced UG students to employ HPC, MPC, and LPC messages as well as different levels of nonverbal immediacy, she had these confederates interact with students who were asked to disclose a recently upsetting event.

I want to play a brief clip of one of the HPC conversations so you can see how this process worked.

Conversations like these tended to help alleviate emotions compared to conversations that exhibited LPC support. Let me show a brief clip from an LPC conversation for comparison purposes.

This study was the first to show that PC support can be manipulated in naturalistic conversations and that the effect of HPC support is still rather strong. Indeed, results showed that VPC was more important to participants feeling better than the manipulation of NVI.

To explain her results, Jones and Guerrero said the following: “when support providers use VPC, they show that they are listening to the distressed person and are taking her or his concerns seriously”.¹ So, if this logic is true, then HPC support providers should be rated as good listeners while LPC support providers should be rated as poor listeners.

We tested this idea in a study that asked people to watch a subset of these conversations. Each person viewed one of 72 conversations that we chose to represent all 9 levels of PC and NVI as well as to represent mixed and same-sex dyad composition.

Participants in our study evaluated the confederates on scales assessing their listening competence. We found that VPC and NVI explained variability, but the effect sizes were quite weak. In other words, VPC and NVI are not the only behaviors relevant when people are asked to be supportive listeners.

We put forward a few explanations for the weak effect sizes in our study.

1. Maybe PC and NVI are not the most important behaviors people use when judging others as good listeners.
2. Maybe it was because they were evaluating a conversation between two other people, one they were not involved in.
3. Perhaps there is variability in how people enact HPC, MPC, and LPC support – and perhaps these micro-momentary differences are important contributors to whether support providers are effective.

These studies have received support from LSU as well as the state of Louisiana.

My research agenda seeks to advance our theoretical and operational thinking of listening, broadly construed and particularly in the context of supportive communication. This work is a collaborative effort, and several students at LSU as well as a few colleagues at other locations have been and continue to be influential to my thinking and contributors to the studies I will talk about today. I’ve always valued collaboration, and that should be evident here as well as in the collaborative nature of my publications to date.

We have since collected data in a number of other studies to test these speculations.

Our basic methodological paradigm is the same as used by Jones – pair individuals together in a laboratory setting - although we acknowledge the limitations of this setting, we are seeking to maintain some level of control and ability to video-record for later coding and analysis.

One very laudable and idealistic goal of all of this work is to situate listening as a necessary (though not sufficient) term for the study of supportive communication. In other words, the place of listening should be more central in theories of supportive communication.

The behaviors we are particularly interested in include a set of four verbal behaviors cited often in the literature as signs of good listening, though the empirical support linking these behaviors to outcomes is quite scant. We also were interested in a set of nonverbal actions labeled in the literature as immediacy behaviors as they are also cited quite often as signs of good listening.

1. Paraphrasing – repeating what was said in your own words, the way you understood it. Remember to use short introductions to your responses that indicate you are only speculating (e.g., It seems like; It appears; So the way you see it...).

2. Reflecting feelings – trying to detect the feelings that underlie certain statements and mirroring them to your conversational partner. Again, remember to use short introductions to your responses that indicate you are only speculating (e.g., It seems like; It appears; So the way you see it...)

3. Open questions – asking questions in a way that facilitates open conversation so that the person does not feel interrogated or judged

4. Check-outs – short questions that seek to ascertain the degree to which you have accurately captured the meaning of the participant's response (e.g., Did I hear you correctly? Does that fit for you?)

5. 9 nonverbal immediacy cues (smiling, eye contact, etc.)

Verbal behaviors are consistently more important than nonverbal behaviors, at least to emotional awareness and affect change. The role nonverbal immediacy plays in the process of supportive listening is less clear

These results also mirror work by Jones and Guerrero cited above as well as our perceptual and overhearer studies mentioned previously.

So it seems that across context and regardless of whether we explore perceptions or actual impact of behaviors, a similar pattern of results are obtained. But as good scientists we are still not convinced the distinction between verbal and nonverbal is the best explanation. Perhaps, instead, what we have is a distinction proposed by Jan Bavelas and her colleagues, between generic and specific responding.

Very simply, generic responding includes those familiar and ubiquitous utterances such as “m-hm” or actions such as head nods that can go anywhere in a narrative, while specific responding includes specified utterances and actions that are tied to specific points of a story.

Interestingly, all of our verbal behaviors seem to map nicely onto specific responding, while our nonverbal actions seem to map nicely onto generic responding.

In his book *Using Language*, Herb Clark suggests in a manner similar to what we find with

implicit theories of listening that listening behaviors signal attending, understanding, and identification. As part of a joint contribution to discourse, typical listening behaviors operate to signal to disclosers they are understood well enough for current purposes and that there is the building of mutual knowledge between interlocutors. After watching our videos several times so far, my research team is finding that conversations in which there are fewer signals of listening the conversations do not flow as

smoothly, stories are not told as coherently, and disclosers are more likely to do things like repeat themselves and provide verbal indications that it is hard to think of what to say next.

The verbal over the nonverbal pattern in Clark's framework is explained in terms of what he calls grounding. He asserts that contributions to discourse are achieved in two main phases, the presentation phase and the acceptance phase. As part of the acceptance phase, listeners can

TABLE 1

	Emotional Awareness	Affect Change
<i>Overall Model Statistics</i>	$F(13, 160) = 1.99, p = .02, R^2 = .14$	$F(13, 160) = 1.79, p = .05, R^2 = .13$
<u>Relative Importance of Individual</u>	<u>%R² (substantive contribution %)</u>	<u>%R² (substantive contribution %)</u>
<u>Behaviors</u>		
Smiling	9.2 (1.0)	2.2 (0.3)
Eye Contact	7.8 (1.0)	11.8 (1.5)
Head Nods	2.5 (0.4)	2.8 (0.4)
Face	2.1 (0.3)	10.2 (1.3)
Lean	6.9 (1.0)	2.4 (0.3)
Body Orientation	6.3 (0.9)	6.6 (0.9)
Open Body Posture	1.4 (0.3)	6.7 (0.9)
Animation	2.0 (0.3)	1.7 (0.2)
Voice	2.3 (0.3)	0.8 (0.1)
<i>Total NVI</i>	40.5 (5.5)	45.2 (5.9)
	<i>Average = 4.5 (0.61)</i>	<i>Average = 5.02 (0.66)</i>
Open Questions	1.2 (0.2)	23.1 (3.0)
Paraphrasing	44.5 (6.2)	13.2 (1.7)
Reflect Feelings	13.1 (1.8)	4.7 (0.6)
Check Outs	0.6 (0.01)	13.6 (1.8)
<i>Total Verbal</i>	59.4 (8.21)	54.6 (8.6)
	<i>Average = 14.9 (2.05)</i>	<i>Average = 13.65 (2.15)</i>

Note: This table originally appeared in Bodie, G. D., Vickery, A. J., Cannava, K., & Jones, S. M. (2015). The role of "active listening" in informal helping conversations: Impact on perceptions of listener helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness and discloser emotional improvement. *Western Journal of Communication*, 79, 151-173. doi:10.1080/10570314.2014.943429

engage in a range of behaviors, some of which will provide more valid evidence of understanding. In particular, Clark lays out four types of positive evidence of understanding with displays and exemplifications offering more explicit evidence of understanding than assertions and presuppositions.

In this framework, listening is a joint construal problem – the listener and the speaker are collaboratively settling on what the speaker is to be taken to mean. As related to the verbal-nonverbal findings, we have instead an explicit versus implicit uptake of a speaker's proposition with some forms of listener behaviors helping the joint construal process more than others.

Recognizing the various ways in which specific listener contributions can be organized, we have spent the last two semesters developing a coding rubric modeled after the work of William Stiles on Verbal Response Modes and incorporating elements of Person Centered Theory. In particular, we have coded a total of 520 conversations at the level of the utterance – with each independent clause coded for its grammatical structure and its illocutionary force.

These data will afford us the opportunity to explore whether different ways in which specific contributions are phrased matter and to look at elements of timing and order as well as how specific choices by disclosers in terms of how to tell their story influence listener language choice and vice versa.

One finding that has already emerged is that the structure of HPC, LPC, and MPC conversations is different at the grammatical and pragmatic level. Looking at the intent of each utterance, we see a shift from low to high PC conversations.

LPC conversations are much more marked by first-person factual disclosure of what the listener is thinking and feeling than second-person interpretation and reflection of the discloser's thoughts and feelings.

In some preliminary analyses, we have found particularly that listeners who engage in acknowledgements followed by questions, interpretations, and/or reflections cause disclosers to use language indicative of interpersonal emotion regulation – that is, more use of positive talk and more use of language that indicates they are reappraising their problematic event.

And so we are back full circle – with a clearer sense that listening is a complex set of abilities, enacted during conversation with particular relevance to how people deal with personal problems.

Thinking back to the conversations you identified earlier – did any of the specific behaviors discussed hit home? Are the people you call close friends or partners able to enact HPC support? And are there perhaps times when you might need some tough love in the form of LPC support?

I hope my talk has convinced you of the importance of listening to support, that its proper place should be a noticeable seat at the table.

Thanks for listening.

¹ Jones, S. M., & Guerrero, L. K. (2001). Nonverbal immediacy and verbal person-centeredness in the emotional support process. *Human Communication Research*, 4, 567-596. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2001.tb00793.x