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The Nature of Supportive Listening II: The Role of Verbal Person Centeredness and Nonverbal Immediacy

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The Nature of Supportive Listening II: The Role of Verbal Person Centeredness and Nonverbal Immediacy

Graham D. Bodie & Susanne M. Jones

This study examines an untested research assumption that a key component of supportive communication is active listening. Participants (N = 383) viewed a 5-minute conversation featuring a person who disclosed an emotionally upsetting event to a confederate who provided emotional support that varied in verbal person centeredness (VPC) and nonverbal immediacy (NVI). Participants then evaluated the extent to which the support provider was an active listener. Results showed that helpers who used higher levels of both VPC and NVI were rated as better listeners than those who used less person-centered and immediate support, although effect sizes were small. Results were also dependent on the operationalization of active listening.

Keywords: Active Listening; Comforting; Nonverbal Immediacy; Social Support; Stress

The adage “A good supporter is a good listener!” appears in virtually every self-help book, textbook, and empirical article on supportive communication. Indeed, Brant Burleson (2007), a leading scholar of supportive communication, suggested, “The best tip I can give about how to be a good comforter is first and foremost to be a good listener” (para. 1).¹ His claim is not without its warrant: Individuals feel

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supported when close others are present (Lehman, Ellard, & Wortman, 1986), prefer interacting with engaged helpers (Jones & Wirtz, 2007), and consistently rate listening as an important component of social support (e.g., Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, in press; Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993; Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1981). In addition, support providers who are more attentive and conversationally responsive elicit more detailed disclosures from distressed others (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983) and are more likely to provide appropriate responses to those disclosures (Clark, 1993). It makes sense that stressed individuals seek out support from others whom they view as particularly good listeners. But what kinds of messages and behaviors lead to impressions of support providers as good listeners? In this study we examine whether the verbal and nonverbal behaviors commonly defined as support also lead to impressions of helpers as supportive listeners.

The Connection between Supportive Listening and Person-Centered, Immediate Support

Almost 30 years of research have shown that beneficial emotional support must be *person-centered* and *nonverbally immediate* (Burleson, 2003; Jones, 2004). Our decision to investigate the role of verbal person centeredness (VPC) and nonverbal immediacy (NVI) in the supportive listening process stems from the implicit recognition, yet significant lack of empirical support for the role of listening in this research tradition. For example, Jones and Guerrero (2001) claimed that “when support providers use VPC and NVI, they show that they are listening to the distressed person and are taking her or his concerns seriously” (p. 568). Although the role of effective listening in helping situations has been recognized for decades, we know little about the concrete behaviors that constitute (i.e., operationalize) actual listening (Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, in press; Cramer, 1987).

Nevertheless, several conceptualizations of listening suggest its connection to VPC and NVI support. In particular, listening is recognized as a multidimensional construct that consists of complex a) cognitive processes, such as attending to, understanding, receiving and interpreting content and relational messages; b) affective processes, such as being motivated to attend to those messages; and c) behavioral processes, such as responding with verbal and nonverbal feedback, (e.g., back channeling, paraphrasing) (see Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998). The listening response also consists of verbal (e.g., asking clarifying questions) and nonverbal (e.g., providing back-channeling cues) dimensions (see Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012; Jones, 2011). These two dimensions suggest a strong connection to VPC and NVI as indicators of supportive listening.

Verbal Person Centeredness

VPC refers to the extent to which messages explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, legitimize, and contextualize the feelings and perspective of a distressed other (Burleson, 1994). Messages that exhibit low person centeredness (LPC) deny the other person's

feelings and perspectives by criticizing or challenging their legitimacy, or by telling the person how he or she *should* act and feel. Moderately person-centered (MPC) comforting messages afford an implicit recognition of the other's feelings by attempting to distract the other's attention from the troubling situation, offering expressions of sympathy and condolence, or presenting nonfeeling centered explanations of the situation. Highly person-centered (HPC) comforting messages explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings by helping the other to articulate those feelings, elaborate reasons why those feelings might be felt, and explore how those feelings fit within a broader context.

Producing messages with higher levels of VPC requires an increasing "awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational reality" of the stressful situation and the person affected by that situation (Burlleson, 1987, p. 305). Given that both producing HPC support and listening entail significant cognitive processing, it is likely that producing messages with higher levels of VPC requires skillful listening. Evidence for the connection between VPC comforting and skilled listening comes from research demonstrating that people with higher levels of interpersonal cognitive complexity (ICC)—the ability to acquire information about interpersonal situations and people—are more adept at producing HPC messages (Burlleson, 2011). In addition, ICC has been linked to listening comprehension (Beatty & Payne, 1984), tendencies to remember conversations with others (Neuliep & Hazleton, 1986), and more sophisticated understanding of supportive communication in general (Bodie et al., 2011). Based on past research, we predicted the following:

H1: VPC is positively correlated with perceptions of supportive listening.

Nonverbal Immediacy

NVI encompasses behaviors that reflect the degree of psychological distance between (or closeness with) others, and includes behaviors such as head nods, eye contact and forward body lean (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). In the context of supportive interactions, these behaviors communicate approach (vs. avoidance) (Jones & Wirtz, 2007) and signal involvement, attentiveness, and awareness (Coker & Burgoon, 1987). Researchers have speculated that supportive listening can be readily operationalized with immediacy cues (Andersen & Andersen, 2005; Fassaert, van Dulmen, Schellevis, & Bensing, 2007); surprisingly, however, this claim has received little empirical attention. Based on these speculations we predicted the following:

H2: NVI is positively correlated with perceptions of supportive listening.

The Interaction of VPC and NVI

To date, only one study has investigated ways in which verbal and nonverbal behaviors interact with one another in the emotional support process (Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Their study focused on testing three models of the combined influence of VPC and NVI on perceived support quality (i.e., message appropriateness, effectiveness,

sensitivity, and helpfulness). Here, we seek to uncover the potential ways in which verbal and nonverbal behaviors might interact to shape observer evaluations of supportive listening. Although it is possible that our results might replicate those of Jones and Guerrero (2001), we hoped to uncover different VPC/NVI interaction patterns given our focus on supportive listening. Our speculations were informed by past research, which explored the impact of VPC and NVI and also showed variations in results based on the outcome of interest (e.g., Jones, 2004; Jones & Burleson, 1997, 2003).

The first model detailed by Jones and Guerrero (2001), the additive effects model (AEM), suggested that VPC and NVI additively influence impressions of helpers. For perceptions of others as supportive listeners, the AEM predicts that high levels of VPC and NVI should be viewed as most indicative of a supportive listener; low levels of VPC and NVI should be viewed as least indicative of a supportive listener. The assumption behind the AEM is that *more is better*, an assumption shared by those advocating the importance of listening in social support (Jones, 2011). Indeed, when judging others as competent in listening, people indicate that both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are important for those judgements (Bodie et al., 2012). Thus, support for this model would complement the main effects proposed in H1 and H2 and lend credence to the claims made in the extant literature regarding the importance of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that signal listening in supportive interactions.

- H3: The combination of high NVI and high VPC is perceived as most indicative of supportive listening, followed by high and moderate combinations. The combination of low NVI and low VPC is perceived as least indicative of supportive listening.

The second model outlined by Jones and Guerrero (2001) was the expectancy threshold model (ETM) which suggests that “people tend to rely on normative behavioral scripts reflecting polite behavior” (p. 572) when making judgements of unfamiliar others. To the extent that moderate and high levels of NVI and VPC “meet the standards of socially appropriate and normative behavior” (p. 573) the ETM proposes that helpers who do not display a low level of either VPC or NVI (i.e., use at least moderate levels of each behavior) will be perceived as qualitatively better supporters (and, perhaps listeners) than helpers who do employ a low level of either behavior. This model seems to be supported by literature that reports individual preferences for others in times of need: Having another “listen” or “be there” when one is stressed tops most lists of what people desire in a supportive other (for review see Goldsmith, 2004, p. 21, Table 1). What these reports suggest is that people have an expectation that others will meet standards of appropriate listening behaviors and that deviations from this expectation will cause negative judgements of a putative helper. To the extent that standard support behaviors (i.e., VPC, NVI) are indicative of supportive listening, when this expectation is not met, a helper should be judged as a less than supportive listener.

- H4: Conditions that do not contain a low level of either NVI or VPC lead to impressions of helpers as a supportive listener, whereas conditions that do contain a low level of either NVI or VPC lead to impressions of helpers as a nonsupportive listener.

The final model proposed by Jones and Guerrero (2001), the nonverbal primacy model (NVPM), suggests “that people rely predominantly on NVI” (p. 574) when making judgements of helpers. Although this model did not receive support in their study, it may well be that nonverbal behavior outweighs verbal behavior when making judgements about helpers as supportive listeners. As previously stated, immediacy behaviors are thought to signal listening, and lists of immediacy and listening behaviors are quite similar (see Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). Moreover, research highlights the importance of nonverbal response strategies for listeners; thus empirical support for the NVPM would provide support for the assumption that listening is primarily a nonverbal behavioral activity when people comfort others (see Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008).

- H5: NVI has a stronger impact on impressions of others as supportive listeners than VPC.

If the NVPM is supported (that is, if NVI is attributed greater predictive power than VPC), then several additional hypotheses concerning the primacy of NVI ought to be tested as well. The full NVPM predicts that combinations of low NVI–moderate VPC, low NVI–high VPC, and moderate NVI–high VPC should produce higher supportive listening ratings than their reverse counterparts: moderate NVI–low VPC, high NVI–low VPC, and high NVI–moderate VPC, respectively. These predictions are stated separately below.

- H6a: Perceptions of supportive listening are higher in high NVI and moderate VPC conditions than in moderate NVI and high VPC conditions.
 H6b: Perceptions of supportive listening are higher in moderate NVI and low VPC conditions than low NVI and moderate VPC conditions.
 H6c: Perceptions of supportive listening are higher in high NVI and low VPC conditions than in low NVI and high VPC conditions.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N=383$) from a southeastern university ($n=305$; 192 women, 109 men; 4 participants did not report sex) and a midwestern university ($n=78$; 48 women, 29 males; 1 participant did not report sex) participated in this study. Participants either completed the study as part of a research requirement or received a modest amount of extra credit. The mean age of the southeastern participants was 22.08 ($SD=4.87$; $Range=18$ to 49); the average age of the midwestern participants was comparable ($M=20.52$; $SD=3.01$; $Range=18$ to 48). A majority of the southeastern ($n=236$) and midwestern ($n=64$) participants self-reported as Caucasian.

Procedures

Identical procedures, each approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board, were used at both institutions. Participants completed all procedures in groups of 2 to 10. A research assistant who was unaffiliated with the project and blind to the study hypotheses greeted participants and then asked them to view one recorded, randomly selected 5-minute conversation. Once participants watched the conversation, they completed a computer-based survey.

Stimulus Conversations

The conversations participants evaluated were generated for an unrelated project. A brief summary of the experimental setup that was used to generate these conversations is provided below; the specifics can be obtained from several sources (Jones, 2004; Jones & Guerrero, 2001). In short, each of the originally collected conversations ($N = 264$) featured a confederate and a participant. Upon entering the lab, participants were seemingly randomly assigned to discuss an emotionally upsetting event with the confederate, who was randomly assigned to exhibit more or less person-centered and nonverbally immediate support. All confederates were trained to enact each of nine combinations VPC and NVI (see Figure 1).

VPC and NVI manipulations

With respect to the *moderate* conditions, most people are moderately immediate in their everyday interactions with others (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995) and use simple expressions of condolences ("Gee, I'm sorry") as the most frequent form of verbal comfort (Burlison, 1994). Confederates were told to act as they would in a typical interaction with a stranger and to use MPC messages in the form of expressions of condolence (e.g., "I'm sorry to hear that") or questions to clarify the details of the distressing event (e.g., "How well did you know her before that happened?").

In the *high* conditions, confederates were told to increase their verbal and nonverbal expressions of support dramatically from what they would do in a typical interaction. In the HPC conditions, confederates were trained to focus their verbal attention on the emotions expressed by the participants. In the HNVI conditions, confederates were instructed to lean forward or move closer to the participant (but to avoid touch), to orient their body positions completely toward the participants, to increase eye contact to approximately 80% to 90% of the time, to smile when appropriate, and to put "lots of warmth" in their voices.

In the *low* conditions confederates were instructed to decrease their verbal and nonverbal support behaviors markedly from what they would typically do in interactions with strangers. They were told to reduce eye contact to approximately 20% to 30% of the time, to avoid smiling, and to look around the room. Confederates were also trained to express a lack of interest or boredom and to appear distracted or tired during the conversation. In the LPC conditions, confederates used statements that

		Nonverbal Immediacy		
		Low	Moderate	High
Verbal Person Centeredness	Low	1	2	3
	Moderate	4	5	6
	High	7	8	9

VPC-NVI Cell									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
H3	-2	-1	0	-1	0	1	0	1	2
H4	-4	-4	-4	-4	5	5	-4	5	5
H6a	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	1	0
H6b	0	-1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
H6c	0	0	-1	0	0	0	1	0	0

Figure 1 Experimental Design Cells and Contrast Weights for Planned Comparisons, H3-6.

encouraged the emotionally distressed person to forget about her or his feelings or that minimized his or her feelings and were encouraged to switch the conversation to an unrelated topic or to begin talking about personal concerns.

Selecting the sample of stimulus conversations for the current study

To assure a reasonably representative stratified sample we randomly selected eight conversations from each condition, resulting in a sample of 72 conversations from the original 264; confederate sex, VPC, and NVI were the three strata.² We then randomly split the 72 conversations into two sets of 36. Although the initial plan was to collect data for 36 conversations at each research site, many midwestern students who had signed up for time slots did not show up to the lab. Consequently, the majority of

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for NVI and VPC Manipulation Checks

	Trained coders		Participant perceptions	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low NVI	1.28	.83	2.37	.94
Moderate NVI	4.04	.18	2.56	.87
High NVI	6.36	1.11	3.00	.92
Low VPC	1.50	.32	3.42	.83
Moderate VPC	3.98	.80	3.56	.76
High VPC	6.65	.23	3.60	.76

Note. NVI = Nonverbal Immediacy; VPC = Verbal Person Centeredness.

the data were collected at the southeastern site ($n = 309$; $N = 383$). All 72 conversations were utilized.

VPC and NVI manipulation checks

Manipulation checks were conducted during the initial data collection and showed that VPC and NVI were manipulated in line with extant theory (for detailed findings see Jones & Guerrero, 2001).³ We conducted a second manipulation check with our sample to determine whether lay observers would differentiate VPC and NVI conditions similar to the trained coders (see Table 2 for scale statistics). To assess NVI, participants in our sample responded to the same NVI scale used by the trained coders. The linear (polynomial) contrast comparing low, moderate, and high levels of immediacy was significant, $F(1, 380) = 29.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, and means were in the predicted direction (see Table 1).

Whereas coders in the Jones and Guerrero (2001) study evaluated messages with characteristics of person centeredness (e.g., validates-invalidates), we checked VPC manipulations with a modified version of Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander's (2000) message evaluation scale. Each of the 12 message attributes (e.g., "reassuring," "helpful") was evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 2 for scale statistics). The linear (polynomial) contrast did not reach conventional significance, $F(1, 380) = 2.71$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .01$, though means were in the predicted direction (see Table 1).

Table 2 Scale Characteristics

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Alpha</i>
Nonverbal Immediacy (NVI) Scale	2.64	.95	.93
VPC Message Evaluation (Goldsmith et al., 2000)	3.53	.79	.92
Affective Empathic Listening (AEL) Scale	4.57	1.29	.93
Affective Listening Observer (ALOS) Scale	3.34	.83	.91

Taken together, while trained coders were clearly able to differentiate VPC and NVI conditions in the Jones and Guerrero (2001) study, lay observers (i.e., participants) in our study did not discriminate levels of VPC and NVI as sharply. Indeed, although the means were in the predicted direction (i.e., low VPC levels were rated lower than high and moderate levels), VPC message levels were not significantly different from one another. A possible explanation for these discrepant findings might lie in the fact that we used different scales for the VPC manipulation check. Whereas NVI measures were the same in both studies, coders in the Jones and Guerrero study rated comforting messages on theoretically relevant dimensions (e.g., validates/invalidates, self-centered/other-centered), whereas participants in our study rated these messages on scales that assess the perceived effectiveness of verbal person centeredness (e.g., helpfulness, supportiveness, sensitivity; see Goldsmith et al., 2000). We advance some speculations explaining these results in the discussion.

Supportive Listening Measurements

We operationalized supportive listening in two ways (see Table 2 for scale statistics). First, we used the other-report version of the *Active Empathic Listening Scale* (AELS-OR; Bodie, 2011b), which consists of 11 items tapping the extent to which participants viewed helpers exhibiting active and empathic listening along three dimensions: *sensing* (e.g., “X is sensitive to what others are not saying.”), *processing* (e.g., “X keeps track of points other make.”), and *responding* (e.g., “X assures others that s/he is receptive to their ideas.”). Each item was measured on a scale that ranged from 1 (*never or almost never true*) to 7 (*always or almost always true*). The second-order model fit the data well, $\chi^2(41) = 103.51$, SRMR = .03, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .06 (.04, .07), and the three latent constructs were substantially correlated with one another ($.72 < r < .78$); therefore we computed one total score for this scale.

The second scale used to operationalize supportive listening was the *Active Listening Observation Scale* (ALOS; Fassaert et al., 2007), which is a 14-item, unidimensional scale (e.g., “used inviting body language”; 5-point Likert). After removing three items ($\lambda s < .40$), model fit was adequate, $\chi^2(51) = 157.67$, SRMR = .05, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07 (.06, .09).

We chose these two scales because they measure supportive listening on different behavioral levels of abstraction. While the AELS measures macrolevel listening characteristics (e.g., “X understood how the other person felt”), the ALOS taps microlevel behaviors (e.g., “X expanded verbally upon the other person’s feelings and emotions”). Since the measurement level for skills and competencies can affect results, we considered it appropriate to measure supportive listening at both molar and molecular levels (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Of course, the very focus of our study is to determine what kinds of behaviors make for supportive listening. The ability to compare and contrast results associated with outcome measures that vary conceptually seemed worthwhile, because the majority of empirical research studies has relied on one outcome measure only (compare Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1981; with

Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993). Although the scales were highly correlated, $r = .77$, $p < .001$, we treated both scales independently precisely because these scales tap different analytical levels of listening and thus may help us understand what matters when people listen supportively.

Results

Analysis Plan and Power Analyses

H1 through H4 and H6 were analyzed using planned contrasts; for these analyses power was .40 for small ($f = .10$) and in excess of .99 for moderate ($f = .25$) and large ($f = .40$) effects.⁴ Procedures developed by Johnson and LeBreton (2004), which rely on significant results, were used to test H5; thus power is not relevant.

Analyses

H1 predicted that impressions of helpers as supportive listeners would be a function of manipulated VPC level (i.e., high, moderate, low). To test this hypothesis we computed the linear (polynomial) contrast for VPC using each listening scale as a separate dependent variable. The contrast was not significant for the ALOS, $F(1, 380) = 1.16$, $p = .28$, but was for the AELS, $F(1, 380) = 4.04$, $p = .045$, $\eta^2 = .01$. As seen in Table 3, the means were in predicted direction for the latter effect, although multiple comparison tests (least square difference; LSD) indicated that only LPC and HPC message levels differed from each other ($p = .045$, $r^2 = .02$). Thus, although the trend for VPC was in the predicted direction, distinctions were problematic for MPC comfort.

H2 predicted that impressions of helpers as supportive listeners would be a function of manipulated NVI level (i.e., high, moderate, low). To test this hypothesis we computed the linear (polynomial) contrast for NVI using each listening scale as a separate dependent variable. The contrast was marginally significant for the ALOS, $F(1, 380) = 3.64$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2 = .01$, and nonsignificant for the AELS, $F(1, 380) = .15$, $p = .70$. For the NVI-ALOS effect, the moderate NVI mean did not conform to the general pattern (see Table 3). Indeed, multiple comparison tests (LSD)

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for H1 and H2

DV	VPC	N	M	SD	NVI	N	M	SD
Active Listening Observation Scale	Low	129	3.24	.86	Low	135	3.30	.84
	Moderate	129	3.44	.74	Moderate	122	3.23	.85
	High	125	3.35	.87	High	126	3.50	.76
Active Empathic Listening Scale	LPC	129	4.38	1.30	Low	135	4.60	1.25
	MPC	129	4.63	1.27	Moderate	122	4.46	1.29
	HPC	125	4.71	1.29	High	126	4.66	1.34

Note. The AELS ranged from 1 to 7, whereas the ALOS ranged from 1 to 5.

indicated that LNVI and MNVI behaviors were perceived similarly; participants exposed to the HNVI conditions judged helpers to exhibit more supportive listening behaviors than the LNVI ($p = .057$, $r^2 = .02$) or MNVI ($p = .012$, $r^2 = .03$) conditions. Once more, although the trend for NVI was in the predicted direction, supporting H2, moderate NVI did not seem to conform to the general pattern, having a slightly lower mean than low NVI.

H3 and H4 predicted different interaction patterns for the combined effects of VPC and NVI. Specifically, H3 predicted that the effect of VPC and NVI would be additive such that high levels of both would lead to perceptions of greater supportive listening followed by moderate/high combinations with the combination of low VPC and low NVI leading to the lowest supportive listening rating (AEM). H4 predicted that low levels of either VPC or NVI would lead to the lowest supportive listening rating (ETM). These two models were tested using the planned contrasts found in Figure 1 for each of the listening scales.

The only significant contrast for these analyses was in general support of H3. Specifically, the AEM contrast test was significant for the ALOS, $t(374) = 2.14$, $p = .03$, $r_{\text{effect size}} = .11$. An inspection of mean values for the ALOS (Table 4) suggests that each mean conformed to this general pattern, except the cell 4 mean (moderate NVI, low VPC). Interestingly, this cell also did not conform to the general pattern in the Jones and Guerrero study. In addition, the mean for cell 7 (high NVI-low VPC) exhibited the highest supportive listening rating, providing preliminary evidence for a nonverbal primacy model (see below).

To test H5 (NVPM), the relative importance of VPC and NVI on impressions of helpers as supportive listeners, we first conducted a relative importance analysis on the significant effects found for both H1 and H2. This method defines relative importance as "[the] proportionate contribution each predictor makes to R^2 , considering both its direct effect (i.e., its correlation with the criterion) and its effect when

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics for Tests of VPC-NVI Interaction Models

	Nonverbal immediacy					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Verbal person centeredness						
DV = Active-Empathic Listening Scale						
Low	4.31	1.36	4.16	1.25	4.67	1.27
Moderate	4.71	1.09	4.56	1.23	4.59	1.52
High	4.74	1.29	4.68	1.35	4.71	1.24
DV = Active Listening Observation Scale						
Low	3.21	.91	2.94	.85	3.57	.71
Moderate	3.39	.74	3.51	.72	3.42	.79
High	3.30	.89	3.27	.91	3.49	.81

Note. The AELS ranged from 1 to 7, whereas the ALOS ranged from 1 to 5.

combined with the other variables” in a specified model (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004, p. 240). Interesting results emerged with respect to the two listening scales. Of the total variance explained in perceptions of supportive listening as assessed by the AELS, VPC contributed 96.5%, whereas NVI contributed 3.5%, thus contradicting our prediction. Of the total variance explained in perceptions of supportive listening as assessed by the ALOS, VPC contributed 26%, whereas NVI contributed 74%, thus supporting our prediction. These results suggest that conclusions about the primacy of nonverbal or verbal message characteristics to perceptions of supportive listening are likely dependent on the operationalization of listening.

To further explore the validity of the nonverbal primacy model, we ran three contrasts that compared cells 6 and 8 (H6a); cells 2 and 4 (H6b); and cells 3 and 7 (H6c) (see Figure 1). Of these tests, only the contrast related to H6b was significant; AELS, $t(374) = -2.05$, $p = .04$, $r_{effect\ size} = .10$; ALOS, $t(374) = -2.61$, $p = .009$, $r_{effect\ size} = .13$. Cell mean inspections, however, showed this effect to be in the opposite direction as predicted. Specifically, participants viewed the low NVI-moderate VPC confederate as a better supportive listener than the moderate NVI-low VPC confederate. This result actually mirrors that of Jones and Guerrero who also found that VPC is generally more crucial to perceptions of support quality than NVI.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether, and in what ways, comforters who exhibit person-centered and immediate emotional support are also perceived as good supportive listeners. The rationale of our study was informed primarily by the adage that good support (aka, person-centered and immediate) equals good listening. As with all untested assumptions, this one has the potential to inform both theory and practice of supportive communication, but only if it is borne out by empirical support. In what follows we summarize our findings and discuss them in light of extant perspectives on supportive communication and supportive listening.

The General Impact and Relative Importance of VPC and NVI on Listening Judgements

The first goal of our study was to examine whether verbal and nonverbal behaviors led observers to judge helpers as supportive listeners differentially. Basing predictions on (a) past research which finds strong linear trends for verbal person centeredness (VPC) and nonverbal immediacy (NVI) on perceptions of message quality and affective improvement and on (b) the assumption that good support is equated with good listening, we proposed that both VPC and NVI would also contribute linearly to impressions of others as supportive listeners. Results from H1 and H2 showed that helpers who exhibited person-centered support that acknowledged and validated the upset conversational partner were viewed as being supportive listeners. Similarly, observers viewed highly immediate helpers as exhibiting supportive listening behaviors. These results are generally in line with past findings concerning

person-centered and immediate support, but further suggest that people associate specific kinds of supportive listening activities with more and less person-centered and immediate support; clearly a person-centered and immediate comforter is also a supportive listener.

This general conclusion should, however, be tempered in two primary ways. First, our analyses revealed that supportive listening results associated with person centeredness were substantiated with the active-empathic listening scale (AELS) only, whereas immediacy levels varied only as a function of the active listening observation scale (ALOS). Recall that the AELS measures general perceptions of what constitutes supportive listening (e.g., “was aware of what the other person implied but did not say”), whereas the ALOS taps concrete behavioral operationalizations of listening (e.g., “used exploring questions”) often associated with an active conversational presence. It appears that evaluations of what constitutes *nonverbal* emotional support seem to be more directly associated with concrete listening behaviors (e.g., asking questions, being distracted, using inviting body language), whereas verbal person-centered support captures more abstract listening qualities (e.g., understanding, remembering, assurances, acknowledgements). Indeed, features captured by the AELS are readily comparable with theoretical message qualities that capture person centeredness (see Goldsmith et al., 2000). For instance, highly person-centered comforters are expected to understand how others feel, listen for more than the spoken words, and assure others they are receptive to their ideas; all of these descriptors are represented by items on the AELS. These findings have implications for how listening is assessed in future research (i.e., we need to assure that multiple listening scales be used based on the specific questions of interest), and scholars should continue to develop operationalizations of supportive listening designed for particular purposes.

The findings associated with our supportive listening scales may also provide evidence that even though both verbal person-centered message features and nonverbal immediacy cues contribute to what constitutes supportive listening impressions, both concepts are processed differently. Nonverbal cues are usually processed as a *gestalt* (Andersen, 1999), whereas verbal messages are processed linearly. The exact nature and consequences of these processes cannot be ascertained with our data, but our results point to important future research that might examine how and in what ways verbal and nonverbal messages are cognitively processed in the support context (see Bodie & Burleson, 2008) and subsequently lead observers to form particular impressions of helpers.

The second reason why findings for H1 and H2 should be tempered is that neither VPC nor NVI accounted for more than 3% of the variance in supportive listening ratings. Variations in supportive listening evaluations were significant yet minimally explained by person-centered and immediate support provided by confederates, even though our reasoning was informed by past theory and research in emotional support. Our results are not all that uncommon in the behavioral sciences. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that determining what people attend to when evaluating behavior continues to be a challenge. There are numerous reasons that contribute to effect sizes, namely methodological factors (e.g., response set), participant factors (e.g.,

sleeper effect), and data analytic factors (e.g., suppression). Of course, it could also be the case that observers attend to behavioral factors (e.g., certain utterances), dimensions (e.g., attractiveness), or contextual characteristics (e.g., nature of relationship), not captured by person centeredness and immediacy. In the spirit of Cohen and Cohen (1983) who espoused “less is more” (pp. 169–170) when it comes to selecting variable sets, we need to examine carefully what factors contribute to perceptions of effective emotional support and supportive listening.

Interactions between VPC and NVI

The second goal of our study was to examine three models (additive effects model [AEM], expectancy threshold model [ETM], and nonverbal primacy model [NVPM]) that propose how VPC and NVI might influence impressions of helpers as supportive listeners. The models were initially proposed by Jones and Guerrero (2001) whose outcome measure was general support quality (e.g., helpfulness). In line with Jones and Guerrero, the contrast test for the AEM, which proposes that VPC and NVI additively predict judgements of supportive listening, was significant but only for the ALOS. Thus, consistent with suggestions in the extant literature, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are important when judging others as supportive listeners. In addition, neither the ETM nor the NVPM received strong support. Specifically, the contrast related to H4, which tested the ETM, was not significant for either listening scale, and the analyses related to H5 and H6 (NVPM) suggested that verbal behavior likely has a primacy effect over nonverbal behavior for impressions of listening. Perhaps, then, although both verbal and nonverbal behaviors displayed by listeners lead others to form impressions, people may associate listening more readily with verbal responses (e.g., extended responding, asking questions) than with nonverbal behavior (e.g., head nods, eye contact).

This verbal primacy explanation is consistent with some data recently collected in LSU's Matchbox Interaction Lab for a study concerned with implicit theories of listening (Bodie et al., 2012). In this series of studies we asked participants to mark the degree to which 19 behaviors are relevant to a) judgements of other individuals as (in)competent listeners (Study 2) and b) judgements of other individuals on five attributes related to listening (i.e., understanding, responsive, attentive, friendly, enabling conversational flow) (Study 3). Behavioral ratings of Study 2 produced two behavioral dimensions, namely a verbal and a nonverbal dimension, and this factor structure was reproduced in an independent sample of participants for each of the listening-related attributes (Study 3). Across all but one of the reported judgement tasks, the verbal dimension was seen as more relevant to listening-related judgements than the nonverbal dimension.⁵ These studies suggest that, contrary to scholarly and textbook treatments of listening as a primarily nonverbal activity, verbal responding may be the most important contributor to judgements of others as good (or bad) listeners.

Although plausible, we must also temper these conclusions. First, with regard to H5 which tested the relative importance of VPC and NVI to impressions of others

as listeners, VPC was only more relatively important in impressions of helpers as supportive listeners for one of the two scales, namely the AELS; NVI was relatively more important for the ALOS. Operationally, the AELS taps general support tendencies as opposed to particular support behaviors. Thus, verbal comforting may be more important to gestalt impressions of helpers as supportive listeners but not when considering specific aspects of those helpers (e.g., specific behaviors that may lead to those impressions). Indeed, the relative importance analysis for the ALOS found that NVI was a much more important predictor of supportive listening impressions than VPC. What exactly these discrepancies mean both theoretically and pragmatically is still only speculative and warrants a great deal of research. Second, cell means (Table 4) suggest that lay observers viewed highly immediate helpers as the best listeners, even when these helpers also exhibited low person-centered help (cell 7, Figure 1). Moreover, LPC helpers who were moderately immediate received the lowest supportive listening score for both the ALOS and AELS. Third, of the contrasts relevant to the test of the NVPM only one was statistically significant (and in the opposite direction as predicted). Thus, perhaps there is something unique about the combination of low and moderate forms of NVI and VPC when it comes to the primacy of verbal, as opposed to nonverbal, behavior in making impressions of others as supportive listeners. Finally, it is possible (as noted below) that the impact of VPC was largely mitigated by the lack of discrimination for the construct found in our manipulation check. Overall, then, the degree to which specific verbal and nonverbal responses are indicative of, and important to, impressions of listening should be the focus of future research.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Whereas data generated by Jones and Guerrero (2001) showed that trained coders sharply differentiated VPC and NVI levels, participants in our study did not differentiate sharply among levels of VPC and NVI. Even though means were in predicted directions (i.e., low VPC was rated lowest followed by moderate, and high VPC), the manipulation check for VPC in our study did not reach a conventional level of statistical significance. The weak manipulation checks primarily resulted in a lack of power, and an increased chance of Type II error. Findings associated with our manipulation checks are not without precedent; past research using VPC as a between-subjects factor has shown less contrast between MPC and HPC messages (for review see MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burlison, 2004). Nevertheless, this is the first study to our knowledge where LPC and MPC/HPC messages were not sharply distinct when evaluated by lay observers. Ironically, one possible reason for this finding might be that participants in our study paid comparatively more attention to the visual cues of the conversation than to exactly what the confederate said. What makes a trained coder a trained coder is precisely the fact that the coder is cued to listen to (i.e., attend to and interpret) and categorize messages and behaviors into empirically established categories—a task that is quite cognitively challenging. A

further moderating factor is that participants might not have been motivated to listen; the only thing at stake was research or extra credit. Trained coders, on the other hand, were research assistants who received a semester grade for their work. Of course the differences between participants and trained coders should not be overstated since the ratings constituting these different manipulation checks were not equivalent. Moreover, our findings above are more consistent with a verbal primacy than a nonverbal primacy model placing doubt on this explanation.

We also found that the vast majority of participants (87%) thought that the people in the videotaped conversation just met or were distant acquaintances.⁶ People usually seek help from close others; thus it would make sense to observe and examine what constitutes supportive listening in established relationships. Perhaps people discriminate supportive listening behaviors more sharply in close relationships with others whose idiosyncratic behaviors are familiar. Conversely, it may be that close others are more forgiving when the conversational partner does not display generic listening behaviors (see Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999). This would certainly help explain why the effect sizes in this study were primarily small in magnitude. Perhaps stronger effects will emerge using different methodological strategies and investigating supportive conversations between participants in more established relationships. Future research ought to examine how elements of a supportive interaction like the relationship between the interlocutors influence impressions of helpers as (un)supportive listeners.

Conclusion

So, is a good supporter also a good listener? Although verbal person-centered and immediate message features partially capture impressions of more and less supportive listeners, the various nonverbal and verbal features of emotional support interact in complex ways to contribute to supportive listening. Moreover, the effects of the verbal and nonverbal behaviors examined here were quite small in magnitude. The degree to which VPC and NVI are important elements in determining whether a support provider is a good listener is questionable, which opens the door for the study of additional behaviors and how they might contribute to impressions of helpers as good (or bad) listeners. For instance, whereas our study focused on more abstract supportive behavior, other research might benefit from unpacking the myriad components of VPC and NVI support and testing their additive and interactive effects. A range of specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors are posited in the extant literature, and their unique and combined effects are certainly fodder for future research.

Overall, and regardless of the particulars of future research, listening should be afforded more attention, perhaps even posited as the primary process influencing supportive communication outcomes (Jones, 2011). Indeed, across the landscape of research in interpersonal communication the role of listening is assumed to affect interaction, yet empirical research demonstrating its effects is less common (Bodie, 2011a). The degree to which various claims about listening, and indeed about any communicative function, are accurate should be continually questioned and empirically examined.

Notes

- [1] Brant Burleson passed away in December 2010. We would like to express our deepest gratitude for having learned from and worked with Professor Burleson for many years. He was an outstanding mentor, a caring friend, and most of all, a supportive listener.
- [2] Using a sample of the total population of conversations as opposed to only a single example of each theoretically interesting cell rests on the notion of representativeness. First, within-condition differences of confederate VPC and NVI behaviors exist. For example, some confederates may have leaned in a bit more than others in high NVI conditions. Similarly, some confederates may have expressed a bit less person centeredness in low VPC conditions. On the whole, however, manipulation checks from trained coders confirm that conversations varied as expected for both person centeredness and immediacy. To capture the slight variations in immediacy cues and person-centered messages within each of the nine conditions, we wanted to use multiple conversations for each of these nine conditions. With respect to person centeredness in particular it seemed particularly important to capture the various ways with which each person-centered message level can be expressed (i.e., operationalized). We also wanted to make sure that other confounding factors, such as conversational topics, physical attractiveness, dialects/accent, and/or attires are randomly distributed and not patterned.
- [3] Each scale used as a manipulation check in this study was submitted to a confirmatory factor analysis to ensure it conformed to its theoretical measurement model. Fit statistics for each model indicated good fit (all CFIs $> .90$, SRMRs $< .08$, RMEASs $< .05$ with upper CIs $< .08$), and these individual results are available upon request. The only exception was the measurement model for the NVI manipulation check for participant observers, $\chi^2(35) = 248.92$, CFI = .92, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .12 (.11, .14). Notably, the RMSEA is somewhat high; however, Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby, and Paxton (2008) recently demonstrated inflated Type 1 error rates for adhering to the conventional RMSEA cutoff and argued that the RMSEA must be interpreted more carefully in conjunction with the sample size, as well as other fit indices. In line with this reasoning, we retained the NVI model because the overall fit statistics suggested a correctly specified model.
- [4] Although evaluating omnibus effects in the traditional factorial design is more popular, "It is a relatively inefficient way to *evaluate theories*" (Furr & Rosenthal, 2003, p. 46) primarily because the omnibus ANOVA tests the residual explained sums of squares left over after the main effects and all lower interaction terms are removed (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1989). In the current design, the 3×3 interaction term in omnibus ANOVA is defined as $SS_{\text{tot}} - (SS_a + SS_b + SS_c + SS_{ab} + SS_{ac} + SS_{bc} + SS_{\text{error}})$. That subtraction divided by MS_{error} is usually not theoretically meaningful (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1991). Most germane to this study, the omnibus ANOVA conflates the linear and quadratic effects of the independent variables. Since our prediction relies on the strength of the linear effect, we test specifically for this effect. This allows for greater statistical power and more streamlined results (see O'Keefe, 2007). Unless otherwise noted, the deviation from the linear trend was not statistically significant.
- [5] The mean rating for the verbal and nonverbal factors for the judgement task involving "friendly" did not differ significantly ($p = .74$).
- [6] We assessed this with a simple question asking "What relationship do these two people appear to have?" with the following responses: They just met; they are close friends; they are distant acquaintances; they are family; they are romantic partners.

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