The Temporal Stability and Situational Contingency of Active-Empathic Listening

Graham D. Bodie [a] , Christopher C. Gearhart [a] , Jonathan P. Denham
[a] & Andrea J. Vickery [a]

[a] Department of Communication Studies, Louisiana State University
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This article presents three studies furthering validity evidence for a self-report measure of active-empathic listening (AEL). Study 1 investigates the temporal stability of the AEL scale, revealing a statistically sound model with no decline in general fit over time, supporting the scale's measurement of an individual trait-like difference. Studies 2 and 3 investigate the contribution of trait-level AEL and various characteristics of situations to the utilization of AEL. A general discussion focuses on areas for future research with respect to how AEL might help (or hinder) the development and maintenance of close, personal relationships.

Keywords: Active Listening; Competence; Empathy; Scale Development; Social Skills

Few would disagree that quality communication contributes to the healthy functioning of interpersonal relationships. Perhaps more than any other communicative action, scholars consistently highlight the importance of listening to fulfilling various communicative goals and purposes (e.g., supportive communication; Jones, 2011; effective marital conflict; Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999). Indeed, the necessity of actively attending to one's relational partner in ways that

show appreciation for his/her point of view—whether in the heat of argument or in the more mundane setting of everyday life—seems to have become axiomatic (Arnett & Nakagawa, 1983). Thus, it seems reasonable to assert that listening is an essential component of interpersonal communication and of relationships more generally.

Upon closer inspection of the empirical data reported in the extant literature, a different picture is painted, one in which listening is painted as the background of an otherwise dimly lit landscape. Indeed, several scholars have recently lamented the conceptual underdevelopment of listening (Berger, 2011; Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008; King, 2008) especially in interpersonal communication (Bodie, 2011b). This is surprising given the attention afforded to conceptually similar phenomena such as conversational sensitivity, interaction involvement, empathy, and cognitive complexity (Bodie, 2012). Unfortunately, the most comprehensive discussions of listening take place in interpersonal communication textbooks where the focus is on "practical skill development rather than conceptual clarification or empirical research" (Stewart, 1983, p. 379). Moreover, those studies that actually afford empirical attention to listening show little consistency in its operationalization, making it difficult to make coherent sense of this research. One obvious explanation for this inconsistency is the lack of psychometrically sound measures of various types of listening. The goal of this article is to forward a conceptualization and report validity evidence for a recently developed measure of one approach to listening deemed important in close, personal relationships. Specifically, we seek to investigate the relative stability of individual self-reports of active-empathic listening (AEL) across time and situations. Doing so serves to further the conceptual development of AEL and to provide future research with a psychometrically sound instrument for measuring AEL.

The Conceptualization and Prior Measurement of Active-Empathic Listening

Active-empathic listening (AEL) is the active and emotional involvement of a listener that can take place in at least three key stages of the listening process (Bodie, 2011a; Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006). AEL during the *sensing* stage describes an active sensitivity to the emotional needs of a speaker and manifests in the listener attending to both the implicit and explicit aspects of others' messages. Within the *processing* stage, AEL refers to acts such as remembering, understanding, and comprehending conversational content and integrating different parts of the speaker's talk into a working whole. Finally, active-empathic *responding* is characterized by using verbal and nonverbal back-channeling and more extended responding, like question asking, to indicate active attention.

Within each of these stages, individuals can be more or less active and empathic. Although activity in these various stages is relatively straightforward (e.g., variability in synthesizing or remembering conversational details), the degree to which individuals are sensing, processing, and responding in empathic ways is complicated by the fact that empathy, like listening, is multidimensional (Davis, 1994). Although any given conceptualization of AEL might invoke one or more types of empathy, we borrow Rogers's (1959) definition—"the ability to perceive the internal frame

of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings . . . as if one were the other person'' (p. 210). This definition aligns with what most scholars call perspective taking or the ability to understand or imagine how another feels (Ebesu Hubbard, 2009).

Approaches to Operationalizing AEL

Allusions to AEL are implicit in numerous other constructs, though studies typically do not assert to measure ''listening'' or its various stages, per se. In terms of the sensing stage, research on nonverbal decoding abilities suggests that some people are more sensitive to the emotions of others and/or accurate in decoding others' behavior (Riggio, 2006). Likewise, the need to understand both the content and relational aspects of messages from others, including those communicated through nonverbal channels, is recognized by a host of specific theories (for review see Edwards, 2011). Skill in ''sensing'' also is represented in various multidimensional self-report instruments. For instance, the Interaction Involvement Scale (IIS; Cegala, 1981) includes a subscale labeled ''perceptiveness'' (e.g., ''During conversations I am sensitive to others' subtle or hidden meanings''), and the Conversational Sensitivity Scale (CSS; Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1988) includes subscales labeled ''detecting meanings'' (e.g., ''I often find myself detecting the purposes or goals of what people are saying in conversations'') and ''interpretation'' (e.g., ''I'm not very good at detecting irony or sarcasm in conversations'').

Abilities referenced under the processing stage have been recognized under the general auspices of conversational memory (Stafford & Daly, 1984), cognitive complexity (Beatty & Payne, 1984; Burleson, 2011), conversational listening span (Janusik, 2007), and listening fidelity (Powers & Witt, 2008). Each of these constructs focus on receivers' ability to remember, understand, and comprehend (i.e., process) the utterances and messages of an interlocutor. Together, research employing measures of these constructs finds that the ability to process conversational information varies across individuals and situations.

Perhaps the most common approach to operationalizing AEL is to measure, code, or manipulate the nonverbal responses of individuals engaged in conversation. Experimental studies suggest that behaviors such as head nods, eye contact, and forward body lean are used by listeners to regulate a conversation. In a line of research by Bavelas and her colleagues (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011), for instance, speakers are instructed to tell a personal, close call story, and the addressee is instructed to ''listen to the story so that, if you had to, you could summarize the gist or main point of it to someone else'' (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2002, p. 573). This research has identified various specific responses that play unique roles in unfolding conversations, responses typically reported in textbooks as behaviors enacted by active-empathic listeners such as appropriate nonverbal displays of attention (e.g., appropriate facial expressions, eye contact) that correspond quite closely to nonverbal immediacy behaviors (Andersen, 1985) and appropriate verbal paraphrasing that summarize and explicate what the speaker said (e.g., Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2006; Trenholm & Jensen, 2008).

Due to the noted importance of appropriate responding behaviors it is not surprising, then, that several studies have attempted to train confederates to display various behaviors designated as ''active listening responses'' during interactions with a research participant in an effort to discover the impact of these responses on various outcomes (e.g., Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010). Alas, most of the conclusions drawn about the impact of AEL responding come from research in psychotherapy (Stokes, 1977) and social work (Nugent & Halvorson, 1995). Yet, from a strictly communication perspective, the degree to which AEL responding within other close relationships is conceptually similar and beneficial is still largely unexplored (Cramer, 1987; but see Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998).

Limitations of Prior Operationalizations and One Potential Solution

Although several limitations of past research on active listening could be addressed, two limitations directly concern the present set of studies. First, of the various operationalizations reviewed, none directly assess AEL within all three stages of the listening process (sensing, processing, and responding). Thus, to create a more holistic AEL measure one would need to incorporate various items from a number of scales, producing a rather lengthy instrument and a heavy burden for respondents. Second, measures of sensing and processing largely address activity in listening while failing to recognize the role of empathy. As noted in the research employing measures and manipulations of AEL responding, listening, especially in close relationships, connotes an empathic involvement not just an active one. Indeed, research on ''active listening'' across the academic landscape has recognized the need to include empathy in its conceptualization (Weger et al., 2010).

A recently developed measure, the Active-Empathic Listening scale (AELS), has the potential to provide a more conceptually consistent way to operationalize both the active and empathic nature of listening within each relevant stage. Consistent operationalization serves to create a coherent body of scholarship devoted to studying this form of listening in various contexts and within the various theoretical frameworks that suppose its importance. The original AEL scale was developed in the context of the salesperson–client relationship (Drollinger et al., 2006) and was recently modified to measure AEL in various interpersonal relationships (Bodie, 2011a). The AEL scale captures both active and empathic involvement with a speaker, and recent studies have found initial evidence for both construct and convergent validity.

Both Drollinger et al. (2006) and Bodie (2011a) presented findings that detail a consistent and coherent factor structure for the AEL scale; both additionally demonstrated that AEL is related to general levels of conversational activity and self-report empathy, providing initial convergent validity for the scale. Similarly, the AEL scale is related to abilities in accurately decoding others' emotions (e.g., emotional sensitivity) (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011), and individuals who respond in highly immediate and ''person-centered'' ways during a supportive encounter also scored highly on the AELS (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Of course, validity is an ongoing process, one this report seeks to advance. In particular, each of the aforementioned studies, though providing

initial validity evidence for a conceptualization of AEL as a relatively stable social skill (i.e., trait-like condition), has assumed stability as opposed to actually testing it. Thus, Study 1 investigates the temporal stability of the AELS.[1]

The current conceptualization of AEL also recognizes that this trait is not necessarily manifest in all situations. Indeed, treatments of communication-based competencies like AEL generally assert that competent individuals employ skills from their repertoire that will most effectively and appropriately reach relevant goals (for review see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Although individuals who are seen to possess high levels of trait-AEL are also seen as more generally appropriate and effective in conversations (Bodie, 2011a, Study 2), it also seems plausible to assert that individuals will differentially report a propensity to use AEL as a function of the communicative situation. For instance, whereas AEL seems highly appropriate in supportive interactions (Jones, 2011), being active and/or empathic may be less appropriate or lead to less efficient goal attainment in situations like the common greeting ritual (nonactive, nonempathic), a class lecture (active, nonempathic), or listening to a friend talk about important aspects of her life that she has disclosed multiple times (nonactive, empathic). Consequently, Study 2 was also designed to investigate the degree to which individuals report differential tendencies to employ AEL based on the relative activity and empathy desirable in a particular situation. A final study aims to identify the possible features of a situation that classify it as requiring AEL.

In sum, this article reports three studies that seek to investigate the relative stability of AEL across time (Study 1) and context (Study 2). Moreover, we sought general contextual cues most likely to prompt individuals to employ AEL (Study 3). To empirically demonstrate stability (or lack thereof) we employed multigroup confirmatory factor analytic procedures and tested for two primary types of invariance for the AEL measurement model (see Byrne, 2010; Little, 1997). The first type of invariance deals with the psychometric properties of the scale and includes *configural* invariance (same factor structure holds across groups), *metric* invariance (factor loadings are equal across groups), *scalar* invariance (loadings and intercepts are equal across groups), and *strict* measurement invariance (loadings, intercepts, and item error variances are equal across groups). Establishing this type of invariance—often labeled *weak* invariance—basically suggests that the scale works equally well across administrations.

The second type of invariance deals with between-group differences in latent means, variances, and covariances. Estimating latent means and testing differences at this level as opposed to more traditional approaches like ANOVA holds advantages such as controlling for measurement error and ensuring observed differences in means can be accurately interpreted (Sharma, Durvasula, & Ployhart, in press). For tests of single measurement models (e.g., to establish model fit for the AEL in a single sample), we examined the comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Kline, 2005). To determine whether tests of measurement invariance suggest model equivalency, we examined change in these goodness-of-fit tests using a cutoff criterion of .01 (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002).

Study 1

In order to assess the temporal stability of the AEL scale we administered the AEL scale to a sample of US undergraduate students at two time points to compare the relative fit of the measurement model at each time.

Method

Participants and procedures
Data were collected at two time periods in a computer laboratory that accommodated up to 25 participants per session. Participants who signed up for and completed the initial survey were allowed to take the second between 14 and 45 days later ($M = 18.93$ days; $SD = 5.55$). The first survey was completed by 267 participants, and 228 completed the second. In the full dataset, there were 150 female and 77 male participants (1 participant did not report biological sex) who reported an average age of 20.43 ($SD = 2.51$) and primarily Caucasian ethnicity ($n = 179$). Though participants were recruited through classes in the Department of Communication Studies, 12 of 17 University academic programs were represented.

The Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS)
The AELS (Bodie, 2011a) asks participants to indicate how they perceive each of eleven statements to be true of them on 7-point scales bounded by *Never or Almost Never True* and *Always or Almost Always True* (midpoint = *Occasionally True*). Items are specified to load on one of three latent constructs (see Table 1).

Results and Discussion

Multigroup confirmatory factor analytic techniques were used to assess the stability of the AEL scale across time. After separate models were tested for each time (CFIs > .90, SRMRs < .05, RMSEAs < .06), a configural model was created by combining the two baseline models into a single confirmatory model and assessing fit. As seen in Table 1, the adequate fit of this model indicates that the number of factors and factor structure pattern are similar across time.

Using the configural baseline model for comparison, Byrne's (2010) recommendations for testing sequential models were employed. Table 2 shows the results of these tests and the tenability of weak measurement invariance. Strong measurement invariance was evaluated by adding a mean structure and constraining indicator intercepts to equality. As seen in Table 2, no fit statistics indicated a decline in model fit. Using Time 1 as a reference point, the mean of the total AEL score at Time 2 was not significantly different, $Z = .38$, $p = .70$, providing support for invariance in AEL across time at the level of the latent mean structure. In other words, participants had a similar total AELS score for both Time 1 and Time 2. Supporting this contention, test–retest reliabilities were all high: $r_{sensing} = .77$, $r_{processing} = .73$, $r_{responding} = .79$, $r_{total} = .70$. Finally,

Table 1 Trait AEL Scale Items and Factor Loadings, Study 1 and Study 2

Item		Study 1		Study 2	
	α T1	α T2	Standardized Regression Weight (T1/T2)	α	Standardized Regression Weight
Sensing	.73	.81		.81	
I am sensitive to what others are not saying.			.57/.68		.47
I am aware of what others imply but do not say.			.60/.73		.77
I understand how others feel.			.63/.66		.83
I listen for more than just the spoken words.			.77/.78		.89
Processing	.73	.71		.81	
I assure others that I will remember what they say.			.68/.58		.68
I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.			.68/.68		.82
I keep track of points others make.			.70/.78		.81
Responding	.74	.83		.88	
I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgements.			.56/.82		.85
I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.			.74/.72		.83
I ask questions that show my understanding of others' positions.			.68/.67		.79
I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).			.58/.78		.74
Total	.87	.90		.91	

the tenability of strict measurement invariance is questionable (ΔCFI = .01, ΔSRMR = .015), though the RMSEA value was within the prior model's 90% CI.

The primary goal of Study 1 was to investigate the untested assumption that AEL is a relatively stable individual difference. Results indicate that this assumption is statistically sound, though the tenability of strict measurement invariance is questionable (see Little, 1997). Whereas Study 1 provides support for conceptualizing AEL as a trait-like variable, "traits vary in their relevance to an individual depending upon the situation that person is in" (Daly, 2002, p. 136). Thus, two subsequent studies were designed to assess the degree to which the AEL scale is sensitive to situational variation (Study 2) and the degree to which various aspects of situations heighten the likelihood that AEL will be employed (Study 3).

Table 2 Model Fit Statistics for Measurement Invariance Analyses, Studies 1 and 2

| Fit Statistic | Configural | Weak Invariance | | | | Strong Invariance | Strict Invariance |
		Measurement Weights	Structural Weights	Structural Covariances	Structural Residuals	Structured Means Model	Measurement Residuals
Study 1							
Chi-Square (df)	χ^2 (82) = 275.01	χ^2 (90) = 293.29	χ^2 (92) = 295.80	χ^2 (93) = 296.43	χ^2 (96) = 299.99	χ^2 (100) = 313.60	χ^2 (107) = 337.48
p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
CFI	.91	.91	.91	.91	.91	.91	.90
SRMR	.05	.05	.05	.055	.057	.05	.065
RMSEA	.06	.06	.06	.065	.065	.065	.065
(90% CI)	(.05, .07)	(.05, .07)	(.05, .07)	(.06, .07)	(.056, .073)	(.05, .07)	(.056, .073)
Study 2							
Chi-Square (df)	χ^2 (164) = 401.80	χ^2 (188) = 446.07	χ^2 (194) = 448.63	χ^2 (197) = 460.67	χ^2 (206) = 496.15	χ^2 (221) = 828.33	χ^2 (239) = 954.93
p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
CFI	.96	.95	.95	.95	.95	.89	.87
SRMR	.03	.03	.03	.05	.05	.05	.08
RMSEA	.04	.04	.04	.04	.04	.067	.07
(90% CI)	(.04, .05)	(.04, .05)	(.04, .05)	(.04, .05)	(.04, .05)	(.062, .071)	(.065, .074)

120

Study 2

Although the goal-directed nature of speaking and listening has long been recognized within the communication discipline (Berger, 2002), the latter has been afforded much less research attention (Bodie, 2011b; Bostrom, 2011; Ford, Wolvin, & Chung, 2000; Imhof, 2003; King, 2008). Like other communication skills, the likelihood of engaging in AEL and the degree of engagement is proposed here to be simultaneously a product of an individual's general predisposition as well as characteristics of the situation that promote or inhibit the manifestation of this skill. Most conceptualizations of interpersonal skill suggest that individuals vary in their ability to adapt or adjust to situations but that situations also make some behaviors and traits more or less salient (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Indeed, in some situations even those with very high levels of trait-like AEL may not respond very actively or empathically because doing so would be inappropriate or ineffective (or both). In sum, the purpose of Study 2 was two-fold: first, to demonstrate AEL differs as a function of the putative listening situation, and, second, to ascertain the degree to which responses to situational AEL differs as a function of trait AEL.

Method

Participants and procedure

Undergraduate students ($N = 156$; 85 male, 65 female) who reported an average age of 20.51 ($SD = 2.74$), were primarily Caucasian ($n = 115$), and who were enrolled in Communication Studies courses at Louisiana State University completed materials for Study 2 in partial fulfillment of a course research requirement. Constraints were put in place disallowing participants from Study 1 to participate in Study 2. After providing informed consent, participants first completed, in a random order, a variety of individual difference measures including the AELS. Then, participants were asked to read descriptions of four situations, also presented in a random order (see Appendix). After each situation, participants responded to the AEL scale items with respect to that situation. The four situations were selected from a collection of situations that were developed to manipulate the need for activity and empathy in listening. The degree to which each situation reflected a perceived need for activity and/or empathy on the part of the listener was tested in a pilot study (see below); those situations which best represented these needs were selected for further use.

Pilot Study

An independent sample of undergraduate students from the same University ($N = 213$; 54 male, 155 female, 4 did not report sex) viewed eight situations and answered a series of questions assessing the degree to which they would listen actively (three items, $\alpha s > .86$; e.g., "I would be very active in my listening, trying to attend to every word") and empathically (three items, $\alpha s > .87$; e.g., "I would attempt to put myself in the other person's shoes") in that situation. The average correlation between these two measures in the various situations was moderate ($r_{ave} = .59$; $.04 < r < .87$).

The four situations that were retained are presented in the Appendix. These situations varied as expected (see Table 3).

Primary Study

For the primary study, we expected that responses to the AEL scale would be lowest in reference to the low active-low empathic situation and highest in reference to the high active-high empathic situation; we expected the two hybrid situations (low activity–high empathy, high activity–low empathy) to maintain scores between these two extreme situations and not to differ from each other statistically.

Results

Multigroup confirmatory factor analytic techniques were used to assess the degree to which the AEL scale is sensitive to changes in the putative listening situation. After fitting a measurement model for each situation (see Table 3), the configural baseline model was assessed. As seen in Table 2, this model was adequate suggesting that the number of factors and factor structure pattern are similar in each situation.

Table 2 shows the results of tests for sequential models (see Study 1 for details) which suggest the tenability of *weak measurement invariance*; across the four situations, the covariance structure of the AEL scale is invariant. Fit statistics did, however, decline when the intercept equality constraints were imposed suggesting, as we expected, that individuals indicated differential levels of AEL based on the activity and empathy required by the different situations. In particular, as seen in Table 4 and supporting our expectations, the low activity–low empathy situation produced the lowest AEL score, whereas the high activity–high empathy situation produced

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Four Retained Situations, Study 2

Situation	Activity Score (Pilot)		Empathy Score (Pilot)		Model Fit (Full Study)			
	M	SD	M	SD	$X^2(df)$	CFI	$SRMR$	$RMSEA$ $(90\% \ CI)$
Low Activity–Low Empathy	2.91[a]	1.34	3.52[a]	1.37	63.62 (41) $p = .01$	.99	.02	.06 (.03, .08)
Low Activity–High Empathy	4.74[b]	1.45	5.33[b]	1.23	122.43 (41) $p < .001$	.94	.05	.10 (.09, .12)
High Activity–Low Empathy	6.10[c]	1.07	4.29[c]	1.48	136.49 (41) $p < .001$	.91	.06	.12 (.10, .15)
High Activity–High Empathy	6.30[c]	1.01	6.30[d]	.97	79.26 (41) $p < .001$	.98	.03	.07 (.05, .10)

Note. Means with different subscripts are significantly different ($p < .001$) within columns.

Table 4 Latent Means and Estimated Marginal Means for AEL by Situation, Study 2

| | SEM Analysis | | | Estimated Marginal Means | | | |
| | | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval | |
Situation	Latent Mean Difference	Z	p	M	SE	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low Activity–Low Empathy	—	—	—	4.58[a]	.14	4.30	4.86
Low Activity–High Empathy	.83	5.14	< .001	5.10[b]	.12	4.86	5.34
High Activity–Low Empathy	.83	5.62	< .001	5.08[b]	.12	4.85	5.31
High Activity–High Empathy	1.83	12.02	< .001	5.96[c]	.08	5.81	6.11

Note. Estimated marginal means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .01$.

the highest score; the two hybrid situations fell between these two extremes and did not differ significantly.

The results for each subscale were consistent with the pattern found for the total scale with one exception, namely there was a significant difference ($p < .001$) between the low activity–high empathy and high activity–low empathy situations for the processing subscale. For this comparison, individuals reported slightly less active-empathic processing for the low activity–high empathy condition ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.50$) than the high activity–low empathy condition ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.27$). In other words, while individuals seemed to indicate they would sense and respond with equal amounts of active empathy in these conditions, something about the situations caused a difference in active-empathic processing.

To meet the second goal of this study, whether trait-level AEL predicted patterns of response across the situations, a profile analysis was performed on AELS scores. The grouping variable was trait AEL. High trait AEL ($n = 22$, 14.1%) was defined as a trait AEL score one or more standard deviations above the mean, and low trait AEL ($n = 15$, 9.6%) was defined as a trait AEL score one or more SDs below the mean. After deleting one case with missing data, assumptions regarding normality of sampling distributions, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, linearity, and multicollinearity were met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

SPSS was used to analyze two effects of primary importance. First, a parallelism test was computed that ascertains the degree to which high and low trait AEL lead to different patterns of situational AEL scores. Second, a levels test was computed to ascertain the degree to which the high and low trait AEL groups reported different situational scores, combined across situations.[2] At the multivariate level, using Wilks's criterion, the profile plots did not deviate significantly from parallelism, $F (3, 33) = 1.24$, $p = .31$; however, the linear contrast for this effect, $F (1, 35) = 2.88$, $p = .09$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, $\eta^2 = .04$, approached the traditional level of significance suggesting the profile plots were not equivalent.[3] As seen in Figure 1, high trait AEL individuals appear to be distinguishing more sharply between the low activity–low empathy and high activity–high empathy conditions. A simple effects analysis
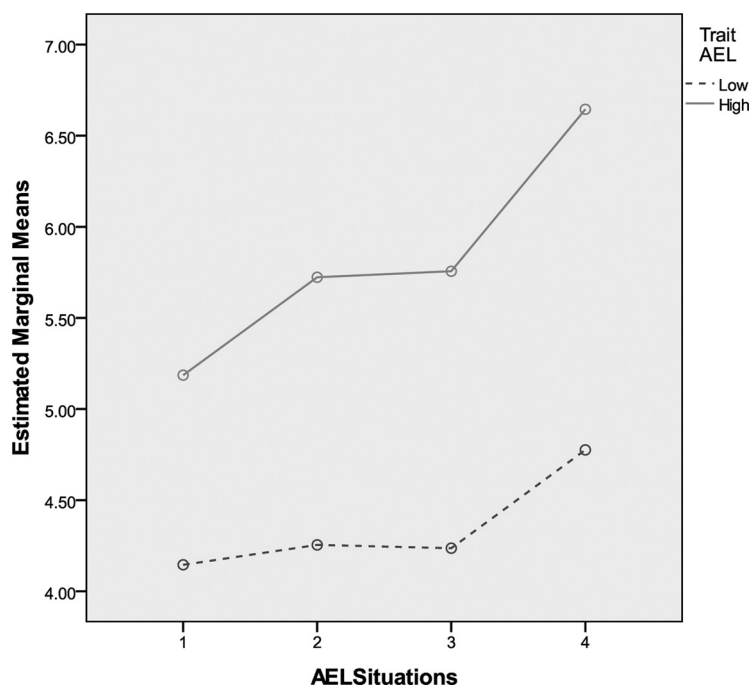
Figure 1   Profiles of Situational AEL Scores for High and Low Trait AEL Groups, Study 2.

confirmed that suspicion, showing that the mean difference between these two conditions was 1.78 times greater for high AEL individuals, $F(1, 21) = 18.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .32$, than low AEL individuals, $F(1, 14) = 9.29$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$.

The levels test showed that, on average, high trait AEL individuals ($M = 5.83$, $SE = .18$) reported higher levels of situational AEL than low trait AEL individuals ($M = 4.36$, $SE = .22$), $F(1, 35) = 27.60$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .44$, $\eta^2 = .44$; regardless of the situation high trait AEL individuals appear to report higher levels of situational AEL than those low in trait AEL (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Results from Study 2 seem to suggest that AEL is tied not only to the goals of an individual listener but also to the contextual characteristics of the listening situation. Such a conceptualization of AEL makes it highly consistent with other listening and information processing dispositions that are expressed differentially based on other factors such as the judgment task and situational constraints (Bodie, 2010). That is, individuals are predisposed to think about elements of their social environments in specific ways and to prefer certain ways of processing social information; however, these predispositions are not "expressed uniformly, regardless of other factors . . . both endogenous predilections (cognitive styles) and situational influences on thinking" are important influences on how people make judgments and decisions (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2003, p. 286).

The only curious result was that AEL processing scores were higher on average after reading the high activity–low empathy vignette than after reading the low activity–high empathy vignette. Perhaps, the low-high scenario is representative of some class of situations that do not require extensive active-empathic processing of information but, instead, active-empathic sensing and responding are sufficient to meet relevant conversational goals. For example, when listening to a close friend's common rant about his or her relational partner, a listener may recognize that friend's desire to merely have an active presence of support. In this case, there is little need to summarize points of agreement and disagreement (i.e., to "process"). In fact, this would be undesirable for the speaker because she likely does not want to engage in a drawn out conflict resolution conversation; she may just merely want to feel like her emotions are being recognized. Since, however, these two vignettes differed in ways other than their potential for activity and empathy this speculation is offered tentatively. For instance, the low-high situation involved listening to a close friend, while the high-low situation involved listening to a relational partner. Perhaps various relational dynamics between the listener and the speaker contribute to one's motivation and/or ability to engage in AEL. Indeed, the hypothetical situations presented in this study differ on a number of levels, and Study 3 was designed to glean added insight into whether some of these variables might help predict whether an individual will employ AEL.

Study 3

The purpose of Study 3 was to explore potential characteristics that can discriminate between active-empathic (AE) and inactive-nonempathic (IN) listening situations. The primary question we sought to answer with these data was what are the principal elements of a situation that may contribute to engaging in or refraining from AEL?

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students ($N = 366$; 131 male, 229 female, 6 did not report sex) who reported an average age of 20.07 ($SD = 2.09$), were primarily Caucasian ($n = 283$), and who were enrolled in Communication Studies courses at Louisiana State University completed materials for Study 3 in partial fulfillment for a course research requirement. Constraints disallowed participants in Studies 1 and 2 from participating in Study 3. After providing informed consent, participants first responded to a variety of individual difference measures including the AELS and then were presented, in a random order, a description of active-empathic listening and a description of inactive-nonempathic listening; after each description participants wrote an account of a time they had employed that type of listening then answered a variety of questions about those specific conversations.

Trait AEL

Trait AEL was measured using the same scale reported in Studies 1 and 2. For these data, the measurement model was adequate, $\chi^2 (41) = 118.45$, $p < .001$, CFI $= .95$,

SRMR = .046, RMSEA = .072 (.057, .087); no standardized residual covariances were above 2.58 in absolute value, no error terms were correlated to achieve model fit, and standardized item regression weights were all above .50 ($M = .68$).

Situations

Instructions informed participants that descriptions of two types of listening ''that you may have employed in the past'' would be presented. They were asked to read each situation and think about their employment of that type of listening. The situation descriptions were generated based on items from the AELS (see Table 5). After reading

Table 5   Situation Descriptions, Study 3

Active-Empathic Situation Description Word Count = 163	Inactive-Nonempathic Situation Description Word Count = 174
One type of listening that some people engage in is called active/empathic listening. In general, this type of listening can be described as an active approach to listening where the listener attempts to understand another's point of view. Some people have reported using this type of listening when the subject matter is important, when they are listening to a distressed other, or when they are fully committed to the interaction.	One type of listening that some people employ is called ''inactive/nonempathic listening.'' In general, this type of listening can be described as a rather passive approach to listening where the listener does not really attempt to understand another's point of view. Some people have reported using this type of listening when the subject matter is not important, when they are listening to a story they have heard before, or when they are thinking about other things.
This type of listening is generally marked by sensitivity to what others are not saying; listening for more than the spoken words but also being fully aware of what the speaker is implying and being receptive to his or her ideas. As such, the active/empathic listener generally: - understands how the other feels - keeps track of points others make summarizes areas of agreement/disagreement - remembers what others say	This type of listening is generally marked by a lack of sensitivity to what others are not saying; listening only for the spoken words, not being fully aware of what the speaker is implying, and not being receptive to their ideas. As such, the inactive/nonempathic listener has trouble: - understanding how the other feels - keeping track of points others make summarizing areas of agreement/disagreement - remembering what others say
Finally, the active/empathic listener tends to show many signs of understanding like using verbal acknowledgements, asking questions, and engaging in animated body language.	Finally, the inactive/nonempathic listener tends to show few signs of understanding like using few verbal acknowledgements, asking few questions, and not engaging in much animated body language.

the situation, participants were asked if they had engaged in this type of listening in the past week; 86.1% could recall an active-empathic (AE) situation in the past week, whereas 72.7% could recall an inactive-nonempathic (IN) situation. The ability to recall an AE situation was not dependent on trait AEL, $t(358) = 1.75$, $p = .08$. Although individuals with higher trait AEL were statistically less likely to recall an IN situation, $t(360) = 2.13$, $p = .03$, the effect size, $r^2 = .01$, was hardly large enough to conclude this was practically significant. As a general manipulation check, participants were asked, "Thinking of that conversation, how aware, interested, sensitive, and involved were you?" with the response to this item measured from 0 to 100. As expected, participant scores on this variable were higher in the AE ($M = 84.29$, $SD = 15.81$) than in the IN ($M = 37.45$, $SD = 24.89$) situation, $t(347) = 29.30$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = .71$.

For each description, participants were then asked to choose a specific interaction that occurred in the past 30 days and to describe the interaction in as much detail as possible. Then, a set of questions were asked to ascertain general characteristics of the recalled situations (see Table 6). After describing general characteristics of the situation, a series of 71 statements were included to measure 16 situational components likely to help discriminate between the two situations. Thirty-nine of the statements were drawn from Daly et al. (1988), and 32 were written for this study. As a general data reduction technique, all items were submitted initially to two separate principle components analyses with orthogonal (Varimax) rotation (Johnson & Wichern, 2002). The solution for the AE situation suggested 19 components that explained 68.68% of the item variance, whereas the solution for the IN situation suggested 16 components that explained 65.93% of the item variance. To identify problematic items, each rotated component matrix was analyzed separately for items with a primary loading no less than .50 and secondary loadings no greater than .30. The 34 items that were similar were retained, suggesting nine shared components. To ensure equivalent measurement models of the nine components for each situation, two separate confirmatory models were fit, one each for the AE and IN situations. Model fit statistics and modification indices suggested the removal of seven additional items with low factor loadings ($\lambda < .50$). The resulting nine-factor, 27-item model (see Table 7) fit both the AE, $\chi^2(263) = 486.442$, $p < .001$, CFI = .94, SRMR = .053, RMSEA = .048 (.041, .055), and IN, $\chi^2(263) = 593.855$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, SRMR = .059, RMSEA = .059 (.052, .065), situations in an equivalent manner, $\chi^2(526) = 1080.30$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, SRMR = .053, RMSEA = .038 (.035, .041). This model exhibited *weak* (ΔCFI < .01) but not *strong measurement invariance* (ΔCFI = .03); in other words, the scale worked equally well regardless of the situation but, as would be expected, the latent means for the factors were different across those situations (see below for results pertinent to this interpretation).

Results and Discussion

As seen in Table 6, regardless of the situation participants were most likely to imagine face-to-face conversations with one other person that occurred within the last week. Compared to the IN situation, participants indicated their AE situation was more

Table 6 Characteristics of the Active-Empathic and Inactive-Nonempathic Listening Situations, Study 3

Question	Active-Empathic	Inactive-Nonempathic
How long ago did this conversation occur?	$M = 7.73$ days, $Mode = 1$ day $SD = 7.51$	$M = 6.48$ days, $Mode = 1$ day $SD = 6.54$
In which context does your interaction primarily fall?	Professional (Job/Work Related): 6.1% School: 6.9% Family: 14.4% Friends: 55.7% Romantic Partner: 15.8%	Professional (Job/Work Related): 10.1% School: 18.5% Family: 21.1% Friends: 41.3% Romantic Partner: 9.0%
How would you describe the conversation according to the following categories?[a]	Work/school related: 23.5% Personal issues: 79.5% Superficial conversation: 3.0% Ordinary conversation: 14.2% Conflict or argument: 18.9% Getting information (e.g., directions): 9.6%	Work/school related: 27.3% Personal issues: 40.2% Superficial conversation: 13.9% Ordinary conversation: 35.5% Conflict or argument: 16.1% Getting information (e.g., directions): 11.2%
Including yourself, how many people were in this interaction?	$M = 4.96$, $Mode = 2$ (72.6%) $SD = 28.99$	$M = 9.56$, $Mode = 2$ (64.9%) $SD = 35.81$
Did this interaction occur:	Face to Face: 78.6% Over the Phone: 17.3% Over E-mail: 0% Over IM: 1.4% Over Text Messaging: 1.4% Over Facebook: 0.8% Over Skype: 0.6%	Face to Face: 80.7% Over the Phone: 15.5% Over E-mail: 0.3% Over IM: 0.3% Over Text Messaging: 2.0% Over Facebook: 0.9% Over Skype: 0.3%
Approximately how long was this interaction?	Less than 5 minutes: 3.9% 6–30 minutes: 56% 31–60 minutes: 17.8% Over an hour: 22.3%	Less than 5 minutes: 23.7% 6–30 minutes: 53.7% 31–60 minutes: 12.4% Over an hour: 10.2%

[a]Participants could check multiple boxes for these questions. Percentage represents the percentage of participants that did check a given box.

Table 7 Situational Variables and Scale Items Retained with Estimates of Internal Consistency, Study 3

		Cronbach's Alpha	
Scale Name	Scale Items	AE	IN
Likability of Interlocutor		.80	.85
	I didn't like the other person(s).*		
	The others involved in the conversation were people I really cared for.		
	I liked the people in the conversation.		
	I did not trust the other person(s).*		
Empathic Potential		.84	.77
	In the conversation the other person was very expressive about their emotions.		
	In the conversation I recognized that the other person wanted me to understand their feelings.		
	The topic we discussed was one I knew was going to have to put myself in their shoes.		
	In this conversation it was important to consider the other person's feelings.		
Tension		.76	.81
	The conversation was more tense than most.		
	The conversation was calm.*		
	The conversation was a friendly one.*		
	There was a good deal of conflict in the conversation.		
Recall Potential		.83	.85
	I knew that after the conversation I would need to be able to recall what was said.		
	It was important that I remember information from this conversation for use in the future.		
	At the end of the conversation I knew I would be responsible for knowing what was said.		
Purpose		.84	.89
	In the conversation I had a special purpose or goal that I was trying to accomplish.		
	I entered the conversation with a purpose in mind.		
Attractiveness of Interlocutor		.96	.96
	The person(s) to whom I was talking was physically attractive.		
	The person(s) to whom I was talking was good-looking.		

Table 7 Continued

Scale Name	Scale Items	Cronbach's Alpha	
		AE	IN
Expectations		.73	.74
	I knew, before the conversation, what the other(s) believed and felt about the topics we discussed.		
	Even before the conversation started, I knew what was expected: what I should say and what the other would say.		
	The course of the conversation (i.e., the way it went) was very predictable.		
Familiarity		.72	.79
	The topic we discussed was unfamiliar to me before the conversation.*		
	The topic of the conversation was one I knew little about.*		
Mood		.70	.67
	I felt tired and run-down before the conversation began.*		
	I was feeling up (in a good mood) before the conversation began.		

likely to involve friends (55.7% vs. 41.3%) or romantic partners (15.8% vs. 9.0%) and deal with personal issues (79.5% vs. 40.2%). On average there were fewer conversationalists involved in AE ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 28.99$) than IN ($M = 9.56$, $SD = 35.81$) conversations, but the mode for both situations was 2. Because the mean number of conversational participants was largely influenced by a few outliers in the IN situation (e.g., one respondent imagined a $200 +$ person lecture hall), perhaps only a few individuals are likely to think of situations involving more individuals when thinking of IN listening. Finally, in both the IN and AE situations, the majority of the conversations lasted between 6 and 30 minutes (53.7% and 56% respectively). However, 22.3% of the conversations in the AE situation were longer than an hour compared to 10.2% in the IN situation. Therefore, time may be a factor that contributes to activity and empathy in listening, though the causal nature of this relationship cannot be ascertained from these data.

To get a general picture of factors influencing active-empathic listening, we fit the nine-factor measurement model discussed above and constrained item intercepts to equality. That model was, as expected, a significant decrement in fit to the model depicting scalar invariance, $\chi^2(569) = 1776.696$, $p < .001$, CFI $= .85$, SRMR $= .093$, RMSEA $= .054$ (.051, .057); thus, the models were not invariant at the level of item intercepts. To estimate latent mean scores and examine their differences, the latent

Table 8 Latent Mean Differences for the Nine Situational Variables, Study 3

Factor	Estimate	S.E.	Z	p
Empathic Potential	−1.22	.08	−16.05	<.001
Purpose	−.87	.08	−10.80	<.001
Recall	−.85	.07	−11.97	<.001
Mood	−.54	.07	−8.24	<.001
Attraction	−.51	.09	−5.86	<.001
Likeability	−.45	.06	−7.53	<.001
Expectation	.33	.06	5.31	<.001
Tension	−.25	.07	−3.58	<.001
Familiarity	−.06	.08	−.75	.452

means for the factors in the active situation were set to zero, and the means in the inactive situation were estimated against the active baseline (Byrne, 2010). Positive differences displayed in Table 8 are interpreted as the inactive condition having a higher latent mean score on a given factor, whereas negative differences are interpreted as the inactive condition having a lower latent mean score when compared to the active condition. Based on these differences, AEL seems more likely to happen when conversations invoke empathic potential, necessitate remembering details, violate expectations, entail conflict or tension, and involve a liked and attractive interlocutor. In addition, listeners who have a purpose coming into the conversation as well as who are in a good mood are more likely to engage in AEL. Finally, the familiarity of the topic does not seem to impact AEL.

In an additional model, trait AEL was modeled to predict responses to the situational variables for each situation separately. Neither model fit (CFIs < .85, RMSEAs > .08), and paths representing the relationship between trait AEL and the situational variables were all nonsignificant ($ps > .10$).

General Discussion

When developing self-report assessments of communication attitudes, behaviors, and predispositions, scholars make various theoretical commitments that should be evaluated empirically in order to ascertain whether others should embrace them (Levine, 2005). One of the more central commitments is the relative stability of a construct and its operationalization. This article reports three studies that investigated the relative stability of a scale assessing the construct of active-empathic listening (Bodie, 2011a; Drollinger et al., 2006) and, as we discuss below, these studies hold great promise for further development of AEL as a state and trait variable. Our discussion first focuses on several findings of particular importance then moves to a broader discussion about the relative place of listening within extant scholarship and how this report can be seen as an effort to bring more empirical sophistication to contextually based listening research more generally.

Study Findings

The first primary finding was revealed in Study 1, which found a statistically sound model for the AEL scale with no decline in fit over time. As a result, it appears that the AEL scale, sans context, measures an individual predisposition. This was certainly the assumption implied in past research using the scale; our first study provides empirical justification for that assumption. In addition, differences in the utilization of AEL appear to be a function of the nature of the conversational setting, possibly more so than trait level scores. This general finding is certainly in line with other views of trait-based competencies being simultaneously the product of typical behavior and contingent on elements of the interactional setting (Daly, 2002; Spitzberg, 2003; Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2003). In particular, Study 2 found that general levels of presumed activity and empathy yielded higher scores on the AEL scale adding to past research reporting correlations between the AEL subscales and conceptually similar measures of conversational activity and empathy (Bodie, 2011a).

Results presented in Table 3 also provided evidence that activity and empathy are not mutually exclusive concepts. Owing to the potential conflation of activity and empathy in the context of listening, the measurement models were a significantly better fit to the data in the low/low and high/high conditions than the conditions that represented a mix between low and high variants of either activity or empathy. In addition, participants were less likely to distinguish between the two hybrid conditions particularly with respect to their sensing and responding behaviors. These results are in line with others who have remarked on the theoretical conjoining of activity and empathy in listening (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011; Shotter, 2009; Stewart, 1983; Thomas & Levine, 1994; Weaver & Kirtley, 1995); certainly future theorizing should continue to investigate whether these two aspects of listening are indistinguishable. Additionally, Study 3 identified several general characteristics of situations such as empathic potential, need for remembering details, and having a conversational purpose that help distinguish between descriptions of active-empathic and inactive-nonempathic conversations.

It is equally important to note that in Study 2 high-trait AEL individuals reported higher levels of situational AEL irrespective of the putative situation. This seems to imply that individuals who report having high levels of AEL might listen in active and empathic ways in most situations, from listening to the bereaved to listening to directions. While this may be a positive attribute, it is possible that employing high levels of AEL may not always be advantageous. Perhaps, for instance, individuals who are highly active and empathic while listening may be less able to regulate their own emotional displays thus reducing their effectiveness in conversations that are emotionally heavy (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). Likewise, some situations do not necessitate AEL and, thus, people who are more prone to enact this skill may waste valuable cognitive resources when less systematic forms of sensing, processing, and responding can reach similar goals (see Burleson, 2011).

Of course, these data paint ''situation'' in very broad strokes necessitating future research that explores more nuanced ways to conceptualize ''situation'' (Cody & McLaughlin, 1985). It is highly likely that activity and empathy take on different

meanings in various types of situations and, thus, result in different ways to sense, process, and respond. For instance, ability to actively attend to relational messages when engaged in a supportive interaction versus a conflict with a relational partner may be similar in many ways but also may be nuanced abilities (Edwards, 2011; Jones, 2011; Pasupathi et al., 1999). At present, it appears that some people are more likely to be actively engaged and empathically involved with others during conversations, though exactly how this plays out across a range of important contexts is unclear.

Trait AEL might, however, also be described as an ability to make sharper distinctions about the amount of activity and/or empathy needed to reach relevant conversational goals. Study 2 found, for instance, that those high in trait AEL had greater difference in AEL scores between the low-low and high-high situations. Consequently, it is plausible that high trait AELs can more easily recognize when there is a need to employ AEL. It seems that low trait AEL individuals may not recognize differences as sharply resulting in less AEL in situations that may require it. As plausible as this may be, our data provide some contrary evidence to this position. In particular, results from Study 3 show that models containing trait AEL as a predictor for the various situational factors were not found to be well-fitting for either the AE or IN situation perhaps suggesting that trait AEL does not help a person to discriminate more sharply among situational features. Rather, as is demonstrated in Study 2, those with higher levels of trait AEL are more likely to report higher levels of activity and empathy in situations regardless of the need. These two possibilities for the role trait AEL plays when listeners are engaged in conversation should be the focus of future theorizing and scrutiny as well as unraveling the inherent connection between activity and empathy while listening. In addition, future research should continue to support how this trait-like individual difference is manifest in people of different personality and cognitive types (see Bodie, 2010; Villaume & Bodie, 2007; Worthington, 2003, 2008, for research with similar goals but using distinct measures of listening).

Limitations and Conclusion

Of course, no study is without its limitations. First, although we do not agree with all of his conclusions, Sears (1986) noted the possibility of bias in using college student samples and noted that claims to external validity are problematic when using college student samples (cf. Shapiro, 2002). Another potential limitation inherently present in all self-report measures is a social desirability bias, meaning individuals completing the AEL scale, despite reassurances of anonymity, still strive to present themselves as good listeners (Ford et al., 2000; Lawson & Winkelman, 2003). If scales such as the AELS do not accurately reflect what people actually do when listening, their practical utility is questionable. Thus, future research should explore the construct validity of the AEL scale, along with other self-report measures of listening ability, using methods such as Campbell and Fiske's (1959) multitrait-multimethod approach. Finally, with the use of retrospective data in Study 3 there exists the potential for recall inaccuracies or biases. Experimental research aimed at replicating these results is

desirable. Common limitations notwithstanding, this article extends the conceptualization and operationalization of active-empathic listening thus contributing to the extant literature by providing a consistent way to operationalize an otherwise rather nebulous concept.

Notes

[1] We use the term temporal stability instead of test-retest reliability because we are primarily interested in the consistency of scores across time. As stated by DeVellis (2003), "[Referring] to invariance in scores overtime as *temporal stability* is preferable because it does not suggest, as does test-retest reliability, that measurement error is the source of any instability we observe" (p. 44, emphasis in original).

[2] Profile analysis can also test for flatness of profiles which, in our study, ascertains whether situational AEL scores differ across situations. The profile analysis returned results statistically and substantively identical to those obtained by the SEM analysis.

[3] The multivariate effect combines the linear, quadratic, and cubic effects similar to a standard ANOVA. Thus, inspection of the linear trend irrespective of an overall multivariate effect is analogous to testing specific contrasts of interest as outlined in several notable publications (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). This approach is preferable for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it is more powerful than the omnibus approach. Given the low sample size for this analysis, we feel confident in interpreting a *p*-value below .10, though we are in no way engaging in "wishful thinking" (O'Keefe, 2007).

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Appendix

Situations assessed in the pilot study and used for Study 2

Low Activity, Low Empathy

A close friend of yours comes to you with a problem regarding the person he or she is dating. This is the same issue that you have heard a dozen times before from this same friend. Indeed, it is like a broken record. You think to yourself that you don't want to hear this discussion anymore. At this point, you don't really care about your friend's feelings but think that you need to at least indulge him/her with your presence.

Low Activity, High Empathy

A close friend of yours comes by your house and is upset about getting into another fight with his or her partner. This is the fourth fight about the same topic he/she has been in this week. Your friend is having a terrible time and wants to know that you understand. You know that the anger will subside once your friend is able to get things off his/her chest. He or she just needs to vent for a while and wants you to sit there quietly and let him/her do that.

High Activity, Low Empathy

You and the person you are currently dating are planning to visit his or her parents over the weekend. Your partner plans to go on Thursday since it has been a while since he or she has been home. You can't go until Friday so you are going to drive separately. Your relational partner is giving you the directions to the house, which seems tricky since you've never been there.

High Activity, High Empathy

You are at home one evening when a long-time friend calls. This friend was just dumped by a long-time dating partner whom he or she thought was "the one." Your friend begins to explain the situation, which you are not very familiar with. At times, your fiend becomes quite emotional and wants to know that you understand.