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### The Understudied Nature of Listening in Interpersonal Communication: Introduction to a Special Issue

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# The Understudied Nature of Listening in Interpersonal Communication: Introduction to a Special Issue

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Although listening is highlighted as an essential component of success in interpersonal communication, this essay argues that interpersonal communication scholars have systematically ignored theorizing about listening. Out of this conundrum comes this special issue, which begins the process of taking listening seriously and theorizing about its nature within the larger corpus of interpersonal communication research.

Scholars have been studying listening from a variety of theoretical perspectives for decades (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). From this work, research has discovered several skills that lead to success in listening (Brownell, 2010) and, in turn, the overwhelmingly positive outcomes that stem from listening-related competence (Wolvin & Coakley, 1994). For instance, research shows that competence in listening leads to more productive interactions, greater relational satisfaction, heightened academic and work success, and better healthcare provision (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010). Even with such a rich academic heritage, there are at least three critiques of this body of literature important for our discussion.

First, much of what we know about listening is derived from research primarily concerned with how students comprehend orally based lecture material. Lists of listening skills found in interpersonal communication (e.g., DeVito, 2006) and basic course texts (e.g., Seiler & Beall, 2005) are typically exact replications of

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the “Nichols 10,” a list primarily compiled from research on how students attend to lecture material (see Nichols, 1948). If our assumptions about how listening works and the skills involved in “good” listening are based primarily on models of information acquisition (Bostrom, 1990), we likely do not fully understand (a) how listening actually operates in more interpersonally oriented contexts or (b) the skills that such listening entails (see Halone & Pecchioni, 2001). Although retaining information is often a goal of listeners, listening comprehension does not provide an inclusive framework for the study of listening in all its many varieties; this is especially true when considering how people interact in ongoing conversation (see Bavelas & Gerwing, *in press*).

Second, and perhaps not surprising given the focus on skills, the lion’s share of listening research conducted in the past 20 years is atheoretical (Wolvin, Halone, & Coakley, 1999). Certainly not all listening research is conducted devoid of theory (Wolvin, 2010). Examples of published listening scholarship taking seriously the role of theory include the work of Bostrom and his colleagues (e.g., Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980) on the development and attempted validation of a measure of listening comprehension; Fitch-Hauser’s (1984, 1990) research on the role of schema-based processing in story comprehension; Bavelas and colleagues’ (Bavelas & Gerwing, *in press*) conceptualization of the listener as addressee in face-to-face dialogue; and the recent development by Janusik (2005, 2007) of a measure of conversational listening span. These exceptions notwithstanding, however, much published listening research is variable analytic and lacks a clear theoretical focus (Bodie, 2009). Although variable analytic research has its merits (e.g., informing theory, establishing empirical relationships), our knowledge about listening becomes limited and incoherent when there is a consistent lack of interest in developing and testing listening theory.

Third, and perhaps most important for this special issue, in many areas of interpersonal communication scholars largely ignore listening as a central and important component in their research. Indeed, listening is not “mainstream” interpersonal communication research. This is quite surprising given that much of the research in interpersonal communication at least implicitly recognizes listening as an important concept. Theories of supportive communication, for instance, propose that high quality support is “listener-centered” (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982); the assumption is that the helper is able to listen well in the supportive encounter so as to produce a sophisticated and beneficial supportive message (Burlleson, 1994).<sup>1</sup> When producing a supportive message is not appropriate (e.g., when

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<sup>1</sup>Quality comforting messages also exhibit other characteristics such as being evaluatively neutral, feeling centered, more accepting of the distressed other, and containing cognitively-oriented explanations of the feelings being experienced (Burlleson, 1994). I do not suggest here that listener-centered is the only characteristic of sophisticated comforting messages, but I do argue that this aspect of comforting messages is often overlooked in favor of evaluating the verbal production of messages as opposed to investigating how “listening” is involved in comforting.

a supportive message, regardless of content, is likely to be seen as unhelpful), scholars assert that “it will be more beneficial . . . to concentrate on listening” (MacGeorge, Feng, & Thompson, 2008). Unfortunately, how to listen well is left up to the faculties of the individual support provider as opposed to being a concern of empirical scrutiny. Since support attempts that fail are rather commonplace (Lehman & Hemphill, 1990), leaving the specifics of supportive listening up to the provider does not seem to be the most profitable strategy.

So as not to single out those who study social support, there is not a single theory of interpersonal communication that directly addresses listening or places it as a central aspect of study. Instead, our field has assumed instead of problematized the concept of listening. In turn, we have capitulated to other fields at least the following: the study of cognitive mechanisms responsible for appropriate conversational interaction from the perspective of the listener (Wyer & Adaval, 2003); the role of attentiveness and involvement when couples work through personal and relational problems (Pasupathi, Carstensen, Levenson, & Gottman, 1999); the nature and correlates of active listening (Hutchby, 2005); the behaviors and attributes that lead individuals to form impression of others as good (or bad) listeners (for review see Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2010); the relative importance of listening to successful interpersonal selling (Castleberry & Shepherd, 1993) and satisfying superior-subordinate relationships (Baird & Kram, 1983).

Examples of assuming the importance of listening abound in our discipline.<sup>2</sup> Although as early as the 1930s, teachers and scholars of human communication argued that our field should take seriously the importance of listening (Adams, 1938; Borden, 1935), the movement to earnestly consider listening as an important concept in interpersonal communication research seems to have barely gotten beyond its grass roots (Berger, 1989, 1998). Evidence that interpersonal communication scholars have failed to take listening seriously is found most readily in the recent entry for Interpersonal Communication within the *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Berger, 2008). In his review, Berger highlights six areas of study, and not a single area concerns listening.<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, the *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (Knapp & Daly, 2002) lacks a sustained focus on listening and related concepts (e.g., message reception and processing).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>This point was highlighted first by Sam Duker (1963), who claimed that “all studies having to do with communication have some bearing, directly or indirectly, on the subject of listening” but that most of these same studies fail to acknowledge this fact (p. 106).

<sup>3</sup>The six areas Berger highlights are uncertainty, interpersonal adaptation, message production, relationship development, deceptive communication, and mediated social interaction.

<sup>4</sup>Berger’s (2002) chapter on social knowledge comes closest to addressing this concern but is far from an exposition of the mechanisms underlying interpersonal listening.

Additional evidence comes from reading Roloff and Berger's (1982) *Social Cognition and Communication*. Although this publication provided a meta-theoretical frame around which a viable study of listening in interpersonal communication could have been sustained, none of the chapters directly addressed listening or message reception as it occurs in conversation. King (2008) recently argued that research and theorizing in social cognition could "provide the conceptual depth lacking in the field of listening, and [for listening to] provide the real-world contexts sorely needed in social cognition research" (p. 2720). Unfortunately, the recent update of issues surrounding communication and social cognition (D. R. Roskos-Ewoldsen & Monahan, 2007) does little to show these connections. While strides have been made on connecting basic cognitive processes and comprehension of media (B. Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Yang, & Lee, 2007), relationship formation and maintenance (Solomon & Theiss, 2007), and message production (Greene, 1997), for instance, a sustained effort to connect social cognition to listening has not yet been undertaken in interpersonal scholarship.

Regardless of its largely peripheral role in mainstream interpersonal communication scholarship, listening should be afforded more serious attention. Listening is intimately related to our core concern as interpersonal communication scholars: how communication creates and helps maintain, transform, and dissolve relationships. Our undergraduate texts seem to recognize this; however, as King (2008) recently noted, "many listening texts continue to be more practical than theoretical: oriented toward improved relationships, improved message comprehension, and improved retention of information" (p. 2719).

If interpersonal communication scholars are going to include listening as a key term in theories of interaction, then we should have a more thorough and theoretical understanding of the term. Yet how is listening to be analyzed? This special issue is devoted to answering this question from the vantage point of several theoretical perspectives. As the articles contained in this issue demonstrate, there are examples of research within interpersonal communication that can be used to inform listening theory and practice.<sup>5</sup> In particular, each article addresses listening as a theoretical term allowing listening to derive its meaning "from the part it plays in the whole theory in which it is embedded, and from the role of theory itself" (Kaplan, 1963, p. 56). Viewing listening as a theoretical term operates

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<sup>5</sup>Other examples include research investigating the processes through which individuals make attributions about another's behavior in ongoing conversations (e.g., Berger, 1975; Burleson, 1986), how people remember elements of conversations (Stafford, Burggraf, & Sharkey, 1987; Stafford & Daly, 1984), and messages likely to be memorable (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). Space limitations precluded a thorough treatment of all the relevant theoretical perspectives that can be used to locate listening as a theoretical term, and others are encouraged to generate additional ideas that align with the theme of this issue.

to “analyze its meaning and role within a [particular] theory . . . [with] theory [as] the starting point, not the destination” (Wilson & Sabee, 2003, p. 7). That is, theory construction is a means to a larger (and more practical) end of answering important questions and gaining insight into a phenomenon with otherwise narrow meaning (Bodie, 2010).

In the first essay that follows, Bostrom takes seriously the need to rethink listening as a theoretical term. After providing an historical overview of the skill-centric nature of listening research, he offers insights into how a more complete understanding of listening can be accomplished by “integrating interpretive, relational, and behavioral aspects of communication” (p. 23).

The next two essays (Burleson and Edwards) attempt to answer this call for more sophisticated treatments of listening by sketching broad theoretical frameworks appropriate for the study of listening in a variety of interpersonal contexts. Both Burleson and Edwards take seriously the need for strong theory to help contextualize listening and begin to study the relationship between listening and its varied outcomes.

Taking a constructivist approach to listening, Burleson defines listening as “the activity of interpreting the communicative behavior of others in the effort to understand the meaning of that behavior” (p. 28). In addition, Burleson draws from dual-process theories of human cognition to propose at least two levels at which listening skills can rest, a basic level likely appropriate in most everyday listening encounters and a more advanced level that calls upon both motivation and higher order abilities to accomplish.

Edwards draws on her work with message interpretation, or the “notion that communicators must make sense of messages by choosing from the available meanings” (p. 47), to suggest that listening is more than comprehension. As she points out, some of the most interesting outcomes of an interaction are likely not the degree to which a listener can recall the specific words of an interlocutor but rather the degree to which that listener takes away one or more interpretations of those words based on a variety of antecedent conditions. Even though the majority of work on message interpretation has employed pencil-and-paper methods, Edwards outlines how core findings may advance new programs of research in listening.

Taken together, the Burleson and Edwards essays highlight the complexity inherent in conversationally oriented listening and forward interesting avenues for basic and applied research in this area.

The next two essays focus on the role of listening within specific contexts. Using second generation action assembly theory, Greene and Herbers propose the notion of transcendence as a “special case of the more general category, ‘listening phenomena,’ where transcendence might be thought of as ‘listening in the extreme’” (p. 67). This work suggests we think of listening primarily as a relational activity, one that contributes to interlocutors’ feeling “a sense of discovery,

creation, and a feeling of connection . . . that could only be achieved via interaction with another” (p. 67). Such an analysis certainly extends the study and theorizing of listening beyond the traditional framework of information processing, attention, and memory. Moreover, it generates theoretical propositions that speak to otherwise taken-for-granted notions about listening and interpersonal communication. For instance, embedded in their discussion of “characteristics of the other” is the commonly held notion that interlocutors who express “attention, understanding, appreciation, and so on” are more likely to foster feelings of transcendence. To date, most of the research testing such a claim comes from the client-patient relationships within the context of therapy. The degree to which “active listening” is something that aids relationships other than the patient-therapist relationship is still not widely documented empirically (Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010).

Jones also conceives of listening as a relationally oriented activity but does so in the context of supportive interactions. Perhaps more than any area of interpersonal communication, the study of social support lends itself to considerations about listening. Unfortunately, most of the practical recommendations focused on making support providers better listeners come from contexts outside of everyday interaction. Thus, Jones provides important insights into a surprisingly neglected area of study, one that spans domains of interest in the field of communication. In addition, Jones offers an interaction adaptation model of supportive listening that highlights the need to study both social support and listening as a supportive response as “*interdependent processes that unfold over time*” (p. 92).

In addition to their individual contributions, these essays speak to larger issues as a group. For instance, each speaks to notions of interpersonal needs and the degree to which listening may operate to satisfy those needs. Likewise, Greene and Herbers as well as Jones prompt scholars to take seriously the dyadic and interdependent nature of communicative interaction. Collectively, these essays situate listening as a core concept of interest and formulate interesting and heuristic avenues for discipline specific and interdisciplinary research.

This special issue ends with insights offered by Charles R. Berger who provides an assessment and critique regarding the state of theorizing about listening and whether we are now any closer to taking it seriously as an area of interpersonal communication inquiry. In particular, Berger questions our fundamentally bipolar thinking about listening-speaking and whether taking a more holistic approach might be necessary especially in light of current neurophysiological findings. Perhaps more than any other scholar of interpersonal communication, Berger has continued to sound the proverbial trumpet alerting others of the need to study listening, its constituent parts, and its potential outcomes. Hopefully this time someone is listening.



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