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The Role of “Active Listening” in Informal Helping Conversations: Impact on Perceptions of Listener Helpfulness, Sensitivity, and Supportiveness and Discloser Emotional Improvement

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Undergraduate students were randomly assigned to disclose a recent upsetting problem to either a trained active listener (n = 41) or an untrained listener (n = 130). Active listeners were trained to ask open questions, paraphrase content, reflect feelings, and use assumption checking as well as be nonverbally immediate. Verbal and nonverbal active listening behaviors were rated as signaling more emotional awareness and promoting a greater degree of emotional improvement but did not affect perceptions of relational assurance or problem-solving utility. On average, the set of verbal behaviors were more important in the prediction of outcomes compared to the nonverbal behaviors. Results

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contribute to the larger literature on enacted support, suggesting particular roles for active listening techniques within troubles talk.

Keywords: *Comforting; Emotional Support; Empathy; Stress; Supportive Listening*

Disclosure of stress is a normative and important coping resource (Rimé, 2009). When we engage in *troubles talk* with others, distress can be alleviated, relationships strengthened, and physical and mental health improved. Unfortunately, the reverse also is true: Discussing problems in certain ways is dysfunctional and can lead to a range of negative outcomes from heightened distress to health complications (for reviews see MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011; Uchino, Carlisle, Birmingham, & Vaughn, 2011). A key contributor to whether troubles talk is helpful or harmful is the quality of *enacted support*—what is said and done in the service of talking about problems (Goldsmith, 2004). Supportive communication scholars have spent considerable effort documenting the behavioral features that distinguish more and less helpful enacted support (MacGeorge et al., 2011), and there is mounting evidence that specific behaviors have reliable impacts on important outcomes including individual and relational health and well-being (Bodie, 2012; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Jones & Wirtz, 2006; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000; Priem & Solomon, 2009).

Although myriad behaviors contribute, perhaps no other behavior is more fundamental to enabling healthy troubles talk than “active listening.” Whether the reader opens a scholarly journal or trade publication, textbook or handbook, flyer or self-help manual, part of the advice relevant to being a good support provider will include one or more skills like paraphrasing, asking questions, and reflecting feelings. To date, although the active listening paradigm is a central component of supportive communication scholarship, the impact of the constituent behaviors is largely untested in the context of informal helping conversations. The purpose of this article is to report an experimental study that tested the active listening paradigm in the context of supportive conversations.

Active Listening in the Context of Troubles Talk

Interest in active listening as a therapeutic tool is generally traced to Carl Rogers (1957, 1959), who proposed that effective counselors ought to demonstrate unconditional acceptance and unbiased reflection of client feelings and experiences. Indeed, Rogers’s philosophy permeates the supportive communication literature. The work on comforting by Burleson and colleagues, for instance, has shown that support providers who have an increasing “awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational reality” of the stressful situation and the person affected by that situation (Burleson, 1987, p. 305) produce messages that are more likely to assist in the comforting process (for review see Burleson, 2003). Traces of Rogers’s work also are visible in a range of contexts including health care (Fassaert, van Dulmen, Schellevis, & Bensing, 2007), social work (Nugent & Halvorson, 1995), and

occupational health (Mishima, Kubota, & Nagata, 2000), from which scholars studying the communication of support in less formal settings generate numerous recommendations.

Although definitions of active listening vary widely across contexts (see Armstrong, 1998; Weger, Bell, Minei, & Robinson, 2014; Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010), most treatments stress the importance of both nonverbal and verbal behaviors that function to demonstrate attention, understanding, responsiveness, and empathy; to encourage continued expression of thoughts and feelings; and to aid in relational maintenance. In terms of nonverbal behaviors, active listening typically is cast as nonverbal immediacy (NVI)—behaviors such as head nods, eye contact and forward body lean that reflect the degree of psychological distance between (or closeness with) others (Andersen & Andersen, 2005). In the context of troubles talk, these behaviors communicate approach (vs. avoidance) (Jones & Wirtz, 2006) and signal involvement, attentiveness, and awareness (Coker & Burgoon, 1987). Active listening is readily operationalized with immediacy cues (for a recent example, see Fassaert et al., 2007), and research on NVI in the context of troubles talk suggests a positive role for many immediacy behaviors (Derlega, Barbee, & Winstead, 1994; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Miczo & Burgoon, 2008).

In addition to showing nonverbal warmth, active listeners also signal attentiveness through a range of verbal behaviors, the most common of which are paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, assumption checking, and asking questions. Paraphrasing and reflecting feelings are both forms of formulation (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Hak & de Boer, 1996; Heritage & Watson, 1979; Korman, Bavelas, & De Jong, 2013; Phillips, 1999). While *paraphrasing* refers to the repetition of what was said in the listener's own words the way he or she understood it (Weger et al., 2014; Weger et al., 2010), *reflecting feelings* refers to statements that demonstrate an accurate detection of feelings that underlie certain statements and mirror these feelings to the discloser (Hutchby, 2005). Both types of summaries often are prefaced with short introductions that indicate their speculative nature (e.g., It seems like; It appears; So the way you see it . . .). When active listeners engage in paraphrasing and reflecting feelings, one strategy utilized to ensure the listener does not misrepresent the discloser is *assumption checking* or asking short questions to ascertain the degree to which the listener has accurately captured the meaning of the discloser's response (e.g., Did I hear you correctly? Does that fit for you?) (Baldwin, 1987). Finally, active listeners also engage with questioning in the form of *open questions* (e.g., How did that make you feel?) which help shift the conversation in particular directions (Healing & Bavelas, 2011).

The benefits of various active listening strategies are well documented in formal helping settings like therapy (Norcross, 2011), and these results are readily generalized and applied to how lay helpers should enact informal support (see Burleson, 1984, 2003; Jones, 2011; Stewart, 1983; for review see Weger et al., 2010). Others have questioned the wholesale extrapolation of findings from formal helping situations to day-to-day support settings (Armstrong, 1998; Cramer, 1987; Gelso & Karl, 1974; Thomas & Levine, 1994), and to date there remains little critical examination of

the impact of active listening techniques outside of formal helping relationships.¹ Evidence exists that skills such as paraphrasing and asking open questions can be taught to informal helpers like spouses (Garland, 1981), supervisors (Kubota, Mishima, & Nagata, 2004), parents (Graybill, 1986), and teachers (McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, & Schreiner, 2008), and there is strong evidence that engaging in certain active listening responses affects the listener (Lewis & Manusov, 2009; Notarius & Herrick, 1988; Perrine, 1993). Interestingly, although informal helping situations constitute the majority of the enacted support we receive in our daily lives (Cowen, 1982), there is little evidence that lay helpers should or do enact strategies derived from the active listening paradigm.

Ultimately, we are left with the assumption that active listening is beneficial to help seekers without compulsory empirical verification. If the active listening techniques championed in the formal helping literature insufficiently explain key outcomes of troubles talk conversations, then alternative models of supportive listening should be forwarded and explored. It seems, however, that the introduction of any alternative model is necessarily limited due to the prevalence of active listening in our lay and scholarly vernacular. Thus, a key contribution of this article is to provide an empirical test of the active listening paradigm in the context of troubles talk.

How Should Active Listening Be Beneficial in Troubles Talk?

Research on enacted support has been primarily concerned with two classes of effects. First, supportive behaviors can influence message evaluations, or “the judgments recipients make about the degree to which messages are *helpful*, *supportive*, and *sensitive*” (Bodie, Bursleson, & Jones, 2012, p. 3; emphasis added), with these three adjectives reflecting the perceived instrumental, relational, and emotional benefits of any given supportive behavior. Active listening is posited as evaluatively positive on each of these three dimensions. Of the 40 themes Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander (2000) derived from participant reports of their understanding of the terms helpful, sensitive, and supportive, listening and three other closely related terms—understanding, caring, and helps clarify ideas (see Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012; Imhof & Janusik, 2006)—were the top four themes, constituting nearly a third of the total responses. An additional 21% of the remaining themes are related to lay notions of good listening.² It seems, therefore, that good support is contingent on adequate listening (Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, 2013; Jones, 2011; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

By paraphrasing and using tag questions while being nonverbally immediate, listeners are likely to be seen as more sensitive or emotionally aware than listeners who do not demonstrate recognition and involvement in these ways. In a similar manner, these behaviors seem to signal an acknowledgment of how the partner is feeling. Acknowledgement has been recognized as a desired macrolevel listening process in close relationships (Pecchioni & Halone, 2000); having a listener who can “get the meaning” or otherwise “summarize key points,” thus reflects relational loyalty and assurance (Bodie, 2011). Finally, while engaged in supportive interactions,

“people’s capacity to overcome their own emotions in order to help others may be limited” (Barbee, Rowatt, & Cunningham, 1998, p. 289). Thus, active listening techniques that stress withholding the projection of one’s own emotions or viewpoints also may be more helpful than techniques that insist on a particular viewpoint. Indeed, exploration of thoughts and feelings is a hallmark of good support (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Combined, this logic leads us to our first hypothesis, that perceived helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness vary as a function of active listening:

H1: Active listening techniques contribute significantly to evaluations of supportive conversations as helpful, sensitive, and supportive.

The second primary class of supportive communication effects is message outcomes, the “more distal effects of supportive [behaviors] . . . [such as] the degree to which [they] generate cognitive (e.g., appraisals), affective (e.g., emotions), and/or behavioral (e.g., coping) change” (Bodie, Burleson, et al., 2012, p. 3). Although assessing the degree to which active listening promotes perceptions of helpers and their instrumental, relational, and emotional utility is important, “emotional support is primarily about alleviating upset” (Jones & Wirtz, 2006, p. 217). Even more distal outcomes such as physical health and mental well-being “are generally viewed as influenced by affective change, which is why [affect change is regarded] as the critical variable in studies of emotional support” (Burleson, 2010, p. 176). Curiously, however, affect change seems the least studied outcome in the supportive communication literature; thus, testing the impact of active listening techniques on a distressed other’s affect change is crucial.

Active listening should make people feel better for several reasons. First, the relationship between message evaluations and message outcomes has been established, suggesting that when people evaluate supportive behaviors positively there is a concomitant positive change in affect (Bodie, Burleson, et al., 2012; High & Dillard, 2012). Second, active listening is likely to encourage disclosers to express difficult feelings. Indeed, support providers who are more attentive and conversationally responsive elicit more detailed disclosures from distressed others (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983; Tokic & Pecnik, 2010) and are more likely to provide appropriate responses to those disclosures (Clark, 1993). Related research demonstrated that emotional disclosure assists in the coping process, especially when that disclosure is met with a responsive interlocutor (Jones, 2004; Jones & Wirtz, 2006; Maisel & Gable, 2009). Finally, active listening is proposed as helping to establish a warm environment, a place where disclosers feel relaxed and able to talk about feelings without fear of being judged negatively (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Formally,

H2: Active listening techniques contribute significantly to reports of affect improvement as the result of a supportive conversation.

Although active listening is posited to produce primarily positive effects during troubles talk, active listening is not universally supportive as research finds active listening responses can produce negative affect in disclosers (Nugent, 1992). Such

findings led Nugent and Halvorson (1995) to speculate that the particular behaviors which constitute active listening may have differential effects on outcomes. Research exploring the contribution of particular verbal and nonverbal behaviors on troubles talk outcomes showed that specific verbal behaviors (e.g., verbal person centeredness) and specific nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact) each contribute to positive perceptions and affect change but to varying degrees (Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, & Clarke, 1992). For instance, while certain nonverbal behaviors have consensually recognizable interpretations, others can engender various effects; still other nonverbal behaviors such as touch clearly are inappropriate in particular relational or communicative contexts (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984; Burgoon & Newton, 1991; Coker & Burgoon, 1987). Other work has shown instrumental responses to generate more positive change when compared to simple reflection of meaning and understanding (Barnett & Harris, 1984). Finally, verbal displays of enacted support can be stronger predictors of message evaluations and outcomes than nonverbal behaviors (Jones & Guerrero, 2001); a similar pattern of results also has been found with individual reports of listening (Bodie, St. Cyr, et al., 2012). Thus, it is possible that, as a gestalt, active listening techniques engender more positive evaluations and outcomes, while certain active listening behaviors may not be contributing to these outcomes. Based on the above logic, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: What is the relative importance of specific active listening behaviors to the evaluations of supporter helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness, and reported affect change after a supportive conversation?

Methods

Participants

In total, 301 undergraduate students (175 females, 116 males, 10 not reporting sex) enrolled in Communication Studies courses at Louisiana State University A&M participated in this study and voluntarily provided demographic information. Students ranged in age from 18 to 52 ($M = 20$, $Mdn = 20$, $SD = 4.24$, 21 missing) and most frequently reported a Caucasian identity ($n = 215$; 73.9%; 10 participants missing); others reported African American ($n = 44$; 15.1%), Asian ($n = 9$; 3.1%), Hispanic ($n = 8$; 2.7%), and “other” ($n = 13$). Participants reported majoring in all undergraduate academic programs offered by the University and represented all class ranks: freshmen ($n = 78$), sophomores ($n = 93$), juniors ($n = 65$), and seniors ($n = 53$). All participants received a modest amount of research credit (3% of their total course grade).

Trained Active Listeners

In order to ensure adequate variability in the use of active listening techniques, we employed eight (7 females, 1 male) masters’ students enrolled in the University’s

Counseling Education program. All students were in the final year of the program and had received classroom training in active listening, including listening in a way that displays acceptance, congruence, and empathy by engaging in various nonverbal immediacy behaviors, and by asking open questions, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and using check outs. In addition, at the time of data collection, each active listener was employed through the Program's internship mechanism in a job that required her or him to engage in these behaviors on a daily basis. Prior to running the study, each active listener was interviewed by the first author, briefed on the study procedures, and allowed ample time to prepare for his or her confederate role. Prior to each conversation, active listeners were provided a reminder sheet that defined and gave examples of each active listening behavior of interest to this study.

Procedure

Undergraduate students were provided with a brief description of the study and then signed up for a specific time slot using an electronic system. After signing up, the undergraduate students received a confirmation e-mail containing a link to a survey. The survey first displayed a human subjects statement to comply with University IRB protocol; students then completed various measures, including self-report measures not germane to the current study and the voluntary demographic information summarized above.

Research assistants greeted participants at their scheduled lab time, ensured the participants had not met previously, and provided all participants with a consent form. They then briefly described the study (using a standard script) and instructed participants to draw slips of paper to randomly assign the conversational roles of problem discloser or listener. In conditions involving an active listener, confederates were given the opportunity to draw first and had been instructed to select the role of listener. Based on the role assignments, there were 130 untrained and 41 trained listener-discloser dyads.

After assignment to condition, participants were separated to complete various individual measures. Trained listeners were provided with a reminder sheet outlining the active listening behaviors (see above). During this time, disclosers identified and rated two recent distressing events, and a research assistant informed the discloser which event to disclose (for similar procedures, see Jones & Guerrero, 2001). Problematic events included mainly everyday stressors common to college students (e.g., academic stressors, relationship spats and dissolution, roommate problems). Disclosers then completed measures related to the event, after which they were reunited with the listener to engage in a 5-minute conversation. Participants sat approximately 3 feet from each other in facing chairs. Research assistants gave all instructions for the conversations at this point, then left the room and allowed participants to get acquainted for 1 minute.³ Participants were left alone for 5 minutes to converse, and the entire conversation was video- and audio-recorded for later data analysis. After the 5-minute conversation session, participants were separated for a final time

and completed various evaluative measures of the conversation and partner. Only relevant measures are outlined below.

Coding Interactions

The videotaped interactions were assessed by two sets of independent coders. For both sets of coders, training consisted of a) a discussion of the relevant construct (e.g., immediacy, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings); b) discussing and visually demonstrating the level of each verbal and nonverbal cue; c) coding videotaped interactions; and d) discussing and adjusting differences in coding. When training the coders, scale endpoints were conceptualized to fit the specific cue. For example, a high level of eye contact was conceptualized as exhibiting eye contact 80% or more of the time, whereas a low level of eye contact was conceptualized as exhibiting eye contact only 20% of the time or less. Coders assessed the listener's verbal and nonverbal cues twice: once after the first half of the conversation and then again after the second half of the conversation. Coders were allowed to stop, rewind, and fast-forward the videos as much as they needed. Interitem correlations across Times 1 and 2 were quite high ($r_s > .65$) and homogeneous across all cues, suggesting that there were only minor coder variations in the first and second half of the conversations. Cues for both Times 1 and 2 were consequently collapsed within the verbal and nonverbal coding rubrics.

Listeners' *nonverbal immediacy cues* were coded with a modified version of Andersen, Andersen, and Jensen's (1979) nonverbal immediacy scale. Two research assistants blind to the study's purpose were trained by the fourth author for approximately 4 hours over two meeting sessions. The modified immediacy scale consisted of nine immediacy cues (e.g., "orient her/his body toward the other person," "smile when it's appropriate") and one global immediacy evaluation. All cues and the global assessment were prefaced with the stem "To what extent is/does the person(s)..." and were evaluated with 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). The average intraclass correlation, based on 40 dyads, was .81.

Listeners' *verbal behaviors* were assessed by five coders who scored paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, open questions, and check outs using 5-point scaling (0 = *Never*; 4 = *Always*). Three coders (different from those who coded NVI) scored interactions featuring the untrained helpers ($n = 130$), and an additional two coders scored interactions featuring the trained listeners ($n = 41$). Interrater reliability, calculated with Krippendorff's α on a subset of the data not used in training, was .68 for untrained dyads and .78 for trained dyads.

Although hypothesis tests are not fully reliant on between-group differences (i.e., our predictions are concerned with techniques not listeners of particular classes, per se), it is important to establish that active listening techniques were being employed and that utilizing trained listeners was a beneficial strategy to elicit them. Evidence in support of this claim comes from the fact that the variance in all five verbal behaviors almost doubled with the inclusion of the active listener group (average = .85) relative to the untrained listeners (average = .45); the same was not true of the nonverbal

immediacy behaviors (.982 vs .963), suggesting that untrained listeners may naturally exhibit some active listening behaviors.

To assess whether trained active listeners exhibited higher levels of nonverbal immediacy than did untrained listeners, we inspected both the overall presence of immediacy as well as each individual immediacy cue. For the combined scale, active listeners ($M = 4.84$, $SD = .36$) were statistically different from their normal counterparts ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .41$), $t(164) = 2.56$, $p = .01$, though the effect was small, $r^2 = .05$. This trend was not consistent across all behaviors. As seen in Table 1, trained listeners were primarily more immediate with regard to eye contact, head nods, and vocal pleasantness (as well as the overall rating), with eye contact and head nods exhibiting moderate effect sizes. Untrained listeners were more immediate with regard to forward lean and body orientation, although these effects were small; there were no differences for smiling, facial pleasantness, open body orientation, and animation.

As a complementary analysis with the verbal behaviors, we inspected both the overall presence of these behaviors as well as each individual behavior. Active listeners ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .72$) were statistically more verbally active than their normal counterparts ($M = 1.16$, $SD = .53$), $t(163) = 13.72$, $p < .001$, and the effect of this difference was large, $r^2 = .56$. Each behavior also was in the correct direction, although

Table 1 Trained Coder Manipulation Check Analyses for Individual Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors

Nonverbal Behavior	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> ²
Smiling	Untrained – Student	4.64	1.35	1.32	164	.19	.01
	Active – Confederate	4.31	1.39				
Eye Contact	Untrained – Student	5.12	1.01	5.51	162	.000	.27
	Active – Confederate	6.01	.24				
Head Nods	Untrained – Student	4.38	1.33	7.35	164	.000	.39
	Active – Confederate	5.94	.32				
Facial Pleasantness	Untrained – Student	5.18	.83	1.91	164	.06	.03
	Active – Confederate	4.90	.80				
Forward Lean	Untrained – Student	4.06	.74	2.78	164	.01	.06
	Active – Confederate	3.71	.58				
Body Orientation Toward Person	Untrained – Student	5.69	.42	2.67	164	.01	.06
	Active – Confederate	5.49	.40				
Open Body Orientation	Untrained – Student	4.46	.81	.43	164	.67	.001
	Active – Confederate	4.53	.80				
Animation	Untrained – Student	3.42	1.46	1.24	164	.22	.01
	Active – Confederate	3.10	1.23				
Vocal Pleasantness	Untrained – Student	4.77	.72	3.71	164	.000	.11
	Active – Confederate	5.23	.56				
Global NVI Rating	Untrained – Student	4.86	.72	2.97	164	.003	.08
	Active – Confederate	5.23	.54				

Table 2 Trained Coder Manipulation Check Analyses for Individual Verbal Response Behaviors

Verbal Behavior	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> ²
Open Questions	Untrained – Student	1.04	.74	1.64	163	.10	.02
	Active – Confederate	1.30	1.16				
Paraphrasing	Untrained – Student	.99	.92	10.87	163	.000	.47
	Active – Confederate	2.89	1.08				
Reflecting Feelings	Untrained – Student	.51	.74	7.53	163	.000	.25
	Active – Confederate	1.76	1.34				
Check Outs	Untrained – Student	.02	.14	1.70	163	.09	.13
	Active – Confederate	.10	.50				
Global Rating	Untrained – Student	1.98	.69	9.92	163	.000	.47
	Active – Confederate	3.17	.57				

there was no significant difference for open questions or check outs (see Table 2).⁴ It appears that employing expert confederates for active listening is a reasonable strategy to elicit some but not all active listening behaviors.

Dependent Variables

Message evaluation (ME)

Participants were asked to evaluate listeners on 11 semantic differential items (7-point) (Goldsmith et al., 2000). The three-factor (helpful, sensitive, supportive) model was adequate, $\chi^2(51) = 143.15$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .10 (.08, .12), $\lambda_s > .53$, as were the subscale reliabilities (problem solving utility $\alpha = .80$; relational assurance $\alpha = .82$, emotional awareness $\alpha = .84$).

Message outcomes (MO)

Affect improvement was measured using four items from the Clark et al. (1998) Comforting Response Scale, based on recommendations found in Jones (2004). Each item reflected the affective state of the discloser as the result of the conversation (e.g., I feel better after talking with my conversational partner) and, thus, are appropriate indicants of MO as opposed to ME. The fit was adequate, $\chi^2(2) = 4.91$, $p = .09$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .09 (.00, .20), $\lambda_s > .73$, as was internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$).

Correlations presented in Table 3 show that ME and MO are only moderately correlated, suggesting that they are distinct judgments made of these behaviors.

Results

Tests of hypotheses and answers to research questions were assisted by multiple regression techniques. With alpha set at .05, 171 total dyads, and 13 total predictors, power to detect small effects ($f^2 = .02$) was .16, power to detect moderate effects ($f^2 = .15$) was .92, and power to detect large effects ($f^2 = .35$) was above .99. For thoroughness, bivariate correlations are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Bivariate Associations between All Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. Smiling	1																
2. Eye Contact	-0.08	1															
3. Head Nods	.18*	.65**	1														
4. Facial Pleasantness	.74**	-0.02	0.13	1													
5. Forward Lean	-0.09	-0.31**	-.25**	-0.02	1												
6. Body Orientation	-0.19*	-0.51**	-.45**	-0.05	.32**	1											
7. Open Body Posture	-0.13	-0.09	-0.12	-.20**	0.06	.16*	1										
8. Animation	0.06	-.33**	-.20**	0.12	.40**	.32**	.16*	1									
9. Vocal Pleasantness	.20**	.27**	.35**	.26**	-.03	-.20**	-0.12	0.03	1								
10. Open Questions	0.06	-0.04	-0.01	0.08	.19*	0.11	.17*	.24**	0.09	1							
11. Paraphrasing	-0.14	.24**	.31**	-0.14	-0.12	-0.14	0.11	0.07	.29**	.27**	1						
12. Reflecting	0.01	0.08	.27**	-.08	-0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.06	.27**	.31**	.51**	1					
Feelings																	
13. Check Outs	-0.01	0.06	0.04	-0.02	-0.09	-0.04	0.06	0.06	-0.05	0.13	.21**	0.11	1				
14. ME - PSU	-0.04	0	0.01	0.03	0.14	0.1	0.01	0.14	-0.05	.21**	.17*	0.14	-0.08	1			
15. ME - RA	-0.01	0.06	0.08	0.04	0.08	0.02	-0.01	0.03	0.01	0.05	.17*	0.08	-0.09	.68**	1		
16. ME - EA	-0.14	0.11	0.08	-0.05	0.09	0.08	-0.02	0.07	0.1	0.08	.31**	.20**	.02	.69**	.79**	1	
17. Affect Change	0.03	0.13	0.09	0.1	-0.05	0.05	0.1	-0.02	0.05	.20**	.16*	0.12	-0.10	.40**	.23**	.17*	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Preliminary Analyses

The problems disclosed in these interactions represented mild stressors common to college students. Across both conditions, the average problem rating was 5.08 ($SD = 1.10$; $R = 2-7$) on a scale from 1 (“*not at all emotionally distressing*”) to 7 (“*very emotionally distressing*”). The average problem rating in the trained condition ($n = 41$; $M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.24$) was statistically similar to the average rating in the untrained condition ($n = 130$; $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(169) = .87$, $p = .39$.

The types of problems disclosed represented seven general categories of personal stressors, including academic problems, car problems, employment problems, family problems, health problems, pet problems, relationship problems, and other stressors. Half of the problems disclosed represented academic problems ($n = 86$; 50.2%), including problems in the classroom (e.g., failing tests) and other problems unique to academic settings (e.g., applying to nursing school, switching majors); the category percentages and example problems for the seven categories are summarized in Table 4.

Tests of Hypotheses and Answers to Research Questions

The first two hypotheses predicted that active listening techniques contribute significantly to evaluations of supportive conversations as helpful, sensitive, and supportive (H1) and to reports of affect improvement after the conversations (H2). Each hypothesis was tested by regressing each outcome measure on the set of nonverbal immediacy and verbal responses. In support of H1, the overall model was significant for emotional awareness (see Table 5), though models for problem-solving utility and relational awareness did not receive support. In support of H2, the model for affect improvement achieved statistical significance at the conventional level (see Table 5).

To answer RQ1, which asked about the relative importance of individual behaviors for evaluations and affect improvement, individual relative importance statistics were computed for the two statistically significant main effects models (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004).⁵ Judged by relative weights as a percentage of R^2 , there was a different relative importance pattern for each dependent variable (see Table 5).

For Emotional Awareness, the only behaviors to contribute more than 10% to model R^2 were paraphrasing and reflecting feelings. The former contributed almost half of the total model R^2 suggesting that emotional awareness is primarily communicated through the use of paraphrasing discloser statements. Indeed, paraphrasing was the only behavior to share more than 5% variance with emotional awareness; all other behaviors shared less than 2%. On average, the verbal behaviors were more important to the prediction of emotional awareness than the nonverbal behaviors.

For Affect Improvement, five behaviors contributed over 10% to model R^2 , namely eye contact, facial expressions, open questions, paraphrasing, and check outs. While the strongest predictor was open questions, the substantive contribution of this behavior was only 3%, suggesting that any single behavior cannot account fully for affect change resulting from the conversation. On average, the verbal

Table 4 Categories and Descriptions of Problems Disclosed

Category and Overall Percentage	General Description	Verbatim Examples	Active (Confederate)	Untrained (Student)
Academic Problems (<i>n</i> = 86; 50.2%)	(a) Problems relating to classroom performance	"Taking calculus test" "a lot of tests coming up"	<i>n</i> = 17	<i>n</i> = 46
	(b) Problems relating to the larger college experience	"getting into nursing school" "6 am volleyball practices"	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 20
Car Problems (<i>n</i> = 5; 2.9%)	Problems with transportation or tickets	"Car wreck (hit & run)" "I was on my way going home & my car died"	<i>n</i> = 1	<i>n</i> = 4
Employment Problems	Problems with internships or employment	"Internship interviews" "Got laid off from my job"	<i>n</i> = 3	<i>n</i> = 6
Family Problems (<i>n</i> = 9; 5.3%)				
Family Problems (<i>n</i> = 26; 15.2%)	Problems with family members	"Death of a family member" "Sister moving away"	<i>n</i> = 7	<i>n</i> = 19
Health Problems (<i>n</i> = 5; 2.9%)	Problems with personal health	"Knee surgery" "Surgery on my back for pole vaulting"	<i>n</i> = 0	<i>n</i> = 5
Pet Problems (<i>n</i> = 5; 2.9%)	Problems with companion animals	"Dog dying" "Raising a puppy"	<i>n</i> = 2	<i>n</i> = 5
Relationship Problems (<i>n</i> = 28; 16.3%)	(a) Problems with intimate dating partners	"Difficult breakup" "Long-distance relationship"	<i>n</i> = 0	<i>n</i> = 5
	(b) Problems with friends or roommates	"Best friend expressed 'love' feelings" "My best friend and I had a fight"	<i>n</i> = 7	<i>n</i> = 11
Other Problems (<i>n</i> = 7; 4.1%)	Problems unable to be categorized	"Air force officer training school" "Squirrel in my attic"	<i>n</i> = 1	<i>n</i> = 9

Table 5 Relative Importance Analysis of Verbal and Nonverbal Listener Responses for RQ1

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

behaviors were stronger predictors of affect change than were nonverbal behaviors, mirroring results from the model predicting emotional awareness.

Discussion

Although scholars and practitioners alike stress the importance of paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, checking assumptions, asking open-ended questions, and being nonverbally immediate, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of these behaviors outside of formal helping relationships. Thus, our study provides an important empirical check for the claims that techniques found to work for therapists and clinical social workers are appropriate for more mundane stressors. Textbooks are replete with recommendations to engage in active listening behaviors such as paraphrasing, especially when “listening to support others” (Wood, 2010, p. 162). Descriptions of highly person-centered helpers from more scholarly outlets also stress behaviors such as asking open-ended questions, paraphrasing, and reflective feelings because they are thought to signal unconditional positive regard and a sincere willingness to help. Although not explicitly labeled as such, Burleson (2003; see especially

p. 580) referred to the use of several active listening techniques when discussing the behavioral strategies available to manifest a person-centered approach to comforting. Indeed, the conceptualization of person-centered comforting, which is the most commonly used proxy for “good support,” was partially derived from the active listening paradigm of Carl Rogers (see also Bodie & Jones, 2012; Bodie et al., 2013; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones, 2011; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Overall, the results of our study suggest mixed support for the active listening paradigm within the context of troubles talk, results that have larger theoretical and practical payoffs to the research in supportive communication. First, although as a group, the set of four verbal and nine nonverbal active listening behaviors contributed to reports of emotional awareness and affect improvement, these same behaviors did not contribute to perceptions of problem-solving utility or relational assurance. Goldsmith et al. (2000) suggested that judgments of emotional awareness “are associated with legitimating, elaborating, and acknowledging the feelings another person is experiencing” (p. 373). The behaviors that formed the operationalization of active listening in this study largely are posited to provide a sense of acceptance and emotional recognition, and so this result seems to provide a type of construct validity for these behaviors within informal helping conversations. One reason these same behaviors did not influence relational assurance or the degree to which they reflect “relational loyalty” may be methodological: Our sample of participants were strangers; thus, similar work with friends and other types of relationally close individuals is needed to assess the utility of active listening behaviors in those sorts of conversations. At the same time, however, we chose strangers for valid reasons. First, by employing strangers we were able to compare the results of our studies to past work exploring supportive communication, as the primary dyadic pairing used is unacquainted individuals. Second, training relationally close partners to engage in active listening behaviors introduces its own set of relevant challenges, not the least of which is these close others’ ability to behave “naturally.” Future work should attempt to solve these logistical concerns as the role of active listening within close relationships is an important issue.

In terms of helpfulness ratings, perhaps the role of active listening behaviors is not to provide problem-solving utility; that is, asking questions and paraphrasing may provide little “informational and instrumental benefits” to a stressed other (Goldsmith et al., 2000, p. 387). Importantly, however, these same behaviors did influence reports of emotional improvement after the conversation. Given the nature of the task asked of disclosers, perhaps they felt better in part because the active listening behaviors did not attempt to solve a problem but instead created a sense of emotional awareness. Future research should continue to explore the role of these (and other) active listening behaviors, attempting to determine what judgments and more distal outcomes they do (and do not) influence as well as exploring competing theoretical models that explore various cognitive, physiological, and behavioral mechanisms underlying these effects.

Second, the magnitude of effects was relatively small, suggesting that the enactment of active listening behaviors is not a panacea. Our findings, however, are not

all that discrepant from research exploring other forms of enacted support. For instance, Jones and Guerrero (2001) reported that nonverbal immediacy and verbal person centeredness accounted for just under 20% of the variance in comforting quality⁶; Jones (2004) reported an even smaller effect for affect improvement at 7%, an effect of similar magnitude as that reported by Bodie (2012), who explored how mean arterial pressure and heart rate varied as a function of receiving high and low person-centered support (variance explained, 7–11%). Thus, it appears that the behaviors highlighted in this study have a similarly small to moderate influence on supportive conversation outcomes, perhaps due in part because they might constitute person-centered speech in a supportive context (Jones & Bodie, 2014). Future work is needed that attends to additional behaviors deemed important to “good” listening, such as interruptions, that are not directly implicated in existing models of enacted support. Likewise, there is a need to explore how variability within behaviors such as the types of open questions asked (e.g., Healing & Bavelas, 2011) or variations in how to formulate another person’s event or feelings (e.g., Korman et al., 2013) can affect outcomes in specific ways. Indeed, a primary contribution of supportive communication scholarship to the more general social support literature is to document patterns of variability of specific types of behavior and the degree to which these patterns map onto important outcomes.

Our results also appear to replicate the finding from Jones and Guerrero (2001) that verbal behaviors are more important to the prediction of supportive conversation outcomes than their nonverbal counterparts. We are not convinced, however, that the distinction between “verbal” and “nonverbal” is the best explanation. Perhaps, instead, what we have replicated is the operation of generic and specific responding (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011). Very simply, generic responding includes those familiar and ubiquitous utterances such as “hmm” or actions such as head nods that can go anywhere in a narrative, while specific responding includes utterances and actions that are tied to particular points of a story. Interestingly, all of the verbal behaviors included in this study seem to map nicely onto specific responding, while the nonverbal actions seem to map nicely onto generic responding. Of course, nonverbal behaviors can be used in very specific ways (and verbal in generic ways); thus, experimental studies that attempt to manipulate these two orthogonal constructs are warranted.

A complementary explanation comes from the work of Clark (1996), who suggested (in a manner similar to what we find with implicit theories of listening; see Bodie, St. Cyr, et al., 2012) that listening behaviors signal attending, understanding, and identification. As part of a joint contribution to discourse, typical listening behaviors operate to signal to disclosers that they are understood well enough for current purposes and that there is a building of mutual knowledge between interlocutors. In initial viewings of our videotaped data, our research team noted consistently that conversations with fewer signals of listening do not flow as smoothly, stories are not told as coherently, and disclosers are more likely to do things like repeat themselves and provide verbal indications that it is hard to think of what to say next, a finding we later recognized in the work of Bavelas (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000, 2002; Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011).

But why the verbal-over-nonverbal pattern? Clark provided an explanation in his chapter on grounding, in which he asserted that contributions to discourse are achieved in two main phases, the presentation phase and the acceptance phase. As part of the acceptance phase, listeners can engage in a range of behaviors, some of which will provide more valid evidence of understanding. In particular, Clark laid out four types of positive evidence of understanding with displays and exemplifications offering more explicit evidence of understanding than assertions and presuppositions. In this framework, listening is a joint construal problem—the listener and the speaker are collaboratively settling on what the speaker is to be taken to mean. As related to the verbal and nonverbal findings, we have instead an explicit versus implicit uptake of a speaker's proposition with some forms of listener behavior helping the joint construal process more than others.

It is important to note that in addition to these theoretical musings, it is also true that most listeners were highly immediate, regardless of whether they were trained or untrained. In particular, fewer than 15% of listeners were coded below the midpoint (4) on the global immediacy scale; for most of the behaviors the modal score was 6. This may suggest that normative pressures for listeners to be immediate were strong in these conversations, a finding that seems in line with speculation offered by Jones and Guerrero (2001). Similarly, as the results from the manipulation check showed, there was little difference between trained and untrained listeners with respect to enacted immediacy behaviors. As a result of a lower amount of variability, NVI may not have been fully able to capture variability in the dependent variables. At the same time, even in the experimental work of Jones, in which both verbal and nonverbal behaviors were manipulated along three levels (and all of these combinations crossed), verbal behaviors were still much more important in the prediction of outcomes. If future work replicates our data that untrained listeners tend to naturally exhibit high levels of NVI, and that verbal behaviors are relatively more influential to outcomes, one important practical implication is that training efforts should focus more on verbal as opposed to nonverbal techniques, or at least a more limited subset of the latter behaviors because they appear to occur naturally and have less of an impact on outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

In order to investigate the verbal and nonverbal behaviors in these interactions, one noted limitation is our decision to define, code, and investigate the broader instances of behavior. There are certainly different ways in which listeners can paraphrase, reflect feelings, ask questions, and check interpretations, but the current investigation examined the general occurrence of these behaviors rather than focus on the variation and differences within these particular behaviors. The inherent variability in these verbal behaviors is grounds for future theoretical and empirical investigation, accompanied with closer textual analyses in order to identify potential differences in the construction and effectiveness of these verbal behaviors. In addition, seven of the eight confederates were female, therefore disallowing a comparison of

confederate sex in our analyses. Future work should seek to balance the enactment of active listening by various types of support providers.

Additionally, bringing participants into the laboratory and having them engage in a troubles talk conversation with a stranger, although allowing for experimental control and a variety of other benefits, certainly has questionable ecological validity which must be acknowledged due to the formal setting, timed conversation with an unfamiliar partner, and the presence of recording devices. However, with no manipulation of listeners' verbal and nonverbal behaviors, the observed behaviors represent naturalistic behavior as opposed to behavior constrained by having to act in a manner predetermined by a researcher. Derlega et al. (1994) argued, "Despite the limitations of the laboratory setting, the direct observation of social support is crucial in advancing our understanding of this phenomenon" (p.149) as it provides a greater understanding of how supportive communication helps another feel better after sharing an emotional event. Examining supportive behaviors in conversation is important to better understand supportive communication, active listening, and the coping process.

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Notes

- [1] Perhaps the most sustained attention to active listening is within tests of marital enrichment programs (Bowling, Hill, & Jencius, 2005). While many of these programs have produced evidence of success, they are not without their critics (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Hafen & Crane, 2002). Most relevant to our argument, these programs include active listening as one of several components to marital therapy and do not tease out the effects of active listening behaviors. Moreover, most of these programs are situated in the context of marital conflict rather than providing beneficial support.
- [2] Those themes were "being there" ($n=40$), "gives advice" ($n=38$), "perceptive" ($n=30$), "touch" ($n=18$), "asks questions" ($n=14$), "eye contact" ($n=9$), and "friendly" ($n=7$). See Bodie, St. Cyr, et al. (2012) for reference to how these themes align with lay notions of good listening and Bodie et al. (2013) for similar results suggesting the terms supportive person and supportive listener are reported as virtually isomorphic.
- [3] Research assistants were trained to use a script to maintain consistent instructions to listeners and disclosers. Disclosers were told by the research assistant to "talk about the event that you and I identified. Talk about what happened and what made this particular event so distressing, how the event made you feel, and why it's still painful/distressing now. Take your time and make sure to provide your conversational partner, (*Listener name*) with as much information as is necessary and as you feel comfortable disclosing." Listeners were told to "respond as you normally would respond in a conversation about emotionally distressing events with your friends. So this is just a regular conversation meaning that, (*Listener name*), you talk too; it is just that we focus on (*discloser's name*) topic." The full script is available from the first author upon request.
- [4] We additionally conducted a discriminant function analysis to predict group membership from the coded nonverbal immediacy and verbal active listening responses. Using the aggregate data for each behavior group, 87.5% of original grouped cases were correctly classified.

Using the individual behaviors, 93% of the original grouped cases were correctly classified. Thus, listener behaviors (verbal and nonverbal) seem to discriminate between trained and untrained listeners (i.e., trained and untrained listeners are enacting support differently). Details of these analyses are available from the first author upon request.

- [5] 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 combined with the other variables in the regression equation” (p. 240). Their relative importance analysis consists of (a) transforming the original predictors to their “maximally related orthogonal counterparts” (p. 249); these counterparts are (b) “then used to predict the criterion” (p. 249). The formula for the raw relative weight (ϵ_j) is the sum of all the products of (c), the relative contribution of the original criterion to each orthogonal criterion, and (d), the relative importance of the transformed criterion variables to the dependent variable. When these weights are “rescaled by dividing them by the model R^2 and multiplying by 100, they may be interpreted as the percentage of the model R^2 associated with each predictor” (p. 251).
- [6] In their study, Jones and Guerrero (2001) used 14 bipolar adjective pairs to assess comforting quality. These items included those more appropriately classified as assessing only one of the three ratings assessed in this study.

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