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Review

Listening and the pursuit of communal relationships

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Abstract

Two motivations linked to developing and maintaining communal relationships include caring for others' welfare and striving to be viewed as a desirable communal relationship partner. We review evidence suggesting that both motivations promote high-quality listening. Furthermore, high-quality listening signals listeners' prosocial motivation and enhances the perceived relational value of both listeners and speakers. Thus, high-quality listening likely functions as an effective strategy in the formation and maintenance of communal relationships. This review suggests several directions for future research, including longitudinal research on the role of listening in relationship development, accuracy and bias in detecting and interpreting listening, the influence of conversation topic on listening, the role of people's beliefs about the usefulness of listening, and individual and relationship factors that determine people's motivations for listening.

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Introduction

In the context of conversations, high-quality listening conveys undivided attention to the speaker, comprehension of the speaker's message, and an accepting and validating stance toward the speaker. Listeners use verbal and nonverbal behaviors to signal their interest, understanding, and validation, such as maintaining eye contact, asking follow-up questions, paraphrasing the speaker's utterances, and using backchannel responses (i.e., brief auditory responses such as "mm-mmm" and "yeah") [1]. Similarly, the concept of active listening [2] emphasizes the expression of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard.

High-quality, active listening may often be employed to help people satisfy goals relevant to forming and maintaining communal relationships. In communal relationships, both members are prosocially motivated to support their partner's welfare [3]. Relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners typically adhere to these communal norms, and people want their close relationship partners to exhibit this prosocial motivation [3]. Beyond this categorical distinction, people may vary in the strength of their prosocial motivation toward individual people [4].

People also want to be valued by others as a communal relationship partner. Hence, they care a great deal about whether their close partners exhibit prosocial motivation, and strive to present themselves as good communal partners [3,5,6]. People may engage in such self-presentation to entice desired partners into a communal relationship, to maintain or strengthen the interests of existing communal partners, or to bolster their self-perceived relational worth [5,6].

Communal relationships and these associated motivations to care for partners and maintain relational worth may promote well-being through a variety of pathways. People with communal partners are more likely to receive instrumental assistance [4]. Moreover, when people enact supportive behaviors that signal prosocial motivation, it may reassure both actors and recipients that they are valuable close relationship partners. That is, these behaviors signal to both parties that actors are willing and able to follow valued communal norms, and that actors have appraised recipients as worthwhile and desired communal partners. Such reassurances of relational value satisfy important and pervasive needs for belonging and social worth [7,8], and motivate people to maintain close relationships [9]. Fulfillment of these tangible and psychological needs may, in part, explain links between communal motivation and personal well-being [10].

Cognitive resources, lack of distraction, and training have been identified as antecedents of good listening in

prior reviews [1]. Below we review evidence suggesting that these interpersonal motivations may also promote listening, and that listening, in turn, contributes to the satisfaction of these motivations.

Prosocial motivation and listening

Several studies suggest that people are motivated to engage in high-quality, active listening when they care for the speaker's welfare. In an experience sampling study, participants reported spending more time listening to relationship partners' distress when they felt responsible for those partners' welfare [11]. Such feelings of responsibility are a defining feature of communal relationships. This greater time spent listening was observed despite the fact that listeners were more personally distressed when listening to the hardships experienced by close partners, ruling out the alternative explanation that people listen to communal partners because they find those conversations more enjoyable. Earlier findings by Hornstein [12] also suggest that prosocial motivation improves the quality of listening. Listeners asked more questions and made more constructive backchannel responses (e.g., "yeah," "uh huh") when speaking on the phone with friends, defined as relationships involving mutual self-disclosure, dependence, involvement, and obligation, relative to strangers and acquaintances. Both sets of findings suggest that high-quality listening varies across relationship partners as a function of the communal nature of the relationship. Similar findings emerge at the individual level; people who are more concerned for others' welfare in general also report greater active and empathic listening [13].

Listening may also function as a signal of prosocial motivation. For instance, good listeners are viewed as more trustworthy, a pattern found in interactions between new acquaintances [14] and in professional contexts [15]. High-quality listening also has been theorized to promote perceived partner responsiveness, which involves perceiving the listener as understanding, validating, and caring [16]. Perhaps due to greater trust and perceived responsiveness, speakers are more willing to honestly disclose when listeners exhibit high-quality listening [17].

People with prosocial motivation may often listen because they care about what is on their partners' minds and because listening makes their partners feel cared for. However, there may be an additional important reason that prosocial motivation fosters listening: listening may increase the effectiveness of future prosocial acts. Good listening facilitates acquisition of information about the speaker's well-being and needs, which can help guide the listener's subsequent provision of responsive support and avoid mistakes. Consistent with this perspective, active listening predicts provision of emotional support [13] and more helpful types of support, including empathy and encouragement, rather than help that is undesired or counterproductive [18]. It also promotes understanding of partners' emotions [19], which is associated with providing more responsive support within romantic relationships [20].

Relational value motivation and listening

When people want to be valued as a communal relationship partner, they attempt to signal to others that they are adept at following communal norms [5,6]. Given that high quality listening signals prosocial motivation, people may often engage in this listening to demonstrate their value as a relationship partner.

Research on the need to belong — a desire for social approval and inclusion [21] — suggests that concerns about one's relational value promotes listening. Those who are chronically high on the need to belong, or who have their need to belong experimentally activated in the moment, are more motivated to listen to their friends' disclosure of emotions, albeit not their disclosure of thoughts [22]. In part, this may be due to the fact that, relative to responses to factual disclosures, responses to emotional disclosures are more relevant to intimacy [23], and thus may be more relevant to listeners' perceived relational value. Classic experimental studies on ingratiation also suggest that the desire to be valued as a relationship partner promotes listening. Instructing people to obtain others' liking or approval increases their active listening behaviors [24,25].

People often respond to events that frustrate their pursuit of social worth by redoubling their efforts to obtain social worth [8]. Hence, research on loneliness, social isolation, and social rejection may also be relevant to the link between desire to be valued by others and listening. Lonely people tend to look at their conversation partner's faces more than non-lonely people [26], an aspect of high-quality listening. In addition, loneliness and social exclusion predict greater processing and memory for social cues [27]. These findings may suggest that loneliness and social exclusion elevate people's desire to be valued, which enhances attention to conversation partners. However, lonely people also are less responsive to their conversation partners [28] and tend to be more self-focused [29]. Thus, loneliness may have a mixed effect on listening, increasing attention to some social information while also compromising other components of high-quality listening. These mixed findings may emerge because lonely people tend to be motivated to both connect with others and protect themselves from social threats [29], and situational contexts that activate the latter goal may undermine high-quality listening.

It is possible that listening motivated by a desire to be valued promotes only the appearance of listening (i.e., people providing false cues that they are listening), rather than actual attention to the speaker's utterances. Indeed, people tend to assume that those who engage in frequent self-presentation are poor listeners [30]. However, in order to effectively create the appearance of listening, one must engage in behaviors that require processing the speaker's message (e.g., acknowledging, paraphrasing, asking follow-up questions), and so wanting to seem like a good listener may often promote careful information processing [31]. Moreover, wanting to be valued by others as a communal relationship partner often elicits genuine prosocial motivation [6], which should elicit a desire to truly understand the speaker's perspective.

It is also possible that listening that is motivated by a desire to be valued by others involves more self-consciousness than listening that is motivated only by prosocial concerns, and this self-consciousness could consume cognitive resources that are needed for listening. This self-focus may compromise the quality of listening, and speakers may detect it. However, self-presentation goals are often pursued automatically and without awareness [32]. Thus, pursuing a goal to be valued by others is not necessarily so cognitively demanding that people are unable to focus on other people or other goals. Indeed, people who strive to be relationally valued tend to be viewed as more responsive by their partners and objective observers [6]. Thus, they seem able to pursue the goal to be valued by others while also competently carrying out social interactions, which may include effective listening.

Listening, in turn, appears to be an effective strategy for increasing one's perceived relational value. People tend to be attracted to those who engage in high-quality listening [14,33]. Asking follow-up questions, a specific behavior involved in high-quality listening, increases others' liking and romantic attraction [34]. Listening also appears to increase people's status at work. For instance, good listeners are judged to be better at changing others' opinions, building coalitions, and maintaining effective working relationships [35]. These findings suggest that good listeners tend to be valued by others and, thus, it is often prudent to use high-quality listening as a means to improving relational value.

Beyond these effects on listeners' relational value, listening also appears to make speakers (i.e., people being listened to) feel more valued. Speakers experience greater self-esteem and lower loneliness, indicators that they feel more valued as a relationship partner, when they receive high-quality listening [36,37]. Conversely, when people are not listened to, they experience hurt feelings, an indicator of perceived relational devaluation [38]. Within the workplace, people who receive high-quality listening from coworkers feel more accepted and valued at work [39]. Hence, good listeners make other people feel valued. Given that people often reciprocate others' positive regard [40], these findings may help explain why good listeners are often valued by others; good listeners may be valued by others because they make others feel valued, which elicits their reciprocation.

Future research directions

The findings described above suggest that prosocial goals, and goals to improve or maintain social worth, are often satisfied through active, high-quality listening. Future longitudinal research should examine the potential bidirectional effects linking high-quality listening and the quality of relationships over time. High-quality communal relationships may serve as an antecedent of high-quality listening, but high-quality listening may also strengthen communal relationships. Moreover, future research should examine whether the phenomena we described above explain the development of listening reciprocity within dyads over time. Studies of work teams [41] reveal that people tend to reciprocate others' listening, and so listening is often a characteristic of dyads. Perhaps recipients of high-quality listening are motivated to reciprocate this listening because they feel cared for and valued by their partners.

People's perceptions of their partner's prosocial motivations are somewhat accurate, but they also exhibit a variety of biases. For instance, people tend to project their own motivations onto their partner, and see their partner's motivation as consistent with their chronic and general expectations and desires [42,43]. If listening reflects and signals prosocial motivation, similar biases may influence perception of a partner's listening behavior, with consequences for personal and interpersonal well-being. Perceptions of listening may be especially prone to bias because listening is difficult to accurately detect [31]. Moreover, people may misinterpret a partner's listening or lack thereof. For instance, listeners may seem insufficiently attentive because of their limited social competencies [44], but speakers may infer lack of prosocial motivation. The role of such listening misattributions in shaping interpersonally critical judgments of partner care should be examined in future research.

Listeners will find some conversation topics and utterances more interesting, pleasant, or relevant to their goals than others, which may produce variations in the quality of their listening within and across conversations. These topic-driven effects likely interact with their motivations. For instance, listeners with prosocial motivation may be especially likely to listen when speakers are expressing their needs, and their listening may be less dependent on their intrinsic interest in the

conversation topic. However, even listeners who lack prosocial motivation may appear to be engaged in high-quality listening when the topic is relevant to their goals. Thus, future research should also examine the impact of conversation topic and its interaction with the motivations discussed above.

The impact of beliefs about listening on listening behavior and relationship development should also be examined. For example, many people are overly confident about how well they understand close relationship partners [45], which may engender beliefs that careful listening is not necessary. In addition, many people believe they should spend more time talking than listening when they want to appear interesting [46], and do not appreciate the effects of question asking, an aspect of active listening, on liking [34]. These misconceptions may reduce the perceived value of listening, which could negatively impact listening and the communal quality of relationships. Speakers' beliefs may also indirectly shape the listening they receive. For instance, speakers often anticipate that sharing personal fears and insecurities will cause listeners to like them less, and they underestimate the positive effects of their honest and genuine disclosures [47]. These misconceptions could constrain disclosure, reducing listeners' chances to provide high-quality listening. Listeners also may believe that listening is valued and supportive to all speakers, despite the fact that the benefits are not always experienced, particularly when speakers are uncomfortable with intimacy [48]. To the extent that people hold beliefs about effective listening that are accurately grounded in the specific relationship context, they may engage the flexible use of listening to maximize the personal and interpersonal benefits.

Motivations for listening may vary across relationships and people. Some communal relationships are normatively asymmetric — one person cares for the other with little expectation for reciprocation (e.g., parent-infant or young child relationships) [3]. For listeners in the caretaker role, their listening may be driven more by prosocial motivation than by a motivation for relational worth. Within normatively mutual communal relationships (e.g., most friendships and romantic relationships), the relative contribution of these two motivations may vary as a function of relationship and individual difference variables. Prosocial motivations for listening may dominate when listeners feel secure about the speaker's commitment to a communal relationship, whereas relational worth motivations may drive listening when listeners feel insecure. Such possibilities highlight the importance of considering the relational context to understand the motivations that drive listening.

Finally, we note that some behaviors that seem to contradict notions of good listening nonetheless may be helpful to speakers. Whereas conceptualizations of high-quality listening include validating speakers' perspectives and providing reflections that stay true to speakers' statements [36], sometimes speakers' long-term welfare is best supported by listeners who blatantly disagree with them. For example, listeners who challenge speakers' perspectives on interpersonal conflicts may help speakers amicably resolve their conflicts, even if speakers do not want to hear their challenging messages [49]. Although high-quality listening involves maintaining attention on the speaker's message and minimizing distractions [36], sometimes speakers benefit from listeners who provide distraction [50]. If we define high-quality listening as listening that promotes a speaker's welfare, then it is clear that the particular behaviors that constitute high-quality listening will vary according to the speaker's immediate and long-term desires and needs.

Conclusion

People in communal relationships care for each other's welfare and want to be valued as a close relationship partner, and both pursuits appear to engender higher quality, active listening. This listening appears to function as an instrumental strategy through which people often satisfy these fundamental interpersonal motivations. Listening may maintain or develop communal relationships by signaling and facilitating prosocial motivation, and causing both speakers and listeners to feel valued as communal relationship partners.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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