

COMMUNICATION STUDY: ENGAGED LISTENING EXPERIENCES

ABSTRACT

People regularly experience situations where they feel they have been truly listened to, but these situations have not been documented and the significance of this type of listening has not yet been considered academically. We believe that there is a form of listening called “Engaged Listening” that has yet to be explored.

Knowing this, we interviewed 14 individuals and asked them to recount experiences where they felt they, as the speaker, were being completely listened to by a person or small (2- 5) group of people. We found that people were able to provide us with a wide range of stories where they felt they were listened to intently, but there were many similarities between the experiences. This study has made it clear that Engaged listening is fairly common, with the number of times the interviewees experience these types of conversations averaging at around 3 times a month. We were also able to confirm that every person feels heard in different ways, but eye contact and verbal engagement of some kind seem to be key to communicating engagement.

BACKGROUND

Listening is often overlooked and understudied in the communication world. There are many articles that have proven the significance of listening, but not many that dissect listening into subcategories that can be easily observed and digested. Those studies that *have* observed listening have only just started to delve into the depths of the significance of listening in different ways, and we feel that the experience of being

listened to in a way where the listener's full attention is on the speaker has not seen enough coverage.

Our research aims to explore and present a listening experience in which an individual was completely focused, even captivated, by another person during communication. We want to know what kinds of conversations have stood out to people in their pasts as being particularly productive in this way, so we have gathered stories from the perspective of 14 individuals who were speakers in an experience like the one described. We recognize that the Symbolic Interaction Theory and the Self-Disclosure Theory do come into play when assessing our data and evaluating our results, and the anticipated and observed impact of these two theories is notated below.

People who were able to identify a communication experience like the one we have described were asked to participate in an interview. We did not place a limit on how old the memory that the speaker recalled could be, so we are relying on their own self-discretion and their ability to assess their own memories when determining the accuracy of the events being shared. We are also privy to the speaker's own self-disclosure, meaning the information we gathered will be limited by the speaker themselves and how much personal information they wanted to reveal. We wonder how self-disclosure has impacted the information we received from our interviewees, and we ask ourselves if the comfort level of the speakers during the interviews have in any way influenced how the speaker recalled an event or the emotions they reported associating with the event.

Additionally, Symbolic Interaction Theory is applied in thinking about the interaction between individuals, which places emphasis on the relationships between

people, particularly on the meaning of the interaction and the way people shape the world through interaction. As has been proven in the past, listening is an essential part of interpersonal interaction. In the listening experience this research focuses on, we asked a person to recall a time when they were the speaker and they were listened to intensively by another person who devoted themselves in listening to the speaker's delivery.

Through receiving feedback and reactions from the listener, the speaker framed meanings of this communication process and will have had a feeling of being listened to. We are asking the speaker to identify the certain behaviors that led them to believe that the listener was giving them their total attention. Aside from this, the research intends to explore how this kind of communication occurs and develops, while also exploring how the interaction made the speaker feel about their relationship with the listener and the experience they have shared before, during, and after the interaction. The final purpose of this research is to uncover how a person feels when they are listened to intensely.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to better understand our phenomenological research, we read up on other forms of listening. We wanted to see what research has already been done in regard to listening before starting on our own study. First, we considered Active Listening in the context of supportive conversations. Graham Bodie describes active listening as fundamental to supportive communication. He conducted an experimental study that involved students disclosing a recent upsetting problem to either a trained active listener or an untrained listener. The active listener was trained to ask open

questions, paraphrase content, reflect feelings as well as being nonverbally warm. Being nonverbally warm included behaviors such as head nods, eye contact and having a forward body lean. These behaviors signal involvement, attentiveness, and awareness. He states that most conversations “stress the importance of both nonverbal and verbal behaviors that function to demonstrate attention, understanding, responsiveness, and empathy.” His results concluded that verbal and nonverbal active listening behaviors caused the listener to seem more emotionally aware but did not affect perceptions of problem-solving utility.

We then considered Empathic Listening and how being empathically understood benefits the person being listened to. Empathic Listening is seen when a person listens to another person with empathy. In this research, Sharon Myers conducted a qualitative study that explored empathic listening through two different therapists and their clients. Myers stated that some of the benefits of being listened to by an understanding person “makes it possible for [a person] to listen more accurately to himself, with greater empathy toward his own visceral experiences, and his own vaguely felt meanings”. By the end of her study she concluded that each participant's experience of being heard was unique because the term empathy had different meanings for each participant. Empathic listening emerged as a relational variable distinct to each therapeutic encounter examined and could not be reduced to solely a technique or a skill.

In addition to active and empathic listening, we read a study about Context Listening in different fields. This study established the listening research agenda within the contexts of business, education, healthcare, religion, and theory/research. The ILA (International Listening Association) invited more than 85 academics, business leaders, researchers, health care professionals, lawyers and ministers from five different

countries to a Forum. From there they were put into five groups to study what is known about listening within their context. Each context provided different foundations of listening literature. For example, the education context group focuses on listening in K-12 classrooms and talks about improvements in teaching listening in the classroom, while the business context group showed that the business world has a lack of listening research and experience even though they have been focused on listening for more than 50 years. These contexts give us a better understanding that different careers have distinct levels of understanding what is listening.

To better understand what “good listening” has already been correlated with, we read an article from the Harvard Business Review called “What do great listeners actually do”. In this article, Jack Zenger talks about how being a great listener is more than just making verbal sounds like “mmhmm” and being able to repeat what the other person has said. He describes a good listener as someone who periodically asks questions that promote discovery and insight. He sees good listening as a two-way dialog rather than “a one-way, speaker versus hearer interaction”. He also claims that a good listener should include interactions that build the speakers self-esteem. Zenger states that there are different levels of listening and that not every conversation requires the highest level.

We also found a study on Interpersonal Transcendence that helped to round off our understanding of “good listening.” John Greene describes transcendence as “a state of maximal receptivity and absorption in an interaction”. He states that transcendence is a special case of listening, more rare, as it is thought of as “listening in the extreme”. Greene claims that transcendent interactions are characterized by the engagement in the conversation where participants feel a sense of discovery or a feeling of connection.

The experience of transcendence can arise in almost any interaction but more cases are found in problem-solving contexts such as interactions in a skill domain or talking about knowledge in a specific topic (food, music, sports) where both discover new or shared perspectives.

All these articles helped us to identify what has already been explored, and where the blind spots were at. Knowing what already exists, we are certain that we will be able to contribute a deeper understanding of a vital type of listening that hasn't been explored before.

METHODS & LIMITATIONS

Methodology

The study relied mostly on qualitative data. We advertised the study both on campus at the University of Texas at Austin and through various social media platforms (See Appendix A.) Every interested person was asked to first respond to a short questionnaire that had them report their demographics: age, gender, race/ethnicity, affiliation with the University of Texas, and college affiliation. The survey then prompted them to recall a time where they were the speaker being listened to intently.

APPENDIX A: Study advertisement.

“UT Events Calendar Call for Participants

Participants needed for study about memorable listening experiences.

A research study is looking for participants who can recall the details of a memorable listening experience. This study involves participating in an audio-recorded interview that will last approximately 30 minutes. If you are interested in participating, please fill out the brief eligibility form

below. If you are eligible to participate, you will be contacted by one of our primary researchers. No identifying information is collected.

Eligibility:

18 years or older

Be able to recall the details of a memorable listening experience at any point in your life.”

Out of the 172 people who opened the survey, 41 answered the prompt and said they were willing to be contacted for a follow up interview. Due to the timing of the research, we were only able to conduct 21 of those interviews. COVID-19 prevented us from being able to conduct all our interviews face-to-face, so many happened over the phone or on Zoom.

When we went to transcribe the interviews we collected, we found that 1/3 of our interviews were not entirely relevant to the topic we were asking about. We made adjustments that made it easier for us to communicate our purpose to our interviewees, placing specific emphasis on the importance of the interviewee being the speaker instead of the listener, as well as the significance of the intimacy of the event, since we had received a few stories where the interviewee misunderstood us and spoke about giving a lecture. We also prepared examples that we could use if absolutely necessary so we could easily get the interviewee in the right headspace, but those were reserved as a last resort because we wanted the stories to come organically.

Finally, after wrapping up our interviews, we transcribed the 14 that were relevant to the study and coded those transcripts so we could easily compare the information we gathered from each interview in a way that made sense.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that we encountered in our study. The first, and most exacting, was the COVID-19 outbreak. Since we were only in the beginning stages of interviewing before the quarantine took place, we had to alter our approach to work around it. The interviews we conducted changed from face-to-face interviews to ones that were done over the phone. This change potentially altered how our own conversations as interviewers and interviewees went since we were unable to see facial expressions and body language, and the interviewees were unable to tell if the interviewers were entirely engaged in the conversation. This barrier may have had an effect on the aforementioned self-disclosure of the interviewees because they may have been unable to receive the affirmations they were looking for, making it difficult for them to feel comfortable opening up and discussing more vulnerable material with the interviewers.

Another challenge that we faced was that not everyone who was interviewed understood the questions in the same way. There was a range of answers, some of which did not always pertain to our specific topic of describing an experience where they were the ones being listened to. After realizing that 7 of our interviews were not completely relevant to the topic we were exploring, we reassessed how our interviewers delivered the prompt. The confusion was both in the perspective the interviewee was offering us, some interviewees were recounting experiences as listeners instead of speakers, as well

as the size of the audience the interviewee was speaking to, we were looking for intimate conversations where some were recounting speeches they had given. Once we reconsidered the language we used to introduce the topic and prepared examples of situations we were looking for, we had little difficulty having relevant conversations.

A third limitation can be seen in the willingness, or lack thereof, of interviewees to discuss certain topics. As was mentioned before, self-disclosure was a concern from the beginning. Often, people can remember deeper conversations better than everyday ones, but the topics discussed in those conversations are not always ones that people are willing to share, especially with strangers. So, when asked to describe a time when they felt listened to, people might have had an initial idea that they maybe felt they were unable to share completely, if at all. It's certainly important to consider that some of these conversations potentially had some key details redacted by the interviewee when they recounted them.

Finally, the age of the memory being recalled could have some impact on the accuracy. All the interviewees told us they were fairly confident in their recollections of the events that occurred. However, knowing the accuracy of the human brain in recalling information has been proven to be iffy at best, we can expect that the 15 year old memory one girl used wasn't entirely accurate since it likely didn't retain too many of the details we were asking her to share with us, and likewise with other interviews. Additionally, other limitations include a small sample size and a response pool made up of mostly females aged 18-24, though both of these limitations can be rectified by conducting more interviews and shifting focus to include demographics that were not as prevalent in the first round.

Individual Contribution

In the processes mentioned above, I listened to all the interviews and, based off of the notes I took, I sorted the interviews into either a “keep” or “discard” pile. I then transcribed two of the interviews, checked the transcriptions of recordings translated by another student, and conducted two interviews of my own, which I then transcribed as well. After the transcriptions were completed, I sorted through eight transcriptions and, along with the other four girls involved in the study, copied the important information over to a Word document. The information on the document was then moved to a spreadsheet, so I moved over the information from three of the fourteen pages we had coded. Finally, I wrote the Abstract, Background, Results, and Conclusion, and contributed to the Methods & Limitations section of the paper I am turning in.

RESULTS

When looking over the data, we found several themes that were notable. Conversations lasted anywhere between 15 minutes and 3 hours, averaging out at around an hour. The events recounted also happened anywhere between the day of the interview to 15 years prior. 50% of the events happened within a year of the recollection, and 75% occurred within the past five years. People described a wide range of situations that were significant to them. Some situations were expected, like one-on-one conversations with significant others, while others were surprising, like a small group discussion at church. The experience we were looking to hear about involved all relationships, whether they be professional or casual, strangers or close friends, the people who spoke in this study proved that deep conversations can happen anywhere.

People also reported feeling similar feelings. 13/14 of the interviewees felt the experience they recounted was a neutral-positive, with only one interviewee saying that they did not enjoy the feelings they were experiencing in the conversation they recalled. It is worth mentioning that that one interviewee did mention that they have had similarly intimate experiences since the one they recounted, and those experiences left them feeling fulfilled. Other interviewees mentioned there were some situations that made them feel uncomfortable, mostly instances where the interviewee was letting their guard down around a stranger or acquaintance. There was also mention of some degree of self-consciousness, but overall, the experiences left the speakers feeling good about themselves.

Additionally, there were common verbal and nonverbal cues mentioned throughout the interviews. 11 of the participants mentioned maintained eye contact and 7 mentioned nodding. Other physical signals interviewees remembered include the listener leaning in towards the speaker, the listener angling their body so it faced the speaker, and the listener placing a hand on the speaker or giving them a hug when it felt appropriate. Additionally, all 14 mentioned some form of verbal affirmation. 7 interviewees mentioned they appreciated not being interrupted and 5 mentioned being asked questions showed the listener was paying attention. Some interviewees also mentioned that they appreciated the fact that their listener did not interject with their own personal stories, with only one interviewee saying that having her listener contribute to the conversation actually made her feel better about the experience. With this point in mind, it's clear that every person feels heard in different ways, but eye contact and verbal engagement of some kind seem to be key to communicating engagement.

CONCLUSION

Study Reflection

Going forward, we can expect that additional interviews would deepen our understanding of the breadth of these experiences. We were surprised by some of the responses we had received, so there are likely many more situations out there that we haven't considered. Additionally, gathering responses from a more diverse pool of people could be useful. Aside from actively trying to engage more male participants, it could also be interesting to ask participants if they identify as an introvert or extrovert. I can't help but wonder if most of our participants were extroverts since they willingly agreed to interview where they had to be vulnerable with a stranger. I imagine introverts could have different opinions on what kinds of situations have made them feel like they were actively listened to in the past.

Additionally, ensuring we're getting some of that concrete information like the amount of time that has passed since the experiences being recounted is important. It's easy to get lost in the interviews and think that questions have been answered clearly enough already, but making sure we are asking the questions like "How confident are you in your recollection?" is important to being able to compare the results of the different interviews. I think it might be worth considering rearranging the questions that we have on our schedule of questions so that the structure is easier to follow. The way the questions are listed currently has us switching between asking about the interviewees experience and their perceptions on the listeners experience, so I think it could be useful to arrange the questions so we aren't switching back and forth. That organization might make it

easier for us to keep track of the questions we have already asked and the answers we have already received.

Personal Reflection

In terms of a nomenclature, I personally think we should call it Engaged Listening. I feel like it easily communicates to anyone using the term that the listener's attention is not split, and the speaker is the focus. I would define it as:

“A type of listening where the person is completely enthralled by the speaker. The listener has nothing dividing their attention, and the speaker is able to recognize that the person[s] they are speaking to is/are hyper-focused on them and the conversation at hand.”

The definition we are currently using does a good job at describing the listening itself, but the way it is introduced does seem to confuse interviewees (See Appendix B.) We have seen several occasions where the interviewee tried to describe an experience where *they* were the listeners. I've been able to correct interviewees by emphasizing the fact that they are the speaker in the scenario we are asking them to describe, but we aren't able to correct the interviewee when they are filling out the survey.

APPENDIX B: Current listening definition.

“We are interested in learning about a kind of listening when an individual is completely focused, even captivated, by another person during communication. This type of experience is viewed as unequal to other listening interactions because an individual perceives that the other person is completely engrossed in what you were saying. In other words, the listener is not distracted by things going on around them or

preoccupied with their own thoughts. In addition, the listener does not seek to seize control of the conversation, or shift its focus, rather provides a sense of authenticity and genuineness to the speaker. It is possible that this type of listening can be perceived as positive or negative, and may lead to a variety of feelings, ranging the gamut from support to anxiety.”

I discovered how much I enjoy research last fall, so this study was a lot of fun for me to work on. It gave me an opportunity to continue to grow my analytical and interviewing skills, while also giving me a unique way of examining how important listening can be. I know now that I am a stronger than average interviewer, and I also confirmed that I offer a unique perspective, even in areas where experts are involved. It's really cool knowing that I can continue to contribute new ideas and information to different groups, and I think that is in large part thanks to my tendency to analyze every angle I can find.

I was particularly interested in walking away from this study feeling like I better understand what makes a good conversation and a good listener, and I feel like I have accomplished that. Because I was able to read the transcripts and see what actions were the most impactful to the interviewee/speaker, I now know what tools I can use to ensure that the people around me feel heard. These lessons will be invaluable as I continue on with my career, not only as a leader, but also as a friend and coworker.

APPENDIX C: Interview Responses

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