

Listening with Empathy in Organizational Communication

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Abstract

Listening and empathy are widely considered marks of competent communicators and leaders. Although overshadowed by speaking, listening and person-focused organizations that practice empathy are linked to positive organizational cultures. In this essay, I survey fifty years of organizational communication research history related to the nexus of listening and empathy: empathic listening. I argue that organizational scholars should escalate their groundbreaking work on empathic listening by rejoining the growing theoretical discussion and research currently underway.

Keywords: listening, empathy, empathic listening, organization

In a brief review of a history of the field of organizational communication, Cheney (2007) describes a discipline that emerged in the business realm in the mid-1900s primarily focused on workplace productivity. This emphasis shifted in the 1980s with a move to include broader theoretical and epistemological standpoints and diverse organizational issues. At present, organizational communication scholars are increasingly concerned with engaging real world problems with their studies, particularly in the pursuit of more socially just and ethical ways of organizational life. In these contexts, listening and emotional openness are required both as a standpoint of engagement with organizational communication practices and as research ends in and of themselves (Cheney, 2007). In other words, since empathy and listening are widely considered by general society marks of a “good” communicators, and “research on social support demonstrates listening as one of the most helpful behaviors in times of distress... managing conflict, promoting intimacy, succeeding as a leader, and creating a client-centered business model” (Bodie, 2012, p. 120), organizational communication scholars should understand how the function and practice of empathic listening impacts organizational development.

Listening is often overshadowed by speaking in communication research and organizational

research in particular. For example, when comparing a search of EbscoHost’s “Communication and Mass Media Complete” (CMMC) database¹ in December 2014 for articles that contained “listening” compared to articles that contained “speaking,” three times as many articles were found for speaking as for listening. This statistic held when comparing only articles that included reference to “organization” as well. Yet, listening has proven an important skill that impacts organizational life, including aspects such as job performance and upward mobility (Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989).

Researchers over the past three decades have consistently called for greater focus on listening in the organizational context. In the 1980s, Sypher et al. (1989, p. 295) argued that “few investigations have linked listening to other communication related skills, and almost no studies demonstrate those relationships in perhaps the most obvious and relevant context – the organization.”

According to Brownell (2008), not much changed in the twenty years following, with research rarely

¹ EbscoHost’s CMMC database includes a total of 820 journal titles (500 in full text and 620 with abstracts), many of which cover manuscripts from the past century, dating back to 1915 (EbscoHost, 2014a). In the domains of organization, this includes monographs and journals such as “Organization,” “Organization Studies,” “Engaging Communication, Transforming Organizations,” and “Group & Organization Management,” among others (EbscoHost, 2014b). In a search for any article that included “organization” in some way, 34,929 articles emerged.

considering how listening impacts organizational communication, performance, or development. Bodie (2012, p. 120) indicated that “most past research...only leads to informed speculations about the role of listening within organizations” but that “research is needed to detail those specific elements of listening most important for fostering positive organizational relationships and a supportive organizational climate.” Although listening is linked to positive organizational cultures, frequent calls for research seem to remain unanswered in organizational communication research.

Empathy is also considered a vital trait of communication and leadership in any organization. Awareness of others’ needs, emotional intelligence, and person-focused organizations that practice empathy are positively related to job performance and positive organizational cultures (Gentry, Weber, & Sandri, 2007). In the past decade, literature discussing empathy as a valuable skill in interpersonal and organizational life has steadily increased. In a December 2014 search of articles that contained the term “empathy” in EbscoHost’s CMMC database, almost 80 percent of the articles were published after 2003. For the organizational context in particular, when both the terms “empathy” and “organization” were searched, 80 percent of the 38 results that emerged reflected this same pattern.

With growing acknowledgement of

the importance of listening and empathy in organizational communication, understanding where scholarly contributions currently exist can guide our future exploration and application of empathic listening in organizational practices. In this essay, I first present a brief description of how listening research developed in the field of communication and organizational communication in particular. Second, I narrow this research to focus on listening with empathy—including research that considers empathetic listening, empathic listening, and listening with empathy in the context of the organization. Finally, I suggest that organizational communication might readopt and expand its influential work in empathic listening research in the organizational context within and beyond the health and educational contexts that it has previously considered.

Listening Research

A number of academic disciplines have engaged the study of listening, including communication, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and management. In their broad survey of the multidisciplinary field of listening, Bodie, et al. (2008, p. 104) specify three areas of listening that have typically been researched across these disciplines: “information processing, competency, and individual differences.” I provide

a brief overview of these three strains of listening

literature below.

According to Bodie's (2012) and Bostrom's (2011) brief histories of listening research, many scholars attribute the initial steps of listening research to Nichol's (1948) study of listening comprehension in the university classroom. This focus on listening as information processing—the receiving, processing, and retention of information—set the stage for ensuing studies that primarily focused on cognitive listening comprehension. In 1967, Kelly (1967) significantly shifted information processing listening research by arguing that listening comprehension tests were measuring general intelligence and treating listening as a unitary skill rather than considering the multiple dimensions and skills (distinct from general cognitive abilities) that must be gained and practiced to be an accomplished listener.

Two decades of research that followed Kelly's move focused on expanding understanding of the multidimensional aesthetic and "sociocognitive" (Beard, 2009, p. 8) nature of listening in human communication—cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes. Building on this information processing research, focus on listening as a communicative skill emerged in the 1970s when linguist Hymes (1979) argued that in order to listen competently, one must have the knowledge and skills to listen appropriately in

any given situation. In the 1980s, Goss (1982) considered what constituted listening "goodness" or "effectiveness" and Spitzberg & Cupach (1989) developed their hugely influential communication competence models which incorporated listening as a key component (Graham D. Bodie et al., 2008). Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s listening research shifted from being solely about comprehension levels to address various kinds of listening success in diverse situations.

In the 1990s, communication researchers began to emphasize listening behaviors that went beyond the internal skills of individual listeners and included communication behaviors that occur in the context of relationship between multiple people. Bodie (2012) categorizes this type of listening research as relational listening—a type of listening that moves beyond information gathering and interpretation. Rhodes (1993) indicated that this type of relational listening occurs within a dyadic relationship between people. As listening research shifted to emphasize relational components, scholars also increased their attention on the ways that individual difference might impact listening. According to Bodie et al. (2008, p. 109), "much of this research has focused on personality-based differences," with discussion of cognitive complexity and listening style preference, "including personality type, empathy and

conversational sensitivity, and communication and receiver apprehension.” Cultural constructs were also considered, including Imhof’s work (2003, p. 364) which found that: “there are both cross-cultural differences between relational listeners and individual cultural constructs within individual listeners that need to be considered for the analysis of listening situations and listening skills.” Relational listening considers in more depth the variety of social, cultural, and individual traits and filters that might impact the listening process.

Although listening has typically been discussed as a construct with a set of definable traits, Bodie (2012) argues that listening should instead be considered a theoretical term. Listening, as theory, might have a variety of meanings depending on the purpose of those engaging in its study.” Treating listening as a theoretical term moves us away from concerns over definitional harmony and toward attempting to understand listening in all its complexity” (Graham D. Bodie, 2012, p. 114). This call for listening to become a field of study in and of itself and to expand beyond instrumental uses is leading to growing attention on listening in the academic field of communication. This is especially true in the study of dyadic interpersonal communication in recent years, but the potential for expanding its application within broader social networks and organizational contexts should

also be realized. In the next section I consider listening research as it appears in organizational communication and cultures.

Organizational Listening Research

The first known study to consider listening in the organizational context was published in 1942 in the *Journal of Marketing*. It was a case study of a manufacturing company which found that customers who listened to a particular advertising program over a long period of time were more likely to use that advertised product (Unknown, 1942). Twenty years lapsed between this article and the next that addressed listening in the organizational context: Burger’s (1967) “The Public Relations of AT&T: Introduction” which considered how listening to public opinion impacts organizational behavior. Almost ten years after this, Weinrach and Swanda Jr. (1975) offered a third look at listening in the organizational context by considering the amount of time spent listening among managers in a number of business organizations. They argued that listening should be included in business communication curriculum. This article in the mid-1970s marks the tangible beginning of growth in research related to how the communicative act of listening impacts organizational contexts.

In the 1980s, organizational listening research grew alongside works such as DiSalvo’s (1980) exploration of necessary skills for people

functioning in the organizational context, Monge et al.'s (1982) exploration of communication competence (including listening) in the workplace, Brownell's (1985) on listening in business settings, and Husband et al.'s (1988) study of factors influencing how supervisors perceive and understand their own listening behavior.

In the 1990s, Haas and Arnold (1995) found that employees considered listening to be a crucial component of what it means to be a competent communicator, utilizing the communication competence literature that grew out of Spitzberg & Cupach (1989) work and mirroring the trends of listening literature in the field of communication as a whole. Communication competency as discussed in the organizational context also moved beyond investigating the communicative competence of individuals to take account of the competence of the organization as a whole. For example, Brownell (2008, p. 216) argues that listening is "the most central and one of the most neglected" competencies in leadership effectiveness when looking at individuals whereas Goby and Lewis (2000) argue from a study of listening skills in Singapore industry that listening is crucial for overall organizational effectiveness and competency.

In the 2000s, organizational listening scholarship reflected broader trends in listening literature as a whole, including relational approaches

to listening that focused on individual differences. For example, Imhof and Janusik (2006) explored ways that different national cultures conceptualize listening. They found cultural differences, and referred to previous work that addressed cultural differences in company communication (e.g. Lewis 1999). Of the four dimensions that they considered—organization information, critical listening, learning and integrating information, and relationship building—results showed differences in cultural constructions of relational aspects of listening. Based on these findings, they encouraged further research into the construction of cultural relational listening characteristics.

Brownell (2008) argues that understanding listening in the organizational context is challenging because of the lack of common theory, frameworks, and listening often acting as a hidden process that is difficult to observe and measure. Yet, throughout these decades of listening research, listening has been included in varying degrees in a few communication theories that are used in organizational contexts, including the Dialogic Theory of Public Relations, Interpersonal Adaptation Theory, and Leader-Member Exchange Theory. In Leader-Member Exchange Theory, for example, research on the presence of listening is "linked to job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity" (Bodie, 2012, p. 120) and listening is a critical component of building

partnerships between leaders and subordinates.

As seen in this brief literature review, listening in organizational communication research appears to have emerged in the 1940s in sales and marketing contexts, organizational emphases that were typical of the field at that time. Evolving alongside listening research as construct and theory, scholars interested in organizational listening adopted communication competence and relational frameworks that focused on both individual and relational competencies and differences. The shift to the relational nature of listening highlighted that “listening generally suggests an active presence of another individual who is typically acting with empathic tendencies” (Bodie, 2012, p. 113). Thus, empathy and relational listening are inherently tied together, although both are often assumed and thus hidden or overlooked in organizational communication literature.

Organizational Empathic Listening Research

According to Lahiff (1976), empathy is a commonly recognized desirable trait for leaders in organizations. Yet, like listening, it has not been the focus of communicative research until recently. Within listening literature specifically, research that focuses on the intersection of listening and empathy is scarce. Based on a December 2014 search of intersecting concepts of empathy and listening (using search terms “empathetic listening,” “empathic

listening,” and “empathy” with “listening”), 52 unique articles appeared in the EbscoHost CMMC database that related to communication.

Empathy has been defined and conceptualized within the listening literature in a number of ways (leading to a lack of consensus and consistency in research), but it is typically associated with being an attentive communicator and other-oriented (Payne, 2005; Stewart, 1983). In sync with the expansion of listening literature from comprehension testing to developing individual communication competence, the first two academic journal articles related to empathy and listening appeared in the early 1980s. Throughout the listening literature, the intersection of these two concepts has been referred to with a number of terms, including “empathetic listening” and “empathic listening.” Because the latter seems to be used most frequently, I use “empathic listening” in this essay.

The first two manuscripts to specifically deal with empathy and listening appeared in the scholarly literature in 1983. Empathic listening emerged as an aspect of communication competence within the organizational setting of public school administrators (Snaveley & Walters, 1983) and Stewart (1983) argued that empathic listening is an impossible fiction to achieve because no one can put themselves in the place of another to fully feel or understand their experience. This latter

argument led to the development of an “interpretive listening” framework which had a noteworthy impact on relational listening studies, but lies beyond the scope of this essay. McComb and Jablin (1984) added to these initial works by looking at the perception of interviewers as empathic listeners and how those perceptions correlated with interview outcomes (whether applicants were offered a second interview). The study revealed that interviewers who verbally interrupted the applicants were considered by applicants to have less empathic listening, but that this did not appear to impact interview outcomes. The next year, Brownell (1985) published an article that argued for the importance of empathic listening in the business context.

As one can see in this brief outline of the initial stages of empathic and listening literature, the first decade of empathic listening work in the 1980s most frequently studied within organizational contexts. Despite this initial groundbreaking research, empathic listening has remained on the margins of organizational communication research. At the end of the push for empathic listening organizational research in the 1980s, Bruneau (1989) offered a conceptual review of empathy and listening that argued against assuming or oversimplifying empathic listening in communication literature, calling instead for additional research. However, it was not organizational communication scholars

that primarily responded to this call, but another subdivision of communication altogether: interpersonal communication. Within the organizational context, I found only 20 academic manuscripts in the December 2014 EbscoHost CMMC search related to empathic listening. These articles primarily considered empathic listening’s role in health care (more than half of the articles) and educational settings, with only minimal treatment in business (Corner & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006), religious (Thompson, 2009), and generalized organizational settings (Cheney, 2008).

Organizational empathic listening research considered the educational context in the 1980s and 2000s with an emphasis on public school administrators (Snavely & Walters, 1983), university interviewing processes (McComb & Jablin, 1984), tutoring relationships (Wilde, Cuny, & Vizzier, 2006), and relational life in the academy (Callie, 2007). Empathic listening in the health care organizational context emerged in 2000 and has emphasized physician-patient medical dialogue most prominently (See, for example, Coran et al. (2010) and du Pre (2002)), but has also included therapeutic relationships (N. Kelly, 2003; Myers, 2000), hospice volunteering and end-of-life care (Vora & Vora, 2008; Worthington, 2008), and one article on training medical students in empathic

listening which bridges educational and health care domains (Bayne, 2011).

Of special note in organizational scholarship is the development of the Active-Empathetic/Active-Empathic Listening Scales in the business communication realm. In 1999, Drollinger and Corner introduced and defined active-empathetic listening (AEL) in the context of marketing and sales, and Drollinger continued to expand on these ideas in following years (Corner & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger et al., 2006). They conceptualized active-empathetic listening as an activity with three stages: sensing, processing, and responding. Gearhart and Bodie (2011, p. 87) emphasize that both empathy and listening are “multidimensional construct(s)” and “within each of these stages, individuals can be more or less active and empathic.” Since initially presented in the business world, the active-empathetic listening scale has been adopted and developed by others in the field of interpersonal communication, most notably Graham D. Bodie and scholars at Louisiana State University. Through intensive statistical testing (e.g., Bodie (2011), Gearhart & Bodie (2011), Pence and Vickery (2012), and Bodie et al. (2013)), interpersonal communication scholarship has continued the conceptual development of AEL. Listening with empathy is, however, undeniably beneficial to more communicative environments

than interpersonal relationships alone and may be practiced differently in diverse contexts, including evolving organizations. As discussed at the outset of this essay, both listening and empathy are crucial components of positive communication in organizational culture and contexts.

Thompson’s (2009) paper related to empathic listening in religious institutions and Cheney’s (2008) article inspiring organizational communication scholarship to become more engaged in public scholarship offer unique and refreshing outliers to the educational and health care focus in organizational empathic listening scholarship. It is probable that additional work related to empathic listening in organizational contexts exist in academic literature outside of what was found in this initial study, and future research should explore these additional domains. However, with only two articles addressing listening with empathy that are not related to education, healthcare, and/or business in the 34,929 articles related to “organization” in my 2014 search of the CMMC database, there is little doubt that much additional work exploring empathic listening in organizational communication could prove beneficial for those interested in organizational development, change, and cultures.

Conclusion

Empathic listening warrants increased

attention in organizational communication for a number of reasons. First, organizational communication scholars played a foundational role in the initial exploration of empathy and listening in the field of communication as a whole and could enjoy the fruit of their labors through continued conceptual development, theoretical improvement, and practical application within the field itself and in public scholarship as well. Second, as attention to empathy and listening grows in the academy, organizational communication scholars are poised to join and contribute to the conversation in useful ways through a lens that is distinct from the primary voices attending to empathic listening today. Third, as the active-empathic listening scale is currently being advanced conceptually and empirically in interpersonal communication, it could be adopted again in the organizational context to be tested in diverse domains that are distinct to its domain of study—creating new and enriched knowledge between communication subdivisions. Finally, although organizational communication has a significant presence within empathic listening scholarship, this literature review shows that the focus has been primarily in health care and educational settings. Organizational communication is a rich and varied discipline including many more contexts than just these! Imagine what exploration of empathy and listening might accomplish in

better understanding non-profit organizations, international development organizations, hybrid organizations, digital organizations, and culturally and diverse organizations globally, to name but a few additional contexts.

Empathic listening can lead to better understanding the challenges that organizations face at each point in history by establishing learning by listening (to the great diversity of ideologies, cultural norms, social performances, and other human differences) as a foundational organizational value. Considering the persuasive arguments for valuing both empathy and listening in any and all contexts, organizations and organizational communication research stand only to gain in committing more fully to this conversation. Neither empathy nor listening are givens; both are skills and competencies that organizations can develop within their individual members and organizational cultures. Based on initial findings, leaders that pursue and practice empathic listening experience more positive organizational cultures and overall organizational effectiveness. Better understanding of how individual communication reflects and produces empathic listening within an organization can lead to the creation of tangible initiatives for promoting desired organizational cultural norms. Research of intercultural listening competencies may find ways that empathic listening might be practiced

differently among diverse peoples and cultures. Application of these findings could lead to more effective intercultural organizational relationships and better multi-organizational collaborations.

Organizations have a unique role to play in the discussion of empathic listening as they can emphasize the way that empathic listening is not simply some trait within an individual, relationship, or organization to be studied. Instead, embracing a stance of empathic listening will lead to the constitution of particular social structures in both organizations and the world in which we live. This could be very good news. If organizational communication scholars take up the call to greater engagement with the ethical listening scholarship, they can once again occupy the space they held in the early 1980s when empathetic listening research began. They can be forerunners in an area that might impact both their own division of communication, the broader field of communication as a whole, and the real practices of organizational leaders and members around the globe.



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