

Review

Listening and attitude change

Kenneth G. DeMarree, Ya-Hui Chang, Taylor Lee and
Angelia Venezia

Abstract

We review research on the role of high-quality listening behavior in attitude change. We examine how listening behaviors can impact attitudes and the mechanisms underlying these effects. The article discusses research that explicitly examines high-quality listening, as well as research that examines behaviors that may indicate high-quality listening or that incorporates high-quality listening into larger interventions. The reviewed research suggests that receiving high-quality listening increases psychological safety and open-minded self-reflection, leading people to consider perspectives they otherwise would not. This in turn leads to less extreme, clearer, and more nuanced views on the topic of conversation. Finally, we highlight the need for further research to better understand the role of listening in attitude change, particularly in non-western cultures.

Addresses

University at Buffalo, State University of New York, Buffalo, NY, USA

Corresponding author: DeMarree, Kenneth G. (kgdemarr@buffalo.edu)

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Introduction

Imagine the following scenario: One evening, Hanna talks with her partner Kiera about her recent frustrations with a colleague at work, noting that she's started to really dislike this colleague. As Hanna vents, Kiera listens attentively, checking in to make sure she understands Hanna's experience with her colleague, and asking questions when she does not understand. During the conversation, Hanna feels comfortable that Kiera will not judge her for expressing herself, and ends up

"thinking out loud," where she expresses half-formed ideas as they enter her mind. As the conversation progresses, Hanna recognizes that although her colleague's actions were frustrating, the things that frustrated her in this situation are also the things she has appreciated about her colleague in other situations. Hanna also recognizes that she has sometimes treated her colleague unfairly. Hanna comes away from her conversation with Kiera with a clearer, less extreme, more nuanced view of her colleague.

Given the focus of this special issue, it should not be surprising that the scenario above is an example of high-quality listening. Novel among the other contributions to this issue, however, is that the focus of the scenario — and of the current paper — is on the impact high-quality listening can have on people's *attitudes*. In the above scenario, Hanna's attitude (i.e., her opinion of her colleague) changes because of Kiera's high-quality listening. These changes include both where Hanna's attitude lies on a positive-negative continuum (moving in a positive direction from her initially very negative view) as well as the additional properties of the attitude — in this example, the clarity with which it is held and the acknowledgement of both positive and negative reactions (i.e., ambivalence) toward her colleague. As described below, such impacts on people's attitudes have been documented in the literature on interpersonal listening.

Attitudes in conversation

When we refer to people's attitudes, we're talking about the extent to which people evaluate an object with some degree of positivity and/or negativity [1,2]. In addition to the positivity or negativity of an attitude, typically referred to as its valence, other attitudinal properties, such as the extremity, certainty, or ambivalence with which attitudes are held are also important, as these features predict whether the attitude is likely to change or guide behavior and judgment [3,4]. An extensive literature has examined the conditions under which and the processes by which people's attitudes change [2,5], although the vast majority of studies on attitude change have examined conditions in which static messages or other instructions are presented to participants, without any actual conversation [6].

A variety of motivations can emerge when discussing one's attitudes with another person [6], including motivations to connect with others [7,8], to defend the self [9,10], and to maintain or restore freedom [11,12]. As such, conversations about one's attitudes have the potential to threaten their belongingness, self-evaluation, freedom, or relationship with their conversational partner. These threats can result in self-protective and self-defensive motivations and behavior which often support further entrenchment of pre-existing views [13–16]. Emerging research suggests that high-quality listening exerts its impact on attitudes by mitigating these potential threats to the self [6].

High-quality listening

Listeners can impact a conversation via the things they do and say, including backchannel reactions to the speaker (e.g., “ahhh” or “mm-hmm” which can communicate interest, understanding, engagement, and so forth) [17]. High-quality listening involves verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate that a listener is attending to the speaker, attempting to understand them, and cares about or accepts them [18]. In other words, high-quality listening entails active engagement in the conversation beyond the “smiling and nodding” that lay understandings of listening can entail. This sort of listening does not have to include agreement with the speaker's position [19]. If there is disagreement, a high-quality listener verbally or nonverbally communicates that they value the speaker, even if they might disagree with their views. Connecting to the focus of the current issue of this journal, high-quality listening is one way to convey responsiveness to a partner [20]. Perceived partner responsiveness — the sense that one's partner understands, validates, and supports one's inner traits and experiences [20,21] — has many of the same psychological effects as receiving high-quality listening [20,22].

Receiving this kind of listening has a variety of psychological impacts. For example, speakers experience less state anxiety and greater psychological safety [19,23–25], which in turn leads them to engage in less defensive [19] or more open-minded self-reflection [23,25,26]. This open-minded self-reflection includes attention to one's internal states, consideration of thoughts beyond the first few that come to mind, and a willingness to learn from one's partner [23,26,27]. This sort of thinking style can lead people to consider their own conflicting views on a topic [19,28], presumably because they are less concerned with being judged for the inconsistency, whether by oneself or by one's conversation partner. In addition, at least in situations that are potentially threatening (e.g., discussing prejudice), receiving high-quality listening supports speakers' psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness [24,29–32]. This set of psychological experiences, in turn, are responsible for many of the documented effects of listening on people's attitudes.

Listening and attitude change

Listening interventions

In most experimental studies on listening and attitude change, a participant adopts the role of “speaker” and talks about a focal topic for a set amount of time (e.g., 10-min) while interacting with a research assistant or participant listener whose listening quality is manipulated. In other words, there is no persuasion attempt present. When trained listeners are used, research assistants enact either moderate¹ or high-quality listening depending on random assignment [19,23,26]. When participant listeners are used, quality of listening is manipulated via distraction [creating low versus moderate quality listening; [23,33]; or structured activity [creating moderate versus high quality listening; [25]].

Research using this paradigm has found a variety of effects on people's attitudes. For example, speakers who experience high-quality listening are more likely to report both positive and negative reactions toward the topic of discussion (i.e., objective ambivalence) compared with people who do not experience such listening [19,25]. Usually, the simultaneous recognition of both positives and negatives leads people to *feel* conflicted in their attitudes [i.e., subjective ambivalence; [34,35]. However, among people who experience high-quality listening, an increase in objective ambivalence is no longer as strongly associated with feelings of conflict [19,25]. One interpretation is that the psychological safety experienced in these interactions means that people feel less pressure to resolve their conflicting reactions, allowing them to feel more comfortable holding views with divergent elements.

People who experience high-quality listening, compared with people who do not, also report less extreme attitudes toward the focal topic [19,25]. When discussing a group about which participants hold a negative attitude, high-quality listening, compared with moderate or poor listening, leads to less prejudice (or a less extreme negative attitude) [26]. Additionally, people who experience high-quality listening when discussing an attitude report both a clearer understanding of the attitude and a greater willingness to share that attitude with others than those who experienced the control condition [23]. Although attitude clarity is associated with the strength of people's attitudes [36], it does not generally predict attempts to persuade or force one's attitude onto others [37,38]. Thus, high-quality listening may foster attitudes that are useful to the attitude holder, without leading them to think that others need to hold the same view. Parallel findings to several of the effects described in this section have also

¹ Moderate quality listening is typically used as a contrast condition with confederates to isolate the effects of *high*-quality listening against a relatively neutral baseline. Notably, poor quality listening may instigate contrastive psychological processes by conveying rejection of the speaker or their ideas, which could stimulate resistance processes [6,19].

been observed with perceived partner responsiveness [22].

Component interventions

A handful of studies have manipulated individual behaviors that may indicate high-quality listening to examine their impact on attitude change or change-related mindsets. Most notable among these is question-asking. Asking questions directed at more fully understanding another person's perspective or experience is a key behavior that might signal high-quality listening [18,39]. Receiving good questions may also help a speaker to introspect on their views [40]. Unlike the research on listening where there is typically no persuasive message, in work on question-asking, the message source is often the one who asks the questions. The impact of such questions can vary depending on contextual factors and the inferences that message recipients make about the questions or their underlying intentions [41–43].

One key inference that recent work has examined is that a message source who asks questions may be perceived as more receptive to another's views [44,45]. This receptivity is often reciprocated [46], leading message recipients to report greater openness to the source's message. For example, when a message source asks an elaboration question, message recipients view the source as more receptive, and in turn report being more receptive themselves [47]. Although receptivity has been linked to less biased processing of information [45], this research has generally not examined the consequences of receptivity for attitude change.

Multifaceted interventions

Other research, such as the work of Kalla and Broockman [48,49], has incorporated elements of high-quality listening into more elaborate interventions. They have included high-quality listening in canvassing interventions directed at advocating for marginalized groups (e.g., transgender people or immigrants). These interventions contain multiple elements (e.g., exchange of narratives, analogic perspective taking), but include nonjudgmental listening. This research has shown that these interventions were effective at increasing the positivity of people's attitudes toward transgender people or immigrants, as well as policies supportive of these groups, in some cases for months after the initial contact [48,49]. Follow-up work has tried to determine which elements of these interventions are needed for success, and one appears to involve getting participants to attend to the perspectives of those in the targeted groups [49,50]. Although the mechanisms underlying this attention have not yet been identified, one possibility is that the listening behavior of the canvasser elicits reciprocal listening from the participant [51].

Other work has used listening behavior to learn more about a person to better tailor a persuasive appeal. For example, by learning about a person's important values via conversation, a canvasser can then deliver a message that appeals to those values, increasing persuasion success [52]. Such approaches are common in the context of sales, where salespeople who listen well to their customers are then better able to deploy "adaptive selling," whereby they flexibly adapt either the object or method of sales to match customer needs [53]. Of course, such techniques may arouse concerns about their use as a persuasive tactic, potentially instigating resistance efforts [41,54,55]. The persuasive motive also reduces the unconditional regard for the speaker that characterizes high-quality listening [56], raising questions about whether high quality listening is possible in the presence of persuasive intent.

Other attitudes

So far, our review focused on attitudes toward the topic of conversation. However, other work has examined attitudes toward people's interaction partner (i.e., interpersonal liking) or themselves (i.e., self-esteem). For example, salespeople who listen well are liked more than those who do not [53], and people tend to like those who ask questions about them more than those who do not [57]. When having a conversation that is potentially threatening to one's self-esteem (e.g., discussing one's own prejudice), receiving high-quality listening buffers against this threat, leading to a more positive state self-esteem than low-quality listening [29].

Limitations and future directions

The impact of listening on attitude change is a relatively new topic of study, and there is still much to learn. The research on component and multifaceted interventions has typically included a persuasive appeal directed at the participant. In contrast, studies that have manipulated listening in isolation have done so without delivering a persuasive message. Future research should systematically examine the impacts of listening in the presence versus absence of a persuasive attempt to better understand whether and how a persuasive attempt might impact the effects of listening. One fruitful direction to consider is the inferences people make about the listener's behavior. Although high-quality listening behaviors are typically interpreted as indicating positive intentions from the listener [18], in a persuasive context these behaviors might not be seen as such, and may instead be perceived as a persuasive strategy [54]. In such situations, rather than leading people to experience psychological safety [6], behaviors typically associated with high-quality listening may instead contribute to a sense of threat. In addition to persuasive intent, people might make other inferences about the mindsets that underlie high-quality listening behaviors (e.g., care for oneself, receptivity to one's

views, a desire to learn about the topic). It is likely that the inferences people make about their listener could determine the psychological impact of these behaviors.

Because contexts that involve listening necessarily involve two or more people (or anthropomorphized agents), there is the potential for *each* person's attitude to change because of the conversation. In nearly all studies, the focus has generally been on one side of the interaction (e.g., the speaker). Research on listening training has suggested that this training decreases anxiety within a listener [58], similar to its impact on people who receive high-quality listening. Additionally, although research on canvassing has tended to examine shifts in the attitudes of those being canvassed, research has found that canvassers also report less extreme attitudes toward members of the group they were reaching out to [59]. There is still much to be understood about the ways that interactions involving high-quality listening might impact the attitudes of both interactants [6].

So far, the research on listening and attitude change has examined dyadic contexts. Little is known about how the effects described above extend to group contexts. With multiple listeners or multiple speakers, the perceptions of everyone in the interaction may not align [60] and if there are opinion factions within the group, there is a risk that the within-group discussion could become an intergroup conflict. In group contexts, one's perceptions of a listener's listening quality may be shaped by how well that individual listens to them as well as to others in the group. Further, common norms for airtime and turn-taking may be more complex than with dyadic interactions [61]. All of this means that group interactions may be qualitatively different than dyadic interactions, so it is unclear how the research on attitude change in dyadic listening contexts will scale up to group interactions [for extended discussion of group versus dyadic interactions, see 61]. In addition, if the group is organized hierarchically, the perceived listening of the person at the top of the hierarchy may be of greatest importance. However, there is the risk that a powerholder's listening can be perceived as performative if it does not lead to changes within the organization [62].

Finally, very little work on listening and attitude change, or on listening in general [18], has examined the ways in which the manifestation or impact of listening might vary across cultures. First, we should begin by noting that existing conceptualizations of attitudes are heavily rooted in western, individualistic notions, which likely differ substantially from non-western or collectivistic cultures. Critically, in many cultures people's attitudes may be embedded within the social context, which would often include one's interaction partner, especially if they are family or close friends [63]. Second, the norms of communication can vary dramatically across cultures, including the value and expectation of self-expression

[including attitude expression; [64], the importance of power distance [65], context-specific norms for communicating and communication style [66,67] such as normative nonverbal behaviors [68–70], and more. Because of this cultural variability, an objectively similar interaction may not be experienced the same way (e.g., may not communicate the same degree of psychological safety) by people of two different cultures. Systematically investigating these factors will lead to a rich conceptual understanding of the impacts of listening on people's attitudes, as well as better recommendations for practitioners who may seek to use listening.

Author contributions

Kenneth G. DeMarree: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – Original Draft. Ya-Hui Chang: Data curation, Writing – Review & Editing. Taylor Lee: Data curation, Writing – Review & Editing. Angelia Venezia: Data curation, Writing – Review & Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to the content of this review.

Data availability

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

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* of special interest

** of outstanding interest

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