

REVIEW ARTICLE

How to foster perceived partner responsiveness: High-quality listening is key

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Funding information

Israel Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 460/18, 1235/21

Abstract

Social psychologists have a longstanding interest in the mechanisms responsible for the beneficial effects of positive social connections. This article reviews and integrates two emerging but to this point disparate lines of work that focus on these mechanisms: high-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness. We also review research investigating the downstream consequences of high-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness: the how and why of understanding the process by which these downstream benefits are obtained. High-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness, though not isomorphic, are related constructs in that they both incorporate several key interpersonal processes, such as understanding, positive regard, and expressions of caring for another person. We develop a theoretical model for representing how listening embodies one form of interactive behavior that can promote (or hinder) perceived partner responsiveness and its downstream affective, cognitive, and behavioral effects. Finally, we discuss our model's implications for various social-psychological domains, such as social cognition, self-evaluation, constructive disagreements, and interpersonal relationships.

1 | INTRODUCTION

People have an innate need to feel positively evaluated by, and connected to, others (Deci & Flaste, 1996; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). These interpersonal connections are known to conduce to many positive intrapersonal affective and cognitive outcomes (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). In recent years, social psychologists, in particular, have begun to articulate some of the *interpersonal behaviors* responsible for these effects. This article reviews and integrates two

This work received an ethical approval.

emerging but so far disparate lines of theory and research that focus on interpersonal mechanisms: high-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness. We argue that high-quality listening is a relational behavior that deserves empirical attention in its own right as a specific driver of perceived partner responsiveness. We review research that focuses on the downstream consequences of high-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness, and suggest that better integration of these two lines of work can clarify just how these benefits take place in everyday social interactions.

2 | WHAT IS PERCEIVED PARTNER RESPONSIVENESS?

First described in the Intimacy Process Model (Reis & Shaver, 1988), perceived partner responsiveness refers to the belief that an interaction partner understands and validates the self and is willing to support one's needs. In this model, partners are perceived to be responsive to the other partner's core traits, values, and experiences when their words and actions are thought to be knowing, encouraging, and caring. In the original model, perceived partner responsiveness was conceptualized as a property that emerged in *specific* interactions; in more recent work, the construct has been construed as a *general* property of relationships. The current formulation encompasses both meanings. That is, we argue that in specific interactions, perceived partner responsiveness follows from high-quality listening. Likewise, we suggest that accumulated high-quality listening over time should also foster a general, relationship-wide sense of perceived partner responsiveness.

Perceived partner responsiveness includes three components. First, people must *feel understood* by their partners. Although the relevance of actual understanding to relationship outcomes is debated, researchers agree that perceived understanding—believing that partners are aware of one's inner qualities and beliefs, as one sees them oneself—is essential to relationship well-being (Reis et al., 2017). This is true for at least three reasons: (1) feeling understood promotes a sense of authenticity in relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2006); (2) understanding by partners is intrinsically satisfying (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011); and (3) perceived misunderstanding would render moot or perhaps even troublesome any expressions of liking and favorable feedback (Patrick and Reis [1995], reported in Reis, 2006).

The second component of perceived partner responsiveness, *validation*, is the belief that partners value and appreciate one's attributes, accomplishments, and worldview. Extensive evidence documents the impact of feeling liked and appreciated in relationships (e.g., Gordon et al., 2012; Murray et al., 1996), mainly because these qualities allow people to feel accepted and secure in close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As for the final component of perceived partner responsiveness, *feeling cared for*, help and support are key contributors to relationship well-being. For example, in close communal relationships, people expect partners to be responsive to their needs and, in turn, are reciprocally responsive to those partners' needs (Clark & Aragón, 2013). Partner support also facilitates goal striving (Rusbult et al., 2009), contending with stressful events (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996), and exploration (Feeney & Thrush, 2010), and is a key contributor to thriving relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

Extensive research has established the impact of perceived partner responsiveness on relationship and personal outcomes. Perceived partner responsiveness predicts feelings of intimacy (Laurenceau et al., 2005), relationship satisfaction (Gadassi et al., 2016), and sexual satisfaction and desire (Birnbaum et al., 2016) in romantic relationships. Perceived partner responsiveness encourages partners to be emotionally open to each other (Ruan et al., 2020), express gratitude (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016), enact caregiving (Canevello & Crocker, 2010), forgive (Pansera & La Guardia, 2012), and provide social support (Maisel & Gable, 2009). In terms of its more personal benefits, perceived partner responsiveness has been shown to promote hedonic and eudemonic well-being (Selcuk et al., 2016), as well as lessen pain sensitivity (Oishi et al., 2013) and reports of physical symptoms (Lun et al., 2008). Based on these and many other studies, Reis (2012) proposed that perceived partner responsiveness may serve as a central principle for organizing the enormous yet largely non-integrated literature documenting the links between relationship qualities and well-being.

3 | WHAT IS HIGH-QUALITY LISTENING?

Listening is a multi-faceted but ultimately holistic process that includes attention, comprehension, and positive intention (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Good listeners convey they are paying attention, comprehending what the speaker is communicating, and doing so with a benevolent intention toward the speaker. Listeners convey these features through observable behaviors, such as gaze, facial expressions, body posture, follow-up questions, and reflections.

Attention refers to focusing on the speaker's message while avoiding stimuli that produce external disturbances (e.g., text messages, other people in the room) and internal disturbances (e.g., unrelated thoughts). Attention is conveyed through effective backchannel behaviors (Bavelas et al., 2000), such as nodding, maintaining constant eye contact, and orienting the speaker's body posture (Bavelas et al., 2002; Duncan, 1972). For example, in a typical conversation, speakers do not constantly gaze at their listeners. Instead, speakers turn their gaze toward the listener every few seconds to check whether they are focused on them. When they look back at the listeners and notice that they have their undivided attention, speakers gain psychological safety that allows them to introspect non-defensively (Castro et al., 2018; Itzchakov et al., 2017). Inattentive listeners can make their speakers distracted (e.g., "am I boring?" and "am I talking too much?"), hinder their self-verification (Pasupathi & Rich, 2005), self-knowledge (Pasupathi, 2001), ability to introspect (Itzchakov et al., 2018), and even long-term memory (Pasupathi et al., 1998).

Comprehension refers to the extent to which listeners accurately understand the speakers' cognitive and affective states (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Listeners convey comprehension by paraphrasing the speaker's message (Nemec et al., 2017) and asking open questions relevant to the speaker's stories (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Good listeners ask speakers to repeat parts they missed or are unsure they understood (Lycan, 1977). Comprehension is an effortful process that requires energy and hence motivation. Finally, benevolent intention involves listening with positive regard, validation, and a non-judgmental approach toward the speaker (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991/1952). Listeners can convey positive intention by exhibiting conversational receptiveness, including the use of hedges; that is, phrases such as "somewhat" and "might," which soften the tone of the conversation and indicate a non-judgmental attitude (Yeomans et al., 2020).

Although some people are inherently good listeners (Kline, 1999), and some can become good by training (Itzchakov, 2020; Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004), listening is a fundamentally relational process driven by the specific interaction of listener and speaker. For example, in two field studies involving work teams, the unique listener-speaker dyad explained almost half of the variance in listening perception. This dyad-level variance can be illustrated as follows: Tony might be a great listener for Alex but a poor listener for Logan; it is the Tony-Alex dyad, rather than Tony *per se*, that instantiates positive listening (Kluger et al., 2021). Thus, overall, when speakers express themselves, good listeners attend carefully, make an effort to comprehend what they are trying to say, and convey their care and valuing of the speaker.

4 | WHY DOES LISTENING MATTER FOR SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

Listening is a basic social behavior and one of the most fundamental features of a satisfying social interaction (Rogers, 1962). Yet, until recently, the ways in which listeners shape conversations and their consequences for speakers have largely been ignored in social psychology. For example, one of the earliest works on listening in social psychology stated that: "listeners in conversations aren't mute or invisible during an utterance. Speakers may alter what they say midcourse based on what addressees say and do" (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986, p. 3).

In the last decade, however, research has begun to emphasize the importance of listening for personality and social psychology. For example, a study of co-workers' perceptions found that listening positively affected social influence above and beyond the effect of verbal expressiveness (Ames et al., 2012). In this study, listening also mediated the association between personality and social influence. Specifically, individuals high in the Big Five traits of Agreeableness and Openness to Experience were perceived as good listeners, and for this reason, influenced others.

In the context of attitude change, feeling listened to reduced attitude extremity among low-power group members toward the high-powered group, whereas listening reduced attitude extremity among the high-powered group toward the low-power group (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). High-quality listening also reduced speakers' state social anxiety and defensiveness and consequently increased their awareness of opposing elements within their attitudes while reducing the extremity of their attitudes (Itzchakov et al., 2017). Relatedly, high-quality listening increased speakers' self-insight and reduced their prejudice toward various social groups (Itzchakov et al., 2020). The reduction in speakers' prejudice was accompanied by increased state self-esteem because the speakers were the recipients of high-quality listening behaviors, thus supporting their sense of autonomy (Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021). Taken together, these findings suggest that the experience of high-quality listening helps speakers to feel free to self-express and subsequently to feel understood, leading to greater openness and lesser defensiveness.

These empirical findings support humanistic theorizing (Rogers, 1980; Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1952). Based on clinical observations, Rogers posited that high-quality listening helps speakers become aware of internal inconsistencies. This awareness can be threatening because it makes cognitive inconsistencies salient. Yet, an attentive, understanding and non-judgmental listener can help the speaker realize that this complexity is not threatening, thus paving the way for positive self-awareness and personal growth. A series of lab and field experiments (Itzchakov et al., 2017, 2018; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017a) found that when speakers receive high-quality listening, the presence of internal inconsistencies (objective ambivalence; Kaplan, 1972) increased without the evaluative conflict that is usually associated with this awareness (subjective ambivalence; Priester & Petty, 1996). Furthermore, studies have shown that non-judgmental listening reduced speakers' exclusionary attitudes and transphobia (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2020), and increased their state self-esteem (Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021), well-being (Weinstein et al., 2021), creativity (Castro et al., 2018; Curhan et al., 2021), and cognitive resilience (Salinas et al., 2021), to name only a few documented outcomes. Together, these studies indicate that many core constructs in social psychology are influenced by high-quality listening and perceived partner responsiveness.

5 | LISTENING AND PERCEIVED RESPONSIVENESS: RELATED CONSTRUCTS WITH A PREVIOUSLY UNIDENTIFIED LINK

Research on perceived partner responsiveness tends not to make an explicit distinction between responsiveness as a momentary feature of a social interaction and responsiveness as a global characteristic of a relationship. In the original Reis and Shaver (1988) model, it was assumed, based on Davis (1982), that perceived partner responsiveness emerged from the listener's actual behavior, but was filtered through the speaker's motivated interpretations (i.e., the way the behavior fulfills needs, goals, values, and personal concerns). However, this study did not specify which behaviors by listeners would inculcate a sense of perceived responsiveness. In a later review, Reis et al. (2004) concluded that both the listener's actual enacted behavior and motivated interpretations mattered, without specifying which behaviors would count as enacted behavior. The only work of which we are aware that has attempted to codify the specific behaviors that enact responsiveness is Maisel et al. (2008), who created a coding system designed to show what "responsiveness looks like" (p. 317). Their list of 19 behaviors includes many specific actions that also constitute high-quality listening (e.g., asking questions and summarizing/paraphrasing). We thus believe it is important to clarify which specific behaviors enacted by a listener are most likely to foster a sense of perceived partner responsiveness.

As Reis et al. (2004) argued, perceived partner responsiveness is a global, holistic construct involving multiple pathways to achieving its outcome. Listening is one of the strategies that promotes perceived partner responsiveness. Surprisingly, these constructs have not been associated in the literature, though they are used in similar ways. This gap points to the need to identify these putative associations while also disentangling them. We argue below that good listening is a specific and beneficial form of social support that can meet needs and adjust to circumstances, thereby fostering perceived partner responsiveness.

Perceived partner responsiveness is a relatively abstract belief that another person understands, values, and supports oneself. It can emerge in specific, relatively brief interactions or, more broadly, as a sense of accumulated interactions over time. As mentioned earlier, although this belief has been theorized to be grounded in specific interactions (Reis & Shaver, 1988), what takes place during these interactions is unspecified by the theory, except to state that listeners, through their actions, somehow induce their partners to feel well-responded to. Clearly, such feelings do not only depend on the listeners' verbal and nonverbal behavior but also on the partner's interpretations and reactions to those behaviors. Listening, on the other hand, is comprised entirely of specific verbal and non-verbal behaviors. In addition, listening involves responses to a *disclosure* or a *conversation* within a listener–speaker dyad or a group of people, whereas perceived partner responsiveness can sometimes occur without conversation. For example, Joe can be attentive to Perry's core needs by giving him something he wants, offering a hug in a time of need, or helping Perry fix his car. None of these behaviors would count as listening.

5.1 | How does listening differ from enacted social support?

Enacted social support (as distinguished from perceived social support, a much more commonly studied construct) is a broader construct, only some forms of which incorporate listening. Social support includes, for example, providing assistance or guidance as well as group belonging, which are only tangentially relevant to listening. Given this wide scope, we argue that listening should be studied in and of itself and separately from other forms of support. The rationale derives from research on emotional support, the form of support that is conceptually closest to listening. Emotional support is a type of social support that includes providing empathy, emotional validation, and encouragement to people experiencing *stressful life events* (Burleson, 2003) and often involves giving advice (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011). Emotional support can be studied without an in-person conversation, which is a prerequisite for listening (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022), such as by sending text messages (Dobson et al., 2018). Empirically, listening has been found to have predictive validity above and beyond emotional support on reducing burnout (Pines et al., 2002) and increasing cognitive resilience (Salinas et al., 2021).

Another related construct is esteem support, a specific form of social support in which individuals try to enhance the way others feel about themselves and their characteristics, abilities, and accomplishments (Holmstrom, 2012). Esteem support is relevant primarily when people experience an aversive event (Weiner, 1986). On the other hand, listening is relevant regardless of whether the speakers share a negative, neutral, or positive event.

How, then, should perceived partner responsiveness, a construct that is ultimately in the eye of the beholder, be integrated with listening, a construct that embodies a series of behaviors that together convey the interpersonal response? We argue that listening serves as a direct avenue to creating perceived partner responsiveness. It seems clear that good listening is an important interpersonal behavior that leads individuals to perceive that their partners are responsive to them. A good listener creates a safe and open space for the partner to share and discuss thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Castro et al., 2016; Rogers, 1959), promoting a sense that one can self-disclose openly to a receptive audience, that is, caring and valuing (Stone et al., 2010). Whether these disclosures are consequential or mundane, the mere opportunity to speak to an understanding listener will promote perceived partner responsiveness. Furthermore, the partner's expressed understanding and appreciation of the speaker can further promote additional self-disclosure and a willingness to be responsive in return (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis et al., 2004). The effects of listening on perceived partner responsiveness are arguably immediate and direct and, over time and repetition, feed into a more global sense of perceived relationship responsiveness, a characteristic of longer-lasting associations (such as those occurring in close relationships or with mentors or therapists).

In enduring relationships and typically in lengthier individual exchanges, the link between listening and perceived responsiveness creates a positive feedback loop: when Partner A listens well it fosters a feeling in Partner B of being responded to, which in turn encourages Partner B to listen more attentively to Partner A. This is thought to be true primarily in symmetric relationships, such as between friends and romantic partners; it may not apply to asymmetric

relationships, such as between clients and their therapists or managers and their employees, where mutuality of disclosure is unlikely. Reciprocal listening and self-disclosure may not occur simultaneously or even necessarily within the same interaction. For example, suppose a conversation is focused on some distressing event in one partner's life. In that case, listeners who attempt to refocus on their own concerns are likely to be perceived as unresponsive. This is consistent with the idea that partners in enduring communal relationships reciprocate their caregiving when needs arise rather than in the moment (Clark & Aragón, 2013). All things being equal, conversations and relationships characterized by such cycles of mutuality are likely to be more productive, intimate, and rewarding for both partners, by fostering a general sense of closeness and connection, as well as the more specific relational outcomes reviewed earlier.

Finally, although both listening and perceived partner responsiveness are multidimensional constructs, listening is multi-faceted in a more narrow way in that it includes a series of very specific behaviors (Itzchakov & Grau, 2020; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017b). On the other hand, perceived partner responsiveness includes relatively general and abstract evaluations such as being cared for and validated by significant others (Reis, 2012). That these constructs are defined at very different levels of specificity further suggests the need for integration.

5.2 | How does high-quality listening make people feel responded to? An integrative model

Social psychologists have identified several constructs that help people feel that their partners are responsive to them. Some of these factors are overtly behavioral, such as including emojis in text messages (Coyle & Carmichael, 2019), smiling (Foot et al., 1977), or offering guidance in parent-adolescent relationships (Brody et al., 2005). Other antecedents are precursors to behavior, such as relational self-construal (Cross et al., 2000), compassionate goals (Canevello & Crocker, 2010), views of nonzero-sum relationship conflicts (Gore & Cross, 2011), and high self-esteem (Maisel et al., 2008). High-quality listening is an antecedent of perceived partner responsiveness that incorporates both these elements: it is challenging to be a genuinely good listener without the appropriate attention and benevolent intention toward speakers (i.e., precursors to behaviors). Furthermore, the listener has to be willing and open to allow the speaker to self-express. Once listeners' mindset is oriented in the speakers' direction, listeners then employ overt behaviors to signal that they are attending.

To the extent that listeners do this effectively, the quality of their listening determines the extent to which they will be perceived as responsive. Consider a conversation between two romantic partners, in which Charlie tells Morgan about a presentation at work. Morgan maintains constant eye contact, nods when appropriate, asks follow-up questions, and paraphrases some of the content to ensure understanding. On the other hand, imagine Morgan sneaking glances at her cell phone when Charlie is not looking, exhibiting indifferent facial expressions, not asking questions, and changing the topic of the conversation after Charlie pauses. Morgan will likely be perceived as a responsive partner in the first example and an unresponsive partner in the second example.

Figure 1 presents a theoretical model describing possible outcomes of listening behaviors through its beneficial effects on perceived partner responsiveness. The model is intrinsically relational because self-disclosure and perceived responsiveness, which require back-and-forth exchanges between interacting persons, are central to the interpersonal exchanges that define relationships. However, the model also incorporates the idea of motivated-reasoning; namely, that partners perceive each other's actions in ways shaped by their own needs, values, traits, and circumstances (Reis et al., 2004).¹ Identifying listening as an antecedent of perceived responsiveness makes a contribution to the scant literature on the specific behaviors that produce perceived responsiveness. Moreover, without articulating such behaviors, perceived responsiveness exists largely as an "in-the-head-of-the-perceiver" construct rather than the product of an interpersonal exchange. This consideration should be central to any relationship process or analysis.

According to the model, high-quality listening behaviors foster speakers' sense of being responded to. Consequently, speakers may benefit from a broader cognitive perspective, such as increased open-mindedness (Itzchakov

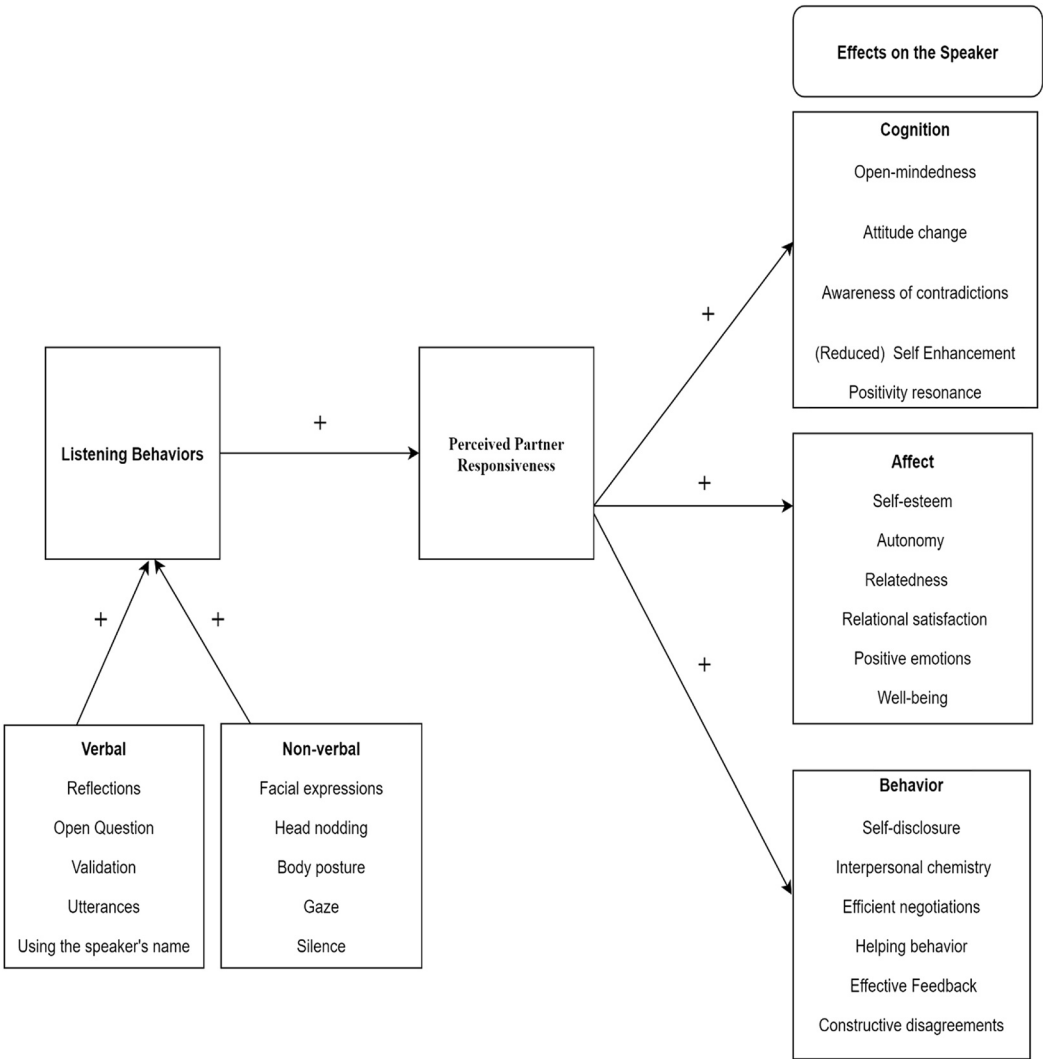


FIGURE 1 A model of the process from listening to perceived responsiveness to cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes

et al., 2017). They should also experience positive feelings such as higher self-esteem (Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021; Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2021). Finally, listening-induced perceived responsiveness should have behavioral implications such as increased self-disclosure and helping behaviors (e.g., Kluger et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2015).

The process depicted in Figure 1 can be applied to virtually every conversation in any speaker-listener dyad. Perceived responsiveness can facilitate the outcomes shown in this figure without conversation or listening; however, listening will not facilitate these consequences when the speaker does not perceive the listener as responsive. Listening is therefore best understood as an antecedent of perceived responsiveness and not *vice versa*.

One key unresolved question is whether listening contributes to perceived responsiveness beyond constructs that overlap with perceived responsiveness, such as relationship satisfaction (Lemay et al., 2007), perceived social support (Maisel & Gable, 2009), and compassionate interpersonal goals (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). Although no research of which we are aware has examined this issue, the distinction between listening and these constructs is clear.

That is, listening involves a set of behaviors that are likely to foster social support and compassionate goals, but are specific to conversations that involve speaking in a revealing way and being heard.

6 | LISTENING PROMOTES RESPONSIVENESS IN MULTIPLE DOMAINS OF HUMAN INTERACTION

Opportunities for listening that promote or hinder perceived responsiveness span most aspects of people's lives because individuals spend a large proportion of their day conversing with others. Below we provide examples of the association between listening and perceived responsiveness in several common interpersonal contexts; namely, work, disagreements, parent-child relationships, and romantic relationships.

6.1 | Workplace interactions

An important aspect of the relationship between a manager and an employee is performance feedback. In some instances, performance feedback can damage employees' performance and undermine the manager-employee relationship (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The pitfalls of feedback increase when the employee feels threatened because perceived threat increases defensiveness and reduces the possibility that the employee will adapt in response to the feedback. However, managers who exhibit good listening behaviors when providing feedback reduce employees' defensiveness (Itzhakov & Kluger, 2018). Importantly, good listening tends to foster employees' perception that their managers understand and validate them and support their core needs (Jonsdottir & Kristinsson, 2020; Kluger & Itzhakov, 2022).

Moreover, managers who listen well and are perceived as responsive provide more opportunities for employees to gain personal insights about their strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for improvement and flourishing, even when they do not give explicit feedback. This process is exemplified in the Feedforward interview, a technique designed to facilitate the connection between an interviewer and an interviewee through high-quality listening (Kluger & Nir, 2010). The Feedforward interview has received empirical support. For example, in a field experiment, employees who received a Feedforward interview from their manager performed better, as measured four months after the interview, compared to employees who received traditional feedback (Budworth et al., 2015).

6.2 | Parent-child relationships

Another asymmetrical relationship in which listening should foster perceived responsiveness involves parents and their children. By promoting felt responsiveness, parental listening may play a crucial role in producing desired downstream intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences in their children (Weinstein et al., 2021). Various works on parental support have highlighted the role of listening. For example, many programs to enable parents to be more supportive and responsive include listening training, among other more directive techniques (Joussemet et al., 2014), as does training designed to improve parents' empathy (Katz & Hunter, 2007). When parents are good listeners, children are more likely to feel that their wants and needs have been understood (Dix, 1991). However, without isolating listening in empirical tests that are focused on parent-child conversations and relationships, it is difficult to discern its specific role or mechanism in effective communication between parents and their children.

6.3 | Romantic relationships

Scores of studies have indicated that poor listening contributes to marital distress and dysfunction, though much like the developmental literature, most studies have not distinguished the specific behaviors that constitute high-quality listening from other communications that romantic partners enact. For example, in studies of marital conflict and its possible resolution, poor outcomes are predicted by reactions such as hostility, criticism, inattention, and stonewalling (withholding and withdrawal). In contrast, more successful outcomes are predicted by engagement and expressions of affection and validation (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In some respects, these constructs are closely linked to the definition of high-quality listening offered above, but they are often conflated with more direct verbal content that is not necessarily an indication of listening; for example, general criticism of a partner or displays of affection, both of which introduce new content to the conversation but are not responses to the speaker's verbal disclosure.

In romantic conflict conversations, affective positivity, although a necessary component, is generally insufficient to produce satisfying resolutions; rather, attention and responsiveness are also needed (e.g., Pasupathi et al., 1999). For example, research on the demand/withdrawal pattern of couple conflict resolution shows that the refusal to engage, rather than expressions of negative affect, is a defining feature of distressed couples (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). This absence of engagement is perceived as unresponsiveness (Sasaki & Overall, 2021), or as invalidation and rejection of the speaker's point of view (Overall et al., 2010). Even in conversations about happy events, partners' lack of enthusiastic support—for example, expressions of disinterest or pointing out the event's downside—is strongly associated with relationship distress (Gable et al., 2004). In terms of the model in Figure 1, it would be worthwhile to identify the specific listening behaviors that engender perceptions of attention and responsiveness.

One common technique in marital therapy explicitly acknowledges the importance of high-quality listening in fostering perceived responsiveness and positive relationship outcomes. The *speaker-listener technique* is a structured procedure in which partners take turns speaking (interruptions are prohibited; partners can only speak when they have the floor, as indicated, e.g., by a signal light), listen rather than interpret their partner's statements, paraphrase what they heard their partner saying (to foster accurate understanding as well as the speaker's sense of feeling understood), and clarify ways in which their partner's paraphrasing may have missed the mark (Stanley et al., 1997). Many marital therapies incorporate similar techniques, thus acknowledging the fundamental premise that listening behavior is only effective when partners feel responded to.

6.4 | Disagreements

People often engage in conversations where they disagree with each other. This can include conversations between teachers and their students or people with different political views. When conversation partners do not feel understood, they are less likely to resolve their disagreements and conflict (Livingstone et al., 2020). However, people are more likely to feel understood when their conversation partners listen actively to them (Reis et al., 2017). Empirical findings indicate that when people feel listened to, their attitude extremity lessens (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017a).

7 | WHEN DOES POOR LISTENING UNDERMINE PERCEIVED RESPONSIVENESS?

People sometimes assume that the listener is a passive participant in a conversation, one whose sole activity is to take in the speaker's words, much as a recording device might do. For example, one popular skills-oriented website defines listening as accurately receiving and interpreting messages in the communication process, a definition that does not require any overt behavior on the part of the listener.² However, listeners play a critical role in influencing the direction of the conversation (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Pasupathi, 2001; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018),

how deeply and openly speakers reflect on a topic (Itzchakov et al., 2018), and whether speakers gain self-knowledge (Harber et al., 2014). Listeners even contribute to the fluency of speakers' utterances (Bavelas et al., 2000). In short, listeners play an influential role in co-constructing the conversation with speakers through their behavior (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022).

High-quality listeners can make speakers feel responded to, whereas listeners who attend poorly can undermine perceived responsiveness. Poor listening behaviors are typically seen as neglectful, ingenuine, or antagonistic. For example, poor listeners may wait impatiently for their turn to talk while looking for the first opportunity to jump in with their own view. Alternatively, they can ask irrelevant questions. For example, Jordan may tell Chris about a disappointing date, to which Chris responds by asking which restaurant Jordan went to or requesting additional details concerning an irrelevant disclosure earlier in their conversation. Such questions would likely leave Jordan feeling that Chris is not genuinely interested in her feelings and consequently lead Jordan to feel not responded to. Chris can also enact facial expressions and body postures that convey unsupportive judgments, such as wrinkling the forehead, raising an eyebrow, and leaning back with arms crossed. These backchannel behaviors may arise unintentionally; however, when perceived, they are likely to foster a sense of unresponsiveness. Chris can also undermine Jordan's perceived responsiveness by exhibiting distractedness, such as by looking to see who else is in the room (Lopez-Rosenfeld et al., 2015). Chris might even engender perceived unresponsiveness with listening behaviors that may seem relatively neutral or "not so bad," such as maintaining a blank facial expression that fails to convey interest, empathy, or curiosity. In short, it is important to conceptualize listening as an active contribution to conversational dynamics rather than a passive act of receiving information.

7.1 | Future directions for research

The integration of high-quality listening and perceived responsiveness offers numerous intriguing possibilities for future research. Listening research to date has primarily focused on its effects on speakers. Exploring the affective, cognitive, and behavioral downstream effects on listeners who make speakers feel responded to would be valuable. For example, when speakers show discernible signs of perceived responsiveness, listeners may feel emotions such as pride or warmth. It may also encourage them to self-disclose in turn, either in the moment or, if more appropriate, at a later time.

Other possible research questions include the impact on listeners' attitudes when listening well and responding to speakers who express opposite attitudes. In other words, does listening well promote openness and subsequent attitude change on the part of the listener? Does observing as an outsider a conversation that includes high levels of listening and perceived responsiveness impact emotions and attitudes? What are the potential costs of listening to speakers in a way that they feel responded to? One such cost may be compassion fatigue, the emotional toll that can accumulate from listening actively and empathically to others (O'Brien & Haaga, 2015). An important practical research question is how to prevent such adverse outcomes for listeners.

In addition, listening takes place in multiple relationship domains, and its expression, impact, and even appropriateness may not be consistent across relationships. For example, in work relationships, such as those between managers and employees, employees may feel responded to when managers exhibit their grasp of workplace problems or concerns. In close relationships, attention and positive intention may be more important, although research is needed in order to understand how comprehension can be effectively signaled in such relationships.

It is important to identify the contextual factors that influence how concrete, in-the-moment acts of high-quality listening influence perceived responsiveness. For example, relationship history, personality characteristics, social skills, and the conversational context can enhance or hinder the effect of listening behaviors on perceived responsiveness. Consider a conversation with a friend who generally listens well and has a long history of being responsive to you but, in the moment, is distracted by personal circumstances. Alternatively, consider a conversation with another friend who has not listened well to you in the past but is making a sincere effort in the moment to listen better. In both

examples, interaction history may influence the perception of responsiveness and its downstream effects. Also, speakers with low self-esteem or low agreeableness (Wood & Forest, 2016), or high on neuroticism (Itzchakov et al., 2014) might be less likely to perceive responsiveness when being listened to in a high-quality manner.

Finally, the context of listening may also matter. For example, research is needed to identify cultural variations in which behaviors are most likely to lead to perceived responsiveness (Wu et al., 2021). Also, a speaker receiving high-quality listening from a romantic partner when disclosing a difficult situation at work is likely to experience greater responsiveness than a speaker who receives a similar level of listening quality when disclosing about cheating to an academic advisor. These examples are promising avenues for future research that are supported by the integration of the literature on listening behaviors and perceived responsiveness.

7.2 | Concluding remarks

Listening and perceived partner responsiveness promote desired outcomes for many key processes in social psychology. However, to date, these constructs have been studied in isolation, though many underlying processes and outcomes touch on similar ideas and mechanisms. Our goal in this paper was to unpack the differences between these constructs, identify their similarities, and integrate them into a comprehensive model. We hope that this model will spur research on listening-induced perceived partner responsiveness and motivate the development of applications and training programs that teach individuals how to listen well so that their conversation partners will feel well-responded to, thereby facilitating social connections.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research was supported by grants #460/18 and #1235/21 from the Israel Science Foundation to the first author.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Reis and Shaver's model makes no distinction between perceived partner responsiveness grounded in the partner's actual behavior or in motivated interpretations, save to note that there is extensive evidence for both, and moreover, that the degree to which each occurs is likely to vary as a function of individuals, relationships, and contexts.

² <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/listening-skills.html>

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How to cite this article: Itzchakov, G., Reis, H. T., & Weinstein, N. (2021). How to foster perceived partner responsiveness: High-quality listening is key. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, e12648. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12648>