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Active-Empathic Listening as a General Social Skill: Evidence from Bivariate and Canonical Correlations

Christopher C. Gearhart & Graham D. Bodie

This study attempts to provide further validity evidence for a scale that measures the tendency to enact active-empathic listening (AEL), one type of listening noted as especially important in close relationships and associated contexts like supportive episodes. In particular, we investigated the degree to which AEL is empirically related to various general social skills that reflect interaction competencies such as emotional sensitivity. Strong correlations between a measure of AEL and four of the six social skill dimensions measured by the social skills inventory (SSI) provide validity evidence for this scale. The paper concludes with a discussion of future research possibilities.

Keywords: Communication Skill; Competence; Listening; Social Interaction; Social Skill

Although definitions of listening are almost as abundant as researchers studying the phenomenon (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008), there seems to be a consensus that listening is a multidimensional construct that consists of complex a) cognitive processes, such as attending to, understanding, receiving and interpreting messages; b) affective processes, such as being motivated and stimulated to attend to another person's messages; and c) behavioral processes, such as responding with verbal and nonverbal feedback (e.g., backchanneling, paraphrasing) (Halone & Pecchioni, 2001; Janusik, 2007; Thomas & Levine, 1994; Witkin & Tochim, 1997). When listening occurs in contexts such as formal (Hutchby, 2005) and informal

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(Jones, 2011; Notarius & Herrick, 1988) helping episodes and, more generally, within the confines of close relationships (Greene & Herbers, 2011; Walker, 1997), these functional components of listening are deemed more competent when performed by an active individual who is typically acting with empathic tendencies. Interestingly, although the importance of being an active and empathic listener is lauded throughout interpersonal scholarship (Bodie, 2011a), very little attention has been afforded to its explicit operationalization. Thus, the primary contribution of this report is to provide further validity evidence for a recently developed measure of active-empathic listening (AEL).

The Measurement of Active-Empathic Listening

AEL was originally defined in the context of product sales as “as a form of listening practiced by salespeople in which traditional active listening is combined with empathy to achieve a higher form of listening” (Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006, p. 162). Recognizing that listening is a multidimensional construct, Drollinger et al. forwarded a conceptualization of active-empathic listening (AEL) as a **three-stage activity: sensing, processing, and responding.**¹ **During the sensing stage, a listener indicates that he or she is taking in all of the explicit and implicit information which is accomplished through being actively involved while the other is speaking and by paying close attention not only to what is said but also how it is said. Next, the processing stage includes synthesizing conversational information and remembering conversational fragments to enable the construction of a narrative whole. Finally, responding includes asking questions for clarification and using verbal and nonverbal means to indicate attention.**

Within each of these stages, individuals can be more or less active and empathic. Although activity in these various stages is relatively straightforward (e.g., variability in synthesizing or remembering conversational details), the degree to which individuals are sensing, processing, and responding in empathic ways is **complicated by the fact that empathy, like listening, is multidimensional** (Stiff, Dillard, Somera, Kim, & Sleight, 1988). Although any given operationalization of AEL might attempt to include one or more types of empathy, the measure created by Drollinger et al. (2006) borrowed Rogers’s definition—**“the ability to perceive the internal frame of of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings . . . as if one were the other person”** (Rogers, 1959, p. 210), which suggests this measure primarily taps empathic tendencies in listening that align with perspective taking. Items such as “I understand how others feel” and “I ask questions that show my understanding of others’ positions” are illustrative of this link.

The measure of AEL created by Drollinger and colleagues was recently adapted to apply to more general conversational settings (Bodie, 2011b). Both Drollinger et al. (2006) and Bodie (2011b) presented findings that detailed a consistent and coherent factor structure for the AEL scale, and both provided initial evidence of convergent validity for the scale by demonstrating that AEL is related to general levels of conversational activity and self-report empathy. Of course, validity is an ongoing process,

one that we seek to further in this report. In particular, this study seeks to provide empirical evidence for the claim that AEL can be considered a social skill or a particular set of “behaviors manifested in the attempt to accomplish some goal . . . [and] are repeatable, more or less, on demand” (Spitzberg, 2003, p. 95). The conceptualization of AEL as a general social skill is implicit in both aforementioned studies, but the AEL scale has only limited empirical support to classify it as such. Thus, in the next section we review several social skills likely related to AEL and forward relevant hypotheses.

AEL and Social Skills

In his extensive review of social skill assessment, Spitzberg (2003) claimed that “[there] are hundreds of communication and social interaction assessments” (p. 106). The conceptualization of social skills that seems most readily associated with listening-related abilities is a model forwarded by Riggio (1986). In particular, Riggio’s Social Skills Inventory (SSI) proposes that skills serve one of three primary functions—to express, sense, or monitor aspects of one’s social environment. Riggio further divided these functions into their verbal and nonverbal components. The SSI is, thus, composed of six separate subscales, namely *emotional expressivity* (express, nonverbal), *emotional sensitivity* (sense, nonverbal), *emotional control* (monitor, nonverbal), *social expressivity* (express, verbal), *social sensitivity* (sense, verbal), and *social control* (monitor, verbal).

Although AEL might be related to each of these skills (see below), the two skills that have the greatest conceptual similarity are *social sensitivity* (SS) and *emotional sensitivity* (ES). These skills are often used to operationalize self-reported interpersonal sensitivity or “the ability to sense, perceive accurately, and respond appropriately to one’s personal, interpersonal, and social environment” (Hall & Bernieri, 2001, p. 3; also see Riggio & Riggio, 2001). Likewise, the sensing subscale of the AEL scale reflects an ability to be more interpersonally sensitive by tapping one’s ability to take in both explicit and implicit information while the other is speaking. As a result of this heightened sensitivity, individuals are likely to keep track of and remember conversational information and to respond more appropriately; thus, the processing and responding subscales of the AEL scale should exhibit similar relationships to these functions.

It stands to reason that individuals who sense, process, and respond in more active and empathic ways are likely more competent communicators (e.g., effective and appropriate; see Bodie, 2011b, Study 2) in general. In Riggio’s framework, the four remaining skills seem to reference general notions of competence in (a) verbally and nonverbally engaging others in conversations and (b) controlling one’s own verbal and nonverbal messages (see Spitzberg, 2003). The first of these skills is divided into *emotional expressivity* (EE)—skill in communicating affect and sending relational messages primarily through nonverbal means—and *social expressivity* (SE)—skill in verbal expression, fluency, and talent to initiate conversations. The second set of SSI skills is divided into *social control* (SC)—often referred to as general social tact—and *emotional control* (EC)—skillful regulation of emotional displays and

nonverbal behaviors (Riggio & Reichard, 2008). To the extent that individuals reporting higher active-empathic sensing, processing, and responding tendencies can be labeled better (more skilled) listeners, it seems likely that they also will be more generally tactful; thus, the AEL subscales seem conceptually related to SC. The relationship between AEL and EC is, however, less conceptually clear. For instance, persons who respond appropriately to others in both verbal and nonverbal ways are often considered more competent than those who fail to do so (Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, in press). This suggests that to be socially skilled it is necessary to have the ability to be in control of one's listening-related behavior as well as associated emotional displays when interacting. It also seems logical, however, that higher AEL tendencies might thwart abilities to regulate one's emotions; perhaps those who tend to be more active and empathic listeners are less able to control emotions because they engage more thoroughly with interlocutors.

The purpose of the study reported below is to examine the bivariate relationships between each of the AEL subscales and each of the dimensions of the SSI as well as get a broader picture of these relationships through multivariate correlations. The model of social skills forwarded by Riggio (1986) suggests that listening is most closely related to abilities that serve the sensing function, though it is possible that the expressing and monitoring functions of social skills are also implicated in listening, albeit to lesser degrees. Given our specific conceptualizations of listening and social skills, we expect each subscale of the AEL scale to be positively associated with the SS and ES subscales. Since the relationships among AEL and the other four SSI components are more speculative, we can utilize the data presented below as an initial investigation into these relationships and rely on future research to flesh them out completely.

Methods

Participants

Participants were college students recruited from a large, southeastern American university [(154 male, 191 female, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.31$ years, $SD = 2.92$, age range = 18–57 years; class rank: Freshman ($n = 105$), Sophomore ($n = 102$), Junior ($n = 56$), and Senior ($n = 78$); race/ethnicity: Caucasian/White (82.4%), African American/Black ($n = 37$), Asian ($n = 15$), Hispanic ($n = 11$), and Native American ($n = 5$)].

Procedures

Participants reported to a computer lab in groups of up to 20, provided informed consent per IRB protocol, and completed a computer-based survey. Participants were rewarded partial fulfillment of a course research requirement.

Active-empathic listening

The self-report version of the Active-Empathic Listening (AEL) scale (Bodie, 2011b) asks participants to indicate how frequently they perceive each of 11 statements to be true of themselves on 7-point scales (1 = *Never or almost never true*, 4 = *Occasionally*

Table 1 AEL Scale Items and Factor Loadings

Item	Average interitem r	Standardized regression weight
<i>Sensing</i>	.53	
I am sensitive to what others are not saying.		.57
I am aware of what others imply but do not say.		.67
I understand how others feel.		.62
I listen for more than just the spoken words.		.73
<i>Processing</i>	.48	
I assure others that I will remember what they say.		.65
I summarize points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.		.59
I keep track of points others make.		.67
<i>Responding</i>	.53	
I assure others that I am listening by using verbal acknowledgements.		.62
I assure others that I am receptive to their ideas.		.68
I ask questions that show my understanding of others' positions.		.64
I show others that I am listening by my body language (e.g., head nods).		.61

true, and 7 = *Always or almost always true*). The scale is comprised of three subscales, sensing (4 items), processing (3 items), and responding (4 items) (see Table 1).

The AEL scale purports to measure three distinct subcomponents of AEL (sensing, processing, responding) which load on a latent second-order factor explaining the first-order latent factor covariances. Fit statistics from a confirmatory factor analysis utilizing Amos 18.0, $\chi^2(41) = 80.79$, $p < .001$, normed chi-square = 1.97, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05 (90% CI: .036, .07), indicated a well-fitting model, and all standardized residual covariances were below 2.58 (absolute value). Standardized coefficients were high for all items (see Table 1) and all first-order latent factors: sensing (.85), processing (.91), responding (1.01). Adequate internal consistency estimates were obtained for the total scale and each subscale (see diagonal in Table 2) and are in line with previous administrations of the AEL scale: $.73 < \alpha < .85$ sensing, $.66 < \alpha < .77$ processing, $.77 < \alpha < .89$ responding, and $.86 < \alpha < .94$ total (Bodie, 2011b; Drollinger et al., 2006).

Social skills inventory

The Social Skills Inventory (SSI; Riggio, 1986) was used to assess six general social skills. Each social skill is assessed by participant responses to 15 items, each measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *Not at All Like Me* and 5 = *Exactly Like Me*). In a review of measures of social skills, Spitzberg (2003) suggested that the SSI is "one of the few assessments with an explicitly theoretical approach" (p. 111) and "has received extensive application and performed very well" (p. 112). With our data, although

Table 2 Reliability Estimates of and Zero-Order Correlations among AEL and SSI Scales

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. AEL Sensing	<u>.74</u>										
2. AEL Processing	.54***	<u>.66</u>									
3. AEL Responding	.64***	.63***	<u>.74</u>								
4. AEL Total	.85***	.85***	.87***	<u>.86</u>							
5. SSI EE	.12*	.14**	.16**	.16**	<u>.81</u>						
6. SSI ES	.48***	.33***	.44***	.49***	.30***	<u>.77</u>					
7. SSI EC	−0.02	0.04	0.02	0.02	−0.32***	0.09	<u>.76</u>				
8. SSI SE	.21***	.19**	.26***	.25***	.59***	.48***	0.07	<u>.91</u>			
9. SSI SS	.25***	0.07	.20***	.20***	0.07	.32***	−.33***	0.05	<u>.85</u>		
10. SSI SC	.18**	.20***	.28***	.25***	.42***	.30***	.20***	.64***	−.34***	<u>.88</u>	
11. SSI Total	.35***	.27***	.39***	.40***	.63***	.74***	.17**	.88***	.25***	.67***	<u>.90</u>

Note. AEL = Active-Empathic Listening; SSI = Social Skills Inventory; EE = Emotional Expressivity; ES = Emotional Sensitivity; EC = Emotional Control; SE = Social Expressivity; SS = Social Sensitivity; SC = Social Control; Reliabilities are presented along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

the comparative fit index was lower than normally desired (.86), residual error was low, SRMR = .08, no standardized residual values were above 2.58 in absolute value, and approximation error was within an acceptable range, RMSEA = .067; 90% CI: .065, .069; in addition, the normed chi-square value was below three, $\chi^2(3900) = 9954.78$, $p < .001$. Given these latter statistics and to ensure our results are easily comparable with past research using the total scale (for reviews see Riggio, 2005; Riggio & Carney, 2003), we utilized the entire scale. Consistent with previous findings, all scales were found to have adequate internal consistency (see diagonal in Table 2 for Chronbach alphas).

Results

With $N = 345$ and $\alpha = .05$, power to detect bivariate relationships was .59 for small effects ($r = .10$) and in excess of .99 for moderate ($r = .30$) and large ($r = .50$) effects. Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations for all AEL and SSI subscales and total scores.

An examination of the zero-order correlation between the AEL scale and SSI provides validity evidence for the AEL scale as a measure of particular social skills. Judging by the relative magnitude of the associations between the SSI subscales and the total AEL scale score, it appears that AEL has the most in common with emotional sensitivity.² The other consistent pattern of correlations is the consistent lack of a statistical association between the AEL scale and emotional control.

To provide further insight into the relationship between AEL and general social skills, a canonical correlation analysis was conducted using the cancorr macro in SPSS 17. The AEL set included the three subscales—sensing, processing, and

responding—and the SSI set included the six social skills (e.g., emotional expressivity, etc.). No within-set multivariate outliers were identified at $p < .001$, and assumptions regarding within-set multicollinearity were met. Based on general guidelines in Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), power was deemed acceptable to detect moderate effects.

The first canonical correlation was .55 (30% overlapping variance), the second was .18 (3% overlapping variance), and the third was .15 (2.2% overlapping variance). With all three canonical correlations included, $\chi^2(18) = 123.78$, $p < .001$, $\Lambda = .66$, and with the first canonical correlation removed, $\chi^2(10) = 17.33$, $p = .07$. Thus, only the first pair of canonical variates was interpreted (see Table 3). The set of AEL variables extracted 63% of the variance in AEL and 19% of the variance in SSI, whereas SSI extracted 25% of the variance in SSI and 8% of the variance in AEL.

With a cutoff correlation of .30 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), all variables in the AEL set were correlated with the first canonical variate, whereas emotional sensitivity, social expression, social sensitivity, and social control were the SSI variables that correlated with the first canonical variate. This pair of canonical variates indicates that those with higher sensing, processing, and responding scores report being more skilled in emotional sensitivity and each verbal dimension of the SSI.

Table 3 Correlations, Standardized Canonical Coefficients, Canonical Correlation, Percents of Variance, and Redundancies between AEL and SSI Variables and their Corresponding Canonical Variates

	First canonical variate	
	Correlation	Coefficient
AEL Set		
Sensing	-.92*	-.65
Processing	-.55*	.12
Responding	-.86*	-.54
Percent of variance		.63
Redundancy		.19
SSI Set		
Emotional Expression	-.25	.17
Emotional Sensitivity	-.91*	-.75
Emotional Control	.02	.10
Social Expression	-.46*	.18
Social Sensitivity	-.48*	-.42
Social Control	-.43*	-.56
Percent of variance		.25
Redundancy		.08
Canonical Correlation		.55

Discussion

The current paper attempted to provide additional validity evidence for a recently developed measure of active-empathic listening (AEL). Results from bivariate and multivariate correlation analyses suggest **AEL is moderately to strongly associated with perceived social skills, providing evidence of convergent validity for the AEL scale as measuring important social skills.** We examine these results separately for the bivariate and multivariate correlations.

Zero-Order Correlation Results

The zero-order correlations (see Table 2) provide insight into the specific patterns of association among AEL and SSI components. Judging by the relative magnitude of the associations between the SSI subscales and the total AEL scale score, it appears that the AEL scale has the most in common with emotional sensitivity as predicted. Thus, it appears that those self reporting high AEL, like those who are high ES, consider themselves especially “concerned with and vigilant in observing the nonverbal emotional cues of others” (Riggio, 1986, p. 651). In general, based on these bivariate relationships, it appears that AEL is a skill that is composed of being attentive to and adapting to other persons and thus shows convergent validity with similar measures. **The adaptation of active-empathic listeners seems particularly salient in contexts where conversations turn to emotional matters** (e.g., supportive interactions; see Bodie & Jones, in press). This pattern of relationships mirrors past research finding connections between particular listening styles and empathy (Bodie, 2010; Weaver & Kirtley, 1995).

Only one subscale of the AEL scale, processing, was not related to the SSI subscale of social sensitivity which suggests that **perceiving oneself as socially sensitive has little to do with one’s AEL processing activity.** Although the processing subscale of the AEL scale demonstrated the lowest estimate of internal consistency among the three subscales, when corrected for attenuation the correlation remained low and nonsignificant. We also verified that the lack of association was not the result of curvilinearity. Both of these results suggest that the lack of association is most likely not statistical but, instead, representative of a conceptual difference among the AEL components and their relationships with SS. **In particular, this finding could suggest that being an active-empathic listener has more to do with sensing and responding rather than information processing,** and future research should continue to parse out this association (or lack thereof). Conceptually, the nil relationship between AEL processing and social sensitivity begins to make sense in light of the fact that the social sensitivity subscale reflects an awareness of social norms and an ability **to act according to the rules of the situation.** Messages are generally characterized as having two dimensions, the **content** of the message and how that message is “to be taken” (the **relational dimension**) (Edwards, 2011, p. 52). It is possible that perceived skill in social sensitivity would not be necessary for or consistent with an ability to synthesize information or construct a narrative whole from fragments, aspects which reflect processing of

message content as opposed to relational dynamics. Instead, the sensing subscale of the AEL scale seems a better reflection of attention to the relational dimension of messages and, as such, we would expect a stronger relationship with perceived social sensitivity.

Finally, it appears that the AEL scale (total score and subscales) is consistently unassociated with the emotional control dimension of the SSI suggesting that being an active-empathic listener has little to do with a perceived ability to be a good “emotional actor” or “mask felt emotional states” (Riggio, 1986, p. 651); yet, the small to moderate relationships between AEL and general social self-presentation skill (i.e., social control) indicates that active-empathic listeners perceive themselves as better able to adjust their behavior to a given social situation. This evidence of discriminant validity seems to support scholarly notions (Barrow & Mirabella, 2009; Shotter, 2009) and textbook treatments (e.g., Redmond, Beebe, & Beebe, 2008) of good listening as an other-oriented phenomenon rather than one’s own emotional control.

Canonical Correlation Results

To obtain a broader picture of the patterns of association among the AEL scale and the six social skills measured by the SSI, a canonical correlation analysis was conducted that produced a single canonical dimension. Patterns of correlations found in Table 3 mirror the bivariate results and provide further evidence of convergent validity insofar as the AEL scale is particularly associated with self-reported emotional sensitivity or a perceived general ability to “rapidly and efficiently” decode others’ emotional communication. Indeed, the correlation of ES was twice the magnitude of the other three significant SSI components (SS, SE, SC) (.91 vs. .48/.46/.43). The strongest AEL components were sensing (.92) and responding (.86); these correlations were 1.67 and 1.56 times larger than the processing component (.55). Items on the sensing subscale tap one’s ability to “understand how others feel” and an awareness of “what others imply but do not say,” whereas items on the responding subscale tap one’s ability to be receptive to others’ ideas and to verbally and nonverbally acknowledge others’ contributions to the conversation. It seems that processing has less to do with being emotionally sensitive, which may indicate that although keeping track of points and “summarizing points of agreement and disagreement” have something to do with ES, it is less important than an ability to pick up on and acknowledge underlying relational messages. In other words, it appears that the combination of picking up on emotions and letting the other know that these emotions are understood seems to capture the relationship between AEL and ES.

The magnitude of the correlations of the other three SSI components suggests that the AEL scale is equally related to the perceived (a) ability to initiate and remain engaged in social interaction (social expressivity), (b) tendency to be attentive to others (social sensitivity), and (c) general sense of tact and social adeptness (social control). Perhaps AEL is related to an ability to engage with others because those who report high AEL tendencies approach conversations with an interest in the other person which leads them to be more attentive and subsequently able to adjust

personal behaviors to suit the particulars of that conversation. Although no conclusions about causality may be inferred from these data, it appears that believing that one is an active-empathic listener and being socially skilled are not mutually exclusive, lending some credence to lay and scholarly notions of the importance of listening in the context of social interaction.

Perhaps the most intriguing finding from the canonical correlation is the fact that the AEL scale was primarily related to verbal skills (SE, SS, SC) and only one nonverbal skill (ES). The lack of association with the two skills that reference abilities to send nonverbal messages (emotional expressivity) or control and regulate nonverbal and emotional communication (emotional control) provides evidence of the AEL scale's discriminant validity by suggesting that tending to remain active and empathic as a listener does not make one effective in the realm of communicating or regulating one's own emotional cues. Instead, perhaps being an active-empathic listener is most readily associated with skills that enable one to be an efficient and effective conversational partner, one that can both initiate and maintain a conversation and pick up on various relational messages being sent in those conversations. Based on past research showing theoretically meaningful relationships between AEL and other measures of interpersonal competence including conversational sensitivity, interaction involvement, and conversational appropriateness and effectiveness (Bodie, 2011b), these results are not surprising but do provide slightly nuanced interpretations of the relationship between AEL and specific social skills.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Of course, any study is not without its limitations. First, although not agreeing with all of his conclusions, Sears (1986) noted the possibility of bias in using college student samples and noted that claims to external validity are problematic when using college student samples (cf. Shapiro, 2002). Ford, Wolvin, and Chung (2000) reported data suggesting college students may overestimate their own listening abilities. Similarly, the use of self-report measures for the study of social skills and listening is further problematic insofar as participants in our study may have attempted to present themselves in the best possible light, thus, potentially distorting the true relationship between AEL and general social skills. As such, any resultant data may be systematically biased toward perceptions of what is "correct" (Fisher, 1993).

Nevertheless, this study's findings demonstrate strong validity for the belief that AEL should be investigated as an important social skill and provide fertile ground for empirically establishing AEL as unrelated to skills that reference abilities to send nonverbal messages or control and regulate nonverbal and emotional communication. Specifically, the results of the multivariate correlations provide the strongest convergent validity for conceptualizing AEL as a social skill related to the reception of (primarily) verbal messages.

In the future, research should begin to situate AEL within theoretical frameworks explaining the etiology of this social skill and the limitations to its effectiveness (see Bodie, in press). Certainly it is not the case that AEL is always a desirable or

warranted social skill. Perhaps, for instance, as the nil relationship between AEL and EC suggests, individuals who are highly active and empathic while listening may be less able to regulate their own emotional displays, thus reducing their effectiveness in conversations that are emotionally heavy. More generally, future research should contribute to the assessment of which situations and types of conversations might be enhanced by skill in AEL. Indeed, the future of research on listening in its many forms and manifestations is ripe for investigation and should do wonders to help verify the extant lay and scholarly claims that appear to presuppose its importance.

Notes

- [1] These stages are certainly not considered to be exactly sequential or to operate in any specific parallel format. Instead, they are illustrative and represent the most popular conceptualizations of listening in the extant literature (see Bodie et al., 2008). Certainly the internal processing of information as it occurs sequentially or in parallel fashion during ongoing conversation is a matter for empirical research, and one that has received scant attention (Imhof, 2010).
- [2] Although not reported in this text due to space considerations, we base this claim on statistical grounds (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, p. 53).

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