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Listening as a Goal-Directed Activity

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Listening styles are a frequently studied construct in the listening literature and are a ubiquitous aspect of interpersonal textbooks. Treatments of listening styles typically consider them as static tendencies utilized irrespective of situational demands. This article extends work on listening styles by questioning if styles are habitual ways of processing information or if they are goal-driven behaviors influenced by interaction context. We predict that styles vary according to the nature of the situation. Participants (N = 382), comprised of 269 female and 102 males who were primarily White and reported a mean age of 20, provided accounts of listening interactions and completed assessments of conversational goals and listening styles utilized during these encounters. Findings indicate listening styles change according to demands of the interaction as a function of empathy, depth, and perspective taking. The relevancy of these characteristics is attributed to the relational quality of the narratives provided by participants. Styles seem to represent cognitive schemas people hold for situational listening in that they are purposefully deployed according to the demands of the interaction and goals of the listener.

Keywords: Habitual Listening; Listener Goals; Listening; Listening Styles; Situational Features

To classify general manners in which people prefer to listen, Watson, Barker, and Weaver (1995) proposed the construct of listening style and suggested four characteristic ways in which people tend to process information. The people-, content-, action-, and time-orientations toward listening is a ubiquitous aspect of interpersonal

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textbooks (e.g., Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2006; DeVito, 2006; McCornack, 2010) and has made its way to various nonacademic outlets suggesting its influence in popular culture as well (Barker & Watson, 2000). Yet while the concept has been influential, little research exists that empirically verifies several key tenets of its conceptualization. Two areas of inquiry are of particular concern in this article: First, the original operationalization of listening styles, the Listening Styles Profile (LSP-16) has recently been shown to exhibit less than ideal psychometric properties (see Bodie & Worthington, 2010). Thus, we provide a reconceptualization of listening styles based on prior work focused on improving the construct and its measurement. The second questionable claim is that listening styles represent habitual reactions which remain relatively constant across various listening situations. Although it is possible that individuals have preferred ways in which to receive and process conversational information, it remains unclear "what causes these variations, [nor is it clear] how persistent they would be" (Imhof, 2003, p. 365). Moreover, not only has the habitual nature of listening styles been questioned in past work but similar variables such as individual conceptualizations of listening (Bodie, 2010) and listening behaviors like active-empathic listening (Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, & Vickery, 2013) have been shown to vary across contexts; thus, the central claim of style rigidity remains questionable.

Indeed, evidence demonstrates that communicators understand certain general interpersonal skills such as listening are valued more in some situations than in others (Spitzberg, 2003) and recognize that skill deployment varies according to the function of the interaction (Burleson, 1986) and/or listener goals (Berger, 2011). Like other trait-based competencies (e.g., information processing), listening is simultaneously the product of typical (not habitual) behavior and contingent on elements of the interactional setting (Daly, 2002; Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2003). Thus, listening styles should not be thought to represent habitual traits but more accurately reflect the goal-driven nature of communication in general.

This article investigates whether individuals report a *primary* listening style and if changes in reports of listening style vary according to the features and goals of a particular situation. While a variety of theoretical frameworks share the assumption that competent listeners are able to pick from several strategies and use them when appropriate, it remains unclear exactly what environmental characteristics signal subsequent listening styles or tendencies. If we can identify significant features of a listening situation that may trigger listeners to match their style to the needs of a conversation, then we can partly understand the cognitive schemas and conceptualizations people hold for situational listening.

Listening Styles: A Reconceptualization

Watson et al. (1995) defined listening style as "attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of the information reception and encoding process" and suggested that "in many circumstances . . . an individual's predominant listening style reflects a structured, habitual response" (p. 2). Listening styles

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were originally conceptualized as listening responses that individuals naturally orient towards especially in novel situations (Imhof, 2004) and captured four listening orientations: people, content, action, and time. The primary measure of these four styles is the Listening Styles Profile (LSP-16), the most widely used self-report listening scale to date (see Rubin, 2009), which asks participants to report how well each of 16 statements (4 for each style) applies to them on a 4-point scale (*Never–Always*) (Watson et al., 1995). Studies utilizing the LSP-16 consistently report inadequate reliability estimates, in the range of .50 to .60, for most of the subscales calling into question the results of past research and signaling scale-related problems (for review of such studies, see Bodie & Worthington, 2010). Likewise, several studies employing multivariate techniques to explore the unique contribution of individual styles to the prediction of various trait-like communication variables find that the people-oriented style is the only style to uniquely contribute to general communication constructs (i.e., communicator style); other multivariate roots feature combinations of styles suggesting conceptual overlap rather than clarity (Bodie & Villaume, 2003; Villaume & Bodie, 2007; Worthington, 2003). The key limitation of the LSP-16 is that scholars have administered and reported results assuming an established factor structure. The only statistical technique used to generate the scale was principle components analysis (PCA), a method that produces an empirical summary of the data set as opposed to a "theoretical solution uncontaminated by unique and error variability" (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, p. 635); thus, subsequent reports utilizing the scale have been blindly reporting on a questionable instrument (for further discussion of PCA and CFA see Park, Dailey, & Lemus, 2002).

Problems with the LSP-16 were recently corroborated by Bodie and Worthington (2010) who reported data inconsistent with the predicted measurement model. The poor model fit in their study was primarily the result of substantial measurement error associated with most of the scale items and high standardized residual covariances; this latter result is in line with exploratory analyses finding only about half of the variance in the 16 items explained with four components. In addition to these statistical critiques, data bearing on convergent, discriminant, predictive, and nomological network validity are sparse (Rubin, 2009). As such, the Listening Styles Profile-Revised (LSP-R) (Bodie, Worthington, & Gearhart, 2013) has been proposed, which retains a factor structure similar to the original LSP-16 but meets current psychometric standards.

Specifically, the LSP-R includes the factor Relational Listening (RL)—listeners who are concerned and aware of others' feelings and emotions and are highly responsive to others—with items more highly interrelated and which produce consistently higher reliability estimates. Recognizing that a fundamental goal of listening involves connecting with others emotionally and attempting to understand how they feel (Bodie, 2011, 2012; Gearhart & Bodie, 2011), RL captures listening as a way to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. The second LSP-R style, Analytical Listening (AL), reflects a goal toward attending to the full message of a speaker before coming to judgment. A preference for systematic listening is clearly evident given AL is most strongly related to the information processing constructs perspective taking

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and systematic-analytic processing (Bodie, Gearhart, et al., 2013; Study 2). Like the time-oriented listeners in the LSP-16, Task-Oriented Listening (TOL) in the LSP-R represents a disdain for listening to speakers that are lengthy in getting their point across. The revised conceptualization of listeners of this type reflects concern with the amount of time spent in an interaction, as well as a listener's desire for a speaker to stay focused and on-topic. Finally, Critical Listening (CL) is a combination of the action- and content-oriented styles of the LSP-16 and refers to a tendency to focus attention on the accuracy and consistency of a speaker's message. For example, attention to errors and inconsistencies in the utterances of others is reflected by CL.

Habitual Nature of Listening Styles

To be considered habitual a listening style must fulfill two criteria: First, it must be stable over time and, second, it should be relatively consistent across situations (Jackson, Hill, & Roberts, 2012; Roberts, 2009). While empirical investigations support the temporal stability requirement, evidence from studies on other listening constructs challenge the criterion of situational stability of listener style. As it were, research offers direct evidence in support of the first standard for the habitual natures of listening styles in that people report similar scores on listening styles across repeated administrations of the LSP-R (Bodie, Worthington, et al., 2013). No direct empirical evidence exists, however, to support listening styles as situationally static. Instead, research focusing on other listening constructs suggests styles may be highly context-dependent.

For instance listening constructs, or distinct belief systems about the roles and functions of listening, vary across situations indicating that the way individuals think about listening is "differentially elicited by elements of situations" (Bodie, 2010, p. 333). Likewise, a listening behavior, active-empathic listening (Bodie, 2011)—the tendency to sense, process, and respond to the emotional content of a speaker's message—has also demonstrated situational flux. Specifically, active-empathic listening (AEL) is more likely to occur when conversations possess empathic potential, necessitate remembering details, violate expectations, entail conflict or tension, and involve a liked and attractive interlocutor (Bodie, Gearhart, et al., 2013). In addition, listener goals also influence a listener's tendency to engage in AEL strategies such as attempting to understand the feelings of another or attempting to comprehend the details of an important lecture.

The studies reviewed above suggest that listening styles may vary according to characteristics and functions of an interaction. Therefore, this article examines consistency between reputed trait-like styles and the reported role a listener enacted in a specific interaction. Furthermore, this study aims to explore the specific environmental stimuli that call forth particular listening styles, particularly such relevant features as empathy and conversational depth (Bodie, Gearhart, et al., 2013). Thus, we attempt to answer the following RQs:

RQ1: Do people change their primary listening style depending on the nature of the situation?

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RQ2: How predictive is a habitual listening style of the way someone will listen in a particular situation?
RQ3: Apart from listening styles, what are features of a situation and/or goals of a listener that may trigger a person to change their primary listening style?

Method

Participants

Data were collected in a reserved computer laboratory that accommodated up to 25 participants per session. The survey was completed by 382 participants, with 269 female and 102 male participants (11 did not report) who reported a mean age of 20.33 ($SD = 2.92$) and were primarily Caucasian ($n = 310$). The most common academic concentration of the participants was Communication Studies ($n = 121$) followed by Business ($n = 83$). All students received a small amount of required research credit (1.5% of the course grade) in one of their communication studies courses for their participation. All data collected were anonymous and all procedures were approved by the appropriate Institutional Review Board.

Procedures

The purpose of this study is to assess the degree of stability of an individual's primary listening style. We approach this goal by first measuring a student's primary listening style via the revised version of the listening styles profile (LSP-R) and then asking students to recall and provide a brief narrative of a listening situation. Next, participants responded to a series of questions of the nature of the interaction as well as completed demographic information.

Participant narratives

Participants provided an account of a time when they used a listening style of their choice. Participants were asked to describe the interaction by typing in a dialogue box which was followed by questions aimed to assess several situational features of the narrative and listener goals. Additionally, demographic details of the conversation such as the length of time, the number of interlocutors, and the interaction medium (e.g., face-to-face) were collected. Frequencies indicate that subjects from this study engaged in interactions primarily with one other person who was most commonly a friend. Conversations were generally face-to-face and lasted between 6 and 30 minutes. As a basic manipulation check that participants were reporting a time when they were primarily in the listening role, participants reported a greater amount of time in the conversation as a listener rather than as a speaker ($M_{\text{listener}} = 54.1$; $M_{\text{speaker}} = 45.9$; $SD = 19.6$).

Measures

LSP-R. Participants completed the 24-item LSP-R (Bodie, Gearhart, et al., 2013) which uses 7-point Likert response scaling to assess the degree to which participants

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generally utilize each listening style. All items were randomized for each participant. Confirmatory factor analytic techniques were used to assess the fit of the model to the data, and results indicated a well-fitting model, χ^2 (246) = 381.97, $p < .01$, CFI = .95, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .05 (90% CI: .04 .06). Internal consistency estimates measured using Cronbach's alpha were adequate for all subscales: Relational ($\alpha = .88$), Analytical ($\alpha = .93$), Task ($\alpha = .88$), and Critical ($\alpha = .91$).

In order to classify respondents according to the primary listening style as measured via the LSP-R, scores were calculated for each of the four listening style subscales by averaging item responses. Scores across the four subscales were split into thirds (tertiary split), and respondents scoring in the upper third of one style and the lower two thirds of the other three styles were subsequently classified as reporting that *primary* style. When a respondent did not score in the upper third of any listening style, they were designated into a "no style" grouping; when a respondent scored in the upper third in multiple styles, they were assigned a "multiple styles" categorization.[1] A total of 105 were classified as reporting one primary LSP-R style (27.5%) with the following distribution: Relational ($n = 33$; 8.6%), Analytical ($n = 20$; 5.2%), Task ($n = 33$; 8.6%), and Critical ($n = 19$; 5%). Conversely, 184 (48.2%) were classified as reporting multiple primary LSP-R listening styles and 93 (24.3%) reported no primary style.

Role as listener

Next, students were asked to evaluate their role as listener in the retroactive narrative by responding to a separate set of questions that reflect the gist of LSP-R styles. These items were developed specifically for this study and were apart from the LSP-R. Participants indicated their level of agreement/disagreement (7-point scaling) with statements assessing the degree to which they employed certain aspects of each of the four listening styles in their role as listener. Three statements represented each listening style for a total of 12 items (see items in Table 1). Results of confirmatory factor analytic techniques indicated a well-fitting model, χ^2 (48) = 123.21, $p < .01$, CFI = .96, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .064 (90% CI: .050 .078). Accordingly, items were averaged to create four subscale scores; means, standard deviations, and alphas are presented in Table 1. Only the internal consistency estimates for the Analytic subscale were below conventional levels ($\alpha > .70$).

In order to classify respondents according to the primary role as listener, identical procedures as used for the classification of LSP-R styles (described above) were utilized for the role as listener items. A total of 143 were classified as reporting one primary role as listener (37.4%) with the following distribution (from Table 1): Relational ($n = 60$; 15.7%), Analytical ($n = 19$; 5%), Task ($n = 33$; 8.6%), and Critical ($n = 31$; 8.1%). Conversely, 174 (45.5%) were classified as reporting multiple roles as a listener and 65 (17%) reported no role.

Features of the interaction

To understand the general nature of listening situations, participants evaluated their specific interactions on two bases: 1) the nature of the interaction itself and 2) their

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Table 1 Role as Listener in the Specific Participant Narrative

Style and scale items	α	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Relational	.83	5.36	1.46	60 (15.7%)
—to build or maintain the friendship.				
—to understand how others were feeling.				
—to understand the others' feelings.				
Analytical	.64	4.55	1.39	19 (5.0%)
—to withhold judgment.				
—to consider several sides of an issue.				
—to remain nonjudgmental.				
Task	.79	3.57	1.57	33 (8.6%)
—that others did not take too long to get to the point.				
—to help others to get to the point quickly.				
—that others did not waste my time.				
Critical	.90	2.97	1.71	31 (8.1%)
—to find mistakes.				
—to focus on errors.				
—to focus on inconsistencies.				

Note. A total of 143 were classified as reporting one primary style (37.4%). 174 (45.51%) were classified as reporting multiple primary narrative listening styles and 65 (17.0%) reported no primary listening style. All items begin with the phrase, "It was important for me . . . ".

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goals as the listener in the interaction (see Table 2). Each dimension has its own response scale and all items were developed exclusively for this study.

First, the nature of the interaction included a total of 14 items used to assess four different features of the interaction: Novelty, Time, Ambience, and Depth. Items were assessed using 7-point semantic-differential scaling. Initial confirmatory factor analysis indicated a model with poor fit to the data, χ^2 (71) = 646.35, $p < .01$, CFI = .85, SRMR = .91, RMSEA = .146 (90% CI: .136 .156). After removing the two-item Time scale due to poor factor loadings and two items from the Affability scale due to high standardized residual covariances, the model showed appropriate fit statistics to the data, χ^2 (32) = 57.44, $p < .01$, CFI = .99, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .046 (90% CI: .026 .063). The remaining items were averaged to create individual scale scores, and the items retained are included in Table 2 along with alphas, standard deviations, and means for the three subscales.

Second, 29 items were utilized to determine how situational goals may play a role in helping listeners discern the appropriate listening style for the conversation. Participants assessed the items on 7-point scales ranging from *Not at all Relevant* (1) to *Extremely Relevant* (7). Principle axis factoring was used to reveal dimensions present in the situational features. The initial solution for listening goals suggested six factors with eigenvalues >1 that explained 62.94% of item variance. Then, each rotated component matrix was analyzed separately for items with a primary loading no less than .50 and secondary loadings no greater than .30. Seventeen items were retained

Table 2 Nature of the Listening Situation for the Participant Narratives

Interaction characteristics	α	*M*	*SD*
Novelty	.91	3.44	1.79
Routine—Rare			
Usual—Unusual			
Common—Uncommon			
Ambience	.91	5.02	1.70
Argumentative—Peaceful			
Not enjoyable—Very enjoyable			
Unpleasant—Pleasant			
Unsatisfying—Satisfying			
Depth	.80	4.34	1.59
Not at all intimate—Very intimate			
Superficial—In-depth			
Impersonal—Personal			
Goals of the Listener in Participant Narratives			
Enjoyment	.92	4.07	2.14
—for fun.			
—for entertainment.			
—for enjoyment.			
Companionship	.82	3.20	1.71
—because I needed someone to talk to or be with.			
—to feel less lonely.			
—to feel that someone was there.			
—to feel less tense.			
Empathy	.82	3.60	1.96
—to help someone.			
—to let someone know I care about their feelings.			
—because I was concerned about someone.			
Perspective Taking	.79	4.00	1.71
—to understand the others' point of view.			
—to understand the others' opinions.			
—to get to all sides of an issue.			
—to investigate an issue.			

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suggesting five shared components accounting for 59.35% of item variance. The five interaction goals identified in these data included Enjoyment, Companionship, Empathy, Perspective Taking, and Passing Time, which are presented in Table 2 (excluding Passing Time). Confirmatory factor analytic results indicated a well-fitting model, χ^2 (109) = 364.36, $p < .01$, CFI = .91, SRMR = .07, RMSEA = .078 (90% CI: .07 .087). Four of the five subscales demonstrated adequate reliabilities; Passing Time was the lone exception ($\alpha < .70$).

Results

Utilizing G*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), power to detect goodness-of-fit was estimated at .34 for detecting small (.10) effects, and in excess of .99 for detecting medium (.25) effects and large (.40) effects given a sample size of 382.

Examination of Style Stability

We addressed RQ1 through descriptive examination rather than statistical inference; thus these results will be discussed apart from the latter two RQs. In order to determine whether participants changed their listening style based upon the situation (RQ1), crosstab analysis was conducted between participant categorization on the LSP-R and reported role as listener (see Table 3). Cohen's Kappa, a measure of agreement ($K = .12$; $p < .001$), indicated that many participants reported enacting a different listening role in the recalled listening situation than their primary style measured via the LSP-R. Several other conclusions can be drawn from this table including the large number of multistyle listeners (>170). Additionally, people seemed to self-categorize via the LSP-R with greater variability than their reported roles as listener. For example, the count of the Relational LSP-R category is half the magnitude of participants who reported enacting this role in their individual listening situation.

Research Questions

RQ2 queried the situational features accounting for the most importance in determining how a participant listened in a particular listening situation. Multivariate relative importance analysis was performed by utilizing techniques and SPSS macros developed by LeBreton and Tonidandel (2008). Relative importance refers to the contribution each predictor makes to the total predicted criterion variance when a predictor is considered by itself and in combination with others. Along with the four

Table 3 Crosstab Analysis—Role as Listener* LSP-R

	LSP-R						
	Relational	Analytic	Task	Critical	Multi	None	Total
Role Relational as listener	7	4	4	2	31	12	60
Analytic	0	3	2	0	6	8	19
Task	1	0	6	1	18	7	33
Critical	2	3	4	3	10	9	31
Multi	12	5	14	8	101	34	174
None	11	5	3	5	18	23	65
Total	33	20	33	19	184	93	382

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styles of the LSP-R, situational features and listener goals included as predictors were Novelty, Ambience, Depth, Enjoyment, Companionship, and Empathy (Passing Time was excluded from the test because of poor reliability). In the analysis, the above independent variables were used to predict "role as listener" categorizations. Results are presented in Table 4 and indicate the subscales of the LSP-R together account for approximately 37% of the total predicted multivariate criterion variance while features of the situation and listener goals account for the remaining 63%. Results also suggested most subscales of the LSP-R demonstrate less relative importance (i.e., lower proportion of variance explained) in determining listening behavior than factors such as Empathy and Depth.

The third research question (RQ3) investigated the degree to which the LSP-R is capable of accurately predicting future listening behaviors as compared to contextual characteristics. Evidence for the ability of the LSP-R to correctly classify the role a listener will enact in a specific listening situation was produced via comparisons of two discriminant function analyses (presented in Table 5). The first discriminant analysis investigated the ability of the LSP-R to correctly classify the listener role reported by participants regarding their specific interaction, whereas the second analysis tested situational features and listener goals as predictors of listener role. Both analyses returned two significant discriminant functions.

In the first analysis, predictor variables were the four subscales of the LSP-R. Significant mean differences were observed for all the predictors on the DV, listener role. Box's M indicated that the assumption of equality of covariance matrices was not violated, $M = 28.56$, $p = .63$. The first discriminant function revealed a significant association between groups of listener roles and all predictors, $\chi^2\ (12) = 51.32$, $p < .01$, $\Lambda = .83$, accounting for 14% of between-group variability. The second discriminant function revealed a significant association between groups of listener roles and all predictors, $\chi^2\ (6) = 12.33$, $p = .05$, $\Lambda = .96$, accounting for 4% of between-group variability. Loadings on the first and second functions can be seen in Table 5. The third discriminant function failed to reveal a significant association between groups and all predictors ($p = .36$). Classification results showed that 41.9% of listener roles were correctly classified by the LSP-R when prior probabilities were set to equal group sizes. Task listeners were classified with the highest amount of accuracy (55.6%) followed by Analytic (47.4%), Relational (39.2%), and Critical listeners (38.1%).

The second discriminant analysis examined features of the listening situation as predictors of listener role. Predictor variables included four of the five scales of

Table 4 Multivariate Relative Importance Analysis (MVRI)

	Novel	Amb	Depth	Enjoy	Comp	Emp	PT	R	A	T	C
Rescaled MVRI (sum to 100)	1.41	7.92	11.07	4.78	5.55	20.58	11.67	7.3	9.5	6.9	13.2

Note. Amb = Ambience; Comp = Companionship; Emp = Empathy; PT = Perspective Taking; R = Relational Listening Style; A = Analytical Listening Style; T = Task Listening Style; C = Critical Listening Style.

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Table 5 Discriminant Analyses—LSP-R and Independent Variables

	Discriminant functions	
	Function 1	*Function 2*
Analysis 1: LSP-R Set		
Relational	.65*	.76*
Analytical	.59*	−.02
Task	−.51*	.21
Critical	−.69*	.44*
Canonical Correlation	*.37*	*.19*
% of Variance	*77.0*	*19.2*
Analysis 2: Situational Features Set		
Enjoyment	.38*	−.22
Companionship	.40*	−.10
Empathy	.67*	−.23
Perspective Taking	.14	−.53*
Novelty	−.10	.71*
Ambience	.50*	.11
Depth	.52*	−.16
Canonical Correlation	*.50*	*.22*
% of Variance	*81.2*	*11.9*

*$p < .01$.

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listener goals (Enjoyment, Companionship, Empathy, and Perspective Taking excluding Passing Time) and three scales of situational characteristics (Novel, Ambience, Deep). Significant mean differences were observed for all the predictors on the DV. Box's M indicated that the assumption of equality of covariance matrices was violated, $M = 162.37$, $p < .05$; given the large sample this problem is not regarded as consequential. The first discriminant function revealed a significant association between groups and all but three predictors (see Table 5), $\chi^2\ (24) = 113.93$, $p < .01$, $\Lambda = .67$ accounting for 27% of between group variability. The analysis also revealed a second significant function, $\chi^2\ (14) = 23.26$, $p = .05$, $\Lambda = .92$, accounting for approximately 5% of between-group variability. Closer analysis of the structure matrix revealed two significant predictors, namely Novelty (.71) and Perspective Taking (−.53). The third discriminant function failed to reveal a significant association between groups and all predictors ($p = .24$). Classification results showed that 57.9% of listener roles were correctly classified by the set of independent variables. Again, Task listeners were classified with the highest amount of accuracy (70.0%) followed by Relational (59.3%), Critical (52.2%), and Analytic (44.7%).

Results of the discriminant analysis provide insight into the ability of the LSP-R as compared to the features of the interaction in predicting a participants' role as listener. Findings indicate that variables concerning the characteristics of the interaction

more accurately classified participants' role as listener (57.9% correct) than scores on the LSP-R (41.9% correct). Moreover, both the LSP-R and interactional features classified Task listeners with the greatest accuracy.

Discussion

This article extends the work on the construct of listening styles by questioning the assumption that listening styles are primarily habitual ways of processing information irrespective of setting. We predicted that listening styles will vary according to the nature of the listening situation, and results support this belief. It is not surprising that participants report listening with different styles across a variety of situations as human communication is highly adaptive and adjustable.

Generally speaking, findings indicated that listening styles change according to demands of the particular interaction, acknowledging that listening styles, like other communication skills, can be competently performed according to situation and function (Spitzberg, 2003) and purposefully utilized in pursuit of personal goals (Berger, 2011). In particular, listening styles principally varied as a function of the amount of Empathy, Depth, and Perspective Taking in the interaction.

Evidence that participants altered their *primary* LSP-R listening styles to the situation can be observed from changes in the crosstab frequencies (Table 3). For example, Relational and Analytic listener role counts were twice the magnitude or more of the number of participants who reported these listening styles via the LSP-R. Thus, at least 30 individuals who identified a non-Relational or non-Analytical primary LSP-R style reported using a Relational or Analytical style during their interaction. The adjustment in listening style is likely explained by the nature of the listening situations reported by the participants. Summarily, perusal of the participant narratives finds personal listening situations that would tend to elicit a relational style of listening and not necessitate Critical or Task listening. For instance, in their narratives, often students did not recall listening to lectures. Perhaps what these data suggest is, in line with other work, that listening is seen as closely aligned with a behavior elicited in times of need by a close relational partner (Bodie, Worthington, et al., 2013; Jones, 2011) and thought to serve particularly important functions in close relationships (Purdy, 2006). To wit, the conversations reported in this study were characterized as one-on-one conversations with friends that were peaceful, enjoyable, involving perspective taking and invoking empathic potential. These qualities tend to reflect interpersonal listening rather than task or critical. It is possible that, unwittingly, asking students to describe a listening situation primes them to think about a personal conversation involving the sharing of feelings rather than pedantic lectures.

Furthermore, the relational nature of participant narratives likely contributes to the study's second finding that the empathic potential of an interaction particularly influences listener style choices. This result mirrored Bodie, Gearhart, et al.'s (2013) finding that empathic potential in a conversation causes individuals to engage in listening behaviors (e.g., active-empathic listening) that attend to the emotions of

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others irrespective of any primary listening style. It is plausible that participants have developed listening frameworks for common interpersonal functions and situations (i.e., social support) and subsequently deploy the analogous listening behaviors, or style, in response to the interaction demands or goals (Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012).

This belief falls within the larger conceptual and methodological framework of constructivism (Burleson & Bodie, 2008), which suggests that individual mental representations of the social world drive how we act and react to its substance. In other words, how we think about something (e.g., how we conceptualize the listening demands in a situation) influences how we act in relevant situations (e.g., the style one adopts). The importance of understanding mental representations of various types of listening was recently highlighted by Bodie et al. (2012), and the current study implies that cognitive schemas are utilized by listeners to interpret features of the situation and match appropriate listening styles. In particular, listening styles were found to change as a function of empathic potential of the situation.

In response to Bodie's (2010) call to "explore environmental stimuli that call forth particular conceptualizations of listening" (p. 333), this study identified characteristics such as Empathy, Depth, and Perspective Taking as important in predicting listener style. These features are in line with situational characteristics that invoke greater levels of conversational sensitivity, identified by Daly, Vangelisti, and Daughton (1988) as interesting and involving interactions and those regarding non-superficial, personal topics. It seems that listening, like other conversational variables and skills, can be performed competently according to what is gauged to be appropriate for and effective in the situation. When interlocutors recognize empathic potential or conversational depth they are generally likely to respond in a relationally oriented manner regardless of other interaction characteristics.

We concede it is plausible that listening styles remain stable across some situations but not others, which could be a function of the *nature* of the specific listening interaction, the *context* of the interaction, and the *person* involved in the interaction. For example, one participant identified Relational as his/her primary listening style; however, because of the nature of the interaction on which he/she reported, an Analytic style was identified as being more important. This participant mentioned an interaction while working at a department store in which a customer disclosed personal sentiments that dealt with controversial views about relational infidelity. Indeed, it seems this participant felt it was more important while listening to *withhold judgment and opinions* than to try *to understand the feelings* of this woman. That is, trying to understand the feelings of the customer would have involved the discussion of intimate details concerning infidelity, which is a topic inappropriate for a professional environment such as a department store. This anecdotal example demonstrates how listening styles may vary across situations yet remain consistent over time. However, our findings did suggest general situational features that might influence a specific style of listening.

In sum, conversations can be intense, upsetting, enjoyable, and generate all types of emotions. Therefore, we believe the context of any particular listening interaction

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has an effect on the selection of a listening style, which is evidenced by the fact that participant narratives ranged from a department store employee talking with a customer about infidelity to a niece talking to her aunt about death, cancer, and how to cope with the difficulties of life. We must acknowledge that a number of factors can characterize a conversation and only a few were investigated in this study, which is a potential limitation of the research and a direction for future studies.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In addition to that mentioned above, several other limitations accompany the conclusions of this study. 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). For instance, Ford, Wolvin, and Chung (2000) reported data suggesting college students may overestimate their own listening abilities. Another potential limitation inherently present in self-report measures is a social desirability bias, meaning individuals completing the various listening scales in this study, despite reassurances of anonymity, still strove to present themselves as good listeners. For example, the Relational listening style was identified as the most common single style in all the different measures of it. Whether or not participants from this study were actually evoking this style most often, it is feasible to suggest that the relational style is most desirable style with which to identify. This limitation has been noted in the development of self-report measurements of listening in the field of counseling (Lawson & Winkelman, 2003), and our research is not immune from similar concerns.

Another limitation is the ability of the LSP-R to classify listeners when no context is present. To wit, participants completing the initial LSP-R were infrequently classified as having one primary style (only 24%); however, when context becomes apparent the number of individuals classified as using a single style increases to 37%. This finding calls into question whether the LSP-R accurately captures habitual listening styles sans context. Moreover, it is unclear the extent to which the LSP-R may unwittingly prompt participants to imagine a particular situation and respond to items based only upon their analysis of that situation. Although directions in the survey instructed participants not to think of any one situation, it is impossible to verify the removal of any context or imagined interaction from respondents' minds.

Finally, it is certainly possible that participants recalled a listening situation reflective of their self-reported LSP-R style. In this case it remains uncertain if the person actually intended to utilize such a listening style according to the situation, or if instead the trait-like persistence of a listening style accounted for the use style. Unfortunately, it is not possible to garner this information from the current data. Furthermore, the cross-sectional data reported in this study can only provide limited insight into the stability of listening styles across situations. Respondents only recalled one listening situation, which certainly is not representative of all potential future listening choices. A longitudinal or diary study that looks at listener styles used

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by an individual on a daily basis would be more appropriate for investigating stability of listening styles.

Conclusion

Common limitations notwithstanding, this study contributed to the development of a reliable typology of listening styles which has been an extension and modification of the LSP-16. The primary goal of this study was to assess the degree to which individuals' listening styles vary across situations to develop a more robust understanding of the dynamic nature of listening styles. We argue that instability does not reflect a lack of reliability from the LSP-R nor does it indicate that listening styles are wholly unstable across situations necessarily. We caution, however, against using the LSP-R for predictive purposes especially if considering styles as habitual orientations toward listening free of context. Ultimately, listening styles as measured by the LSP-R may provide another method to measure a communicators' competence or adaptability. We hope future studies use the LSP-R and the results from this study continue to flesh out the features that influence the degree to which individuals' listening styles vary as a function of the nuances of interpersonal communication.

Note

[1] This phenomenon was also noted in Watson et al. (1995) where 40% of respondents reported multiple styles.

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