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Listening and Organizing

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Abstract
Listening may be conceptualized as skillful organizational practice and processes integral to organizational phenomena. Competent listening has been linked to organizational outcomes, and organizational communication interventions include efforts to make listening more effective (e.g., listening skill development, dialogue, appreciative inquiry). Listening may be evaluated by individual and interactional outcomes, and competent listening is skillful and situation appropriate. Listening may also be conceptualized as an organizational-level as well as individual-level construct.

Main Text

The International Listening Association defined listening as "the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages," while also arguing for the development of multiple conceptualizations to accommodate the diversity of ideas related to and subsumed by the broad term (Bodie, Janusik, & Välikoski, 2008). Listening has been conceived of as an interpersonal communication activity; the physical and cognitive processes of hearing, interpreting, and responding; a set of behaviors comprising as verbal and nonverbal responsiveness; an approach to managing discussion and conflict; a skill to be honed; a sensitivity to emotions and emotional situations; and an openness to input and ideas (Brownell, 2013). Bodie et al.'s (2008) review of listening scholarship organized listening research across multiple intellectual domains (e.g., psychology, communication, linguistics, anthropology, and management) into listening as information processing, competent behavior, and individual difference. Scholarship at the intersection of listening and organizing has tended to focus on listening as skillful activity related to organizational outcomes and as a process or practice important in organizational communication phenomena.

Most agree that listening is an essential communication phenomenon that merits attention; most also agree that despite its importance it has been the focus of relatively little empirical research. The study of listening has proven difficult in part because it is to a degree inseparable from other fundamental communication processes. Listening is implicit in theory and research on, for example, conversational turn-taking, interaction, accommodation, speaker or audience-adaption, and models of competent communication. Much research that might reasonably include listening may also reflect the (particularly American) notion that listening is the absence of talking, and the measurement of listening thus conceptualized is difficult. Early research centered on questions of effective or skillful listening especially concerned with comprehension, a focus that may have also obscured more basic questions.

Skillful listening has been related to important organizational outcomes. Effective listening has been associated with perceptions of listener competence, more effective teamwork, and supportive organizational climate; poor listening has been associated with negative organizational outcomes such as counterproductive conflict and organizational mishaps such as medical errors, misunderstood work orders, feedback confusion, and decreased safety climate (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010; Brownell, 2013).

Communication effectiveness is generally understood as communication that is (a) competent or skilled and (b) appropriate or fitting; listening effectiveness is too in part about skillful practice and situational fit. It is skillful to the extent that it allows communicators to achieve multiple goals, and it is situational in that those goals are given to some degree by the situation (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010). The earliest scholarship concerned with listening and organizing recognized that skillful listening practice is integral to organizing to the extent that forming and nurturing relationships are integral to organizing (Bodie, Worthington, et al., 2008; Nichols & Stevens, 1957). Relatedly, the what makes listening effective is in part individual (e.g., comprehension) and interactive (e.g., being perceived as being a good listener). Listening behaviors that prove or are judged by others as effective listening vary from situation to situation. The situational view of listening competence is particularly important for listening and organizing, because variation in organizational situations complicate listening tasks.

To explain variation in listening competence and effectiveness, scholarship has conceptualized listening in terms of more or less effective types of listening practice or situation-specific listening functions. For example, active listening, versus passive listening, involves a greater marshaling of behaviors like paraphrasing, expressing understanding, asking questions. Active listening should be more effective, because the listener is more engaged and speaker-focused and therefore more likely to both comprehend and respond appropriately, as well as to perform that they care about what is being said.

Whereas this typology draws a distinction between patterns of listening behavior and attempts to link those patterns to more or less effective communication, others have focused on fit between listening skill and situation. For example, situations may call for deliberative listening where the principal object is to hear, analyze, recall what is being said. Others may call for empathic listening where the principal object is to provide social support by giving the speaker space to share their feelings and to understand those feelings. Such bifurcations of listening into types and functions (active vs. passive, deliberative vs. empathic) have been useful for research and practice, but they no doubt over simplify listening, which more likely includes complex interplay of situational goals and arrays of listening behaviors.

The focus on skillful listening as organizational practice has been important in studies of domains of practice wherein relationships with clients is a central feature of the profession. Listening effectiveness here may be understood as underlying fulfilling client needs and building relationships with clients, and listening is enabled and constrained by a mix professional and organizational phenomena. For example, early models of competent listening focused on the relationship between clients and salespersons where listening skill (e.g., minimizing interruptions, asking clarifying questions, verbal and nonverbal listening behavior) is integral to selling (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010). Listening is also important in, for example, attorney-client relationships. Attorneys must interview clients and witnesses to develop an understanding of the case and gather evidence, and negotiate competing demands such as building relationships with clients while still maintaining detachment. Listening is similarly important in models of patient-centered care and in professional practice such as the medical or therapeutic interview.

Research on effective listening has also been concerned with intervening in practice to encourage improvements in listening or positioning more effective listening as an intervention into related organizational phenomena. Such interventions have typically focused on developing listening skills (Brownell, 2013) or altering orientations to listening. That is, research has conceived of listening as an intervention *into*, for example, leadership, change management, emotional labor, and conflict management, and an intervention *through* practices such as dialogue and appreciative inquiry.

For example, effective listening is a skill attributed to effective leaders. In studies of work that involves managing or processing emotions, listening behaviors that allow for empathy without emotional contagion may buffer against burnout (Miller, 2007). Listening may improve organizational change implementation efforts especially if they include involvement or participation. Efforts to enhance public deliberation include changes in how stakeholders should listen to each other.

Whereas these efforts involve enhancing or reconceiving listening to intervene in an organizational process, dialogue and appreciative inquiry may be conceived of as organizational interventions that emphasizing listening. Dialogue, conceived of as communication episodes that are structured to develop shared understanding, emphasizes shifting from advocacy to inquiry marked in differences in listening behavior and listening goals. Shifting concern from particular episodes to organizational communication more generally, "dialogical wisdom" still focuses on the careful management of the relationship between the speaker and the listener (Barge & Little, 2002). Likewise, appreciative inquiry, "an approach to organizational development and management that emphasizes the positive care of organizational life" (Barge & Oliver, 2002, pp. 125-126), includes on an openness to listening. The conversational structures integral to appreciative inquiry emphasize inquiry and question asking (e.g., especially perspective taking, future talk, and reflecting conversations, Barge & Oliver, 2002). Dialogic approaches and appreciative inquiry rely in part on communicative practices that emphasize listening borrowed from professional listening practices, such as interventive interviewing.

Although the bulk of scholarship on listening and organizing has focused on listening as more or less effective practice, listening may also be conceived of as a property of organizations or organizing. Work in this domain has tended to admonish organizations to be more open, but making organizations more open may not necessarily make them more effective or encourage more sophisticated listening practice (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987). Listening has been highlighted in the study of organizational phenomena such as giving and receiving feedback, social support, participative organizing, high reliability organizing, and environmental scanning and sensemaking. Research in these areas has conceptualized listening as an organizational as well as individual level construct.

For example, listening has been positioned as key to giving and receiving feedback or seeking compliance or upward influence though most research in this domain emphasizes constructing effective feedback messages. Researchers have also conceptualized listening as a characteristic of organizational climate or culture that may be cultivated through intervention in listening practice and supportive feedback in particular. Listening is key to effective social support and especially comforting communication which is in turn integral in a wide variety of emotion work (Miller, 2007). Organizing for safety and reliability emphasizes listening as fundamental to communicative practice (e.g., heedful interrelating) that may reduce error and accidents, and creating organizational processes for safety work involves orienting communicative episodes to who is and who should be listening (Barbour & Gill, 2014).

To the extent that organizations are open to their environments and process information from their environments, organizations may be conceived of as listeners as well. The literature on organizations' information environments positions the organization as the listener scanning information available or sent to the organization to interpret it or making meaning of it. Participative organizing involves varying degrees of involvement of organizational members in organization decision-making whereby management listens to organizational members. An organization's willingness to listen to internal and external stakeholders has also been conceptualized as listening wherein an openness to input may enhance organizational reputation.

SEE ALSO:

IEOC0016
IEOC0032
IEOC0038
IEOC0057
IEOC0068
IEOC0079
IEOC0110
IEOC0119
IEOC0137
IEOC0188
IEOC0191
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Further Reading

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Author Mini-Biography

Joshua B. Barbour (PhD, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) is an assistant professor of Communication Studies in the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests center on the confluence of the macromorphic and communicative in organizational life. He studies how and why individuals, groups, and organizations manage information and meaning and how we can (re)design conversations, change groups, and help individuals to do so with more sophistication. His works reflects the assumption that by changing how we communicate with one another we can work together more equitably and more effectively. His past projects have focused on collaborative, engaged scholarship in organizations including a toxic waste storage facility; nuclear power plants; organizations involved in disaster preparation, response and recovery; and healthcare organizations. His work has appeared in *Communication Monographs, Management Communication Quarterly, Communication Theory, the Journal of Applied Communication Research, the Journal of Health Communication, and the Journal of Communication*.

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Listening, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, information processing and cognitions, communication skills