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The motivational value of listening during intimate and difficult conversations

Netta Weinstein[1] | **Guy Itzchakov**[2] | **Nicole Legate**[3]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Reading, Reading, UK

[2]Department of Human Services, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

[3]Department of Psychology, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Correspondence
Netta Weinstein, Department of Psychology, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AH, UK.
Email: n.weinstein@reading.ac.uk

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Abstract

Outcomes of conversations, including those dealing with controversial, deeply personal, or threatening disclosures, result not only from what is said but also from how listeners receive these messages. This article integrates the motivational framework of self-determination theory (SDT) and the expanding literature on interpersonal listening to explore the reasons why high-quality listening is so impactful during these conversations. We describe why high-quality listening is a specific and distinguishable autonomy-supportive motivational strategy, and argue that there is much to gain by considering that listening can satisfy basic psychological needs, in particular for autonomy and relatedness. We argue that SDT can help explain why high-quality listening is effective, especially in reducing defensiveness, bridging divides, and motivating change. The discussion focuses on ways motivation science can build more effective interventions for behavioral change by harnessing listening as an interpersonal strategy.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Constructive conversations generate well-being, feelings of closeness, shared effort, and productivity (Reis, 2017). Difficult conversations, when people disagree or disclose something controversial (Grimshaw, 1990; Zhang et al., 2018), can produce these same positive outcomes if they unfold under supportive circumstances (Stone et al., 2010; Tjosvold et al., 2014). These conversations take place across life's relational domains, from close relationships to

workplaces to interactions among strangers. Clearly, how people talk to each other (i.e., through words and tone of voice) is important in influencing conversation outcomes (Holtgraves, 2010; Monaghan, 2012), but speakers do not live in a relational bubble. Relatively little attention has been paid to the influence of the other party in a productive conversation; that is, how high-quality listeners shape conversations (Bavelas et al., 2000; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017).

It is easy to bring to mind the image of a listener. They may stay quiet so their partner can speak. They wait for sentences to be completed before contributing their thoughts. During the conversation, they avoid glancing at phones, maintain constant eye contact, and exhibit facial expressions and a body posture that convey interest and curiosity. Hence listeners' *attentional attitude* creates space in the conversation for speakers to talk. However, "high-quality" listening involves more than merely being silent and creating space, since the listener is an active agent in the conversation who can contribute verbally and non-verbally to shaping the interaction (Bavelas et al., 2000; Itzchakov, 2020; Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015). Taken together, the listener can enhance the quality of the conversation or detract from it. In this article, we will explore the meaning of "high-quality" listening from humanistic, motivational, social, and organizational psychology perspectives. Furthermore, we will integrate this view with a self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) perspective to argue that listening supports speakers' basic psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness (and possibly competence, depending on the topic of the conversation). Finally, we will explore the implications of listening and its proximal outcomes in the context of difficult conversations and motivating change.

2 | THE SCIENCE OF HIGH-QUALITY LISTENING

Colloquially and empirically, listening has various meanings, including ones as simple as merely staying silent (Glenn, 1989). Researchers recommend defining this construct within the framework of a given study (Worthington & Bodie, 2017). This article focuses on the role of a specific set of listening qualities or behaviors, and speakers' perceptions of them, during conversations (e.g., Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2021). We understand high-quality listeners convey three qualities to their interlocutor: undivided attention, comprehension, and positive intention (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021). Listeners indicate that they are attending to the speakers' content through back-channel behaviors in the form of verbal and nonverbal reactions that signal interest without interrupting the speakers (Bavelas et al., 2000; Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015), including a key set of non-verbal behaviors (i.e., eye contact, open posture, and facial expressions). High-quality listeners also communicate that they comprehend what speakers are saying by paraphrasing conversational content (Nemec et al., 2017) and asking open-ended and clarifying questions (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Importantly, as they do so, high-quality listeners convey their positive intention by taking a non-judgmental attitude toward the speakers, providing some measure of validation, and through facial expressions that convey interest and curiosity (Rogers, 1959). This non-judgmental attitude is not isomorphic with agreeing with what the speaker says; rather, it entails acknowledging the speakers' freedom to freely share their perspectives (Rogers, 1961).

Although listening involves a number of different non-verbal and more curtailed verbal behaviors, speakers tend to form a holistic perception of whether they were listened to well or not (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021). In fact, listening measures usually load on a single latent factor (Lipez et al., 2020) or two second-order factors of constructive and destructive listening (Kluger & Bouskila-Yam, 2018), even when scale items tap different aspects of the construct, such as [the listener...] "tries hard to understand what I am saying" and "creates a positive atmosphere for me to talk" (Kluger & Bouskila-Yam, 2018). Listening can also be measured as a single construct through listeners' own self-reports (Bodie, 2011) or by applying coding schemes (Levinson et al., 1997).

It is worth noting that many studies on listening have focused on the closely related construct of active listening. When this term was first coined by Carl Rogers in 1951, it defined the non-judgmental and empathic approach still understood to constitute high-quality listening. However, over the years, it has lost its original meaning, and the benevolent intention that characterized it within the humanistic tradition is frequently used in marketing and other

areas to induce speakers to behave in line with listeners' goals (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021; Tyler, 2011). Because benevolent intention is a key aspect of high-quality listening, the current operationalization of listening necessarily includes behaviors that convey relational valuing (i.e., a positive intention toward speakers that recognizes their intrinsic worth; Rogers, 1959).

The muddying of the concept of active listening also obscures an important quality of high-quality listening: that listeners must be genuine in order to be perceived as truly good listeners. Listening cannot be reduced to performing a series of techniques from an automated script. Rather, these techniques must be used in conjunction with genuine interest and caring for the individual speaking, even if only while listening to that conversation. Previous research has shown that speakers can detect non-genuine listeners and do not respond well in these circumstances (Tyler, 2011).

3 | HIGH-QUALITY LISTENING IS NOT ISOMORPHIC TO SOCIAL SUPPORT

In a wider research context, the construct of "listening" is frequently related to social support, or providing psychological and material resources to others (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Feeney & Collins, 2015). This is because both listening and social support involve a series of constructive observable actions that can readily be perceived by the recipient (Tyler, 2011). In both cases, perceptions by the recipients are also influenced by their own needs, emotions, and individual differences (Reis et al., 2004).

We argue that high-quality listening is a specific form of social support, which deserves empirical study in its own right. This can be seen in the ways that social support is operationalized. Namely, the social support construct "emotional support" is thought to involve listening well and communicating an understanding of one's partner's feelings (Burleson, 2011). But emotional support also involves advice-giving (Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011), which is not a condition of listening, and can, at times, interrupt the listening process (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021). Social support in general can involve emotional support (which involves listening), but also tangible support (providing material resources, an even more conceptually distant definition of support; Holden et al., 2014). Perceived social support scales, for instance, often involve the implicit assumption that listening plays an important role (e.g., items, such as "I can talk about my problems with my friends") along with perceptions that are most likely related but conceptually further removed from perceived listening (e.g., "I can count on my friends when things go wrong"; Zimet et al., 1988).

It is important that we recognize listening as a construct in its own right so that we can begin to understand the specific benefits this relational activity provides, its limitations, its particular importance in certain areas of interaction (e.g., self-disclosures), and its more specific qualities (e.g., providing attention and reflections) that drive benefits to speakers. There may also be greater explanatory power when considering components of social support separately to determine the value of a given component of listening for various outcomes. For example, recent research doing just that found that perceived partner listening, but not other forms of social support, including receiving love/affection, getting advice or emotional support, or having contact with others, predicted cognitive resilience (better cognitive functioning with lower cerebral volume; Salinas et al., 2021).

Furthermore, listening is in itself a complex construct. When studies separate it from other social support indicators, they tend to acknowledge that clear-cut differences between measures that are often lost in more holistic constructs such as social support because a large number of specific behaviors can reflect high-quality listening by conveying attention, comprehension, and positive intention (e.g., eye contact, body posture, and key phrases), and once these are recognized they can be strategically manipulated (e.g., Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021). We can observe similar nuance in scales that measure perceived listening. For example, the Facilitating Listening Scale consists of a relatively varied set of items that complete a stem relating to the speaker, such as [the partner] "tries hard to understand what I am saying," "expresses interest in my stories," "listens to me attentively," and "creates a positive atmosphere for me to talk" (Kluger & Bouskila-Yam, 2018).

A final reason for considering listening in isolation is it that listening takes place during conversations, whereas social support can be provided in and out of conversations, at specific times, or broadly across times. By isolating

listening from other interpersonal behaviors and perceptions, researchers can test how the specific applications of listening techniques, their antecedents, and their associated speaker perceptions influence conversations. Researchers can also identify the emotional, need, and behavioral outcomes of conversations across different conversations (e.g., those that are more or less challenging). In summary, we argue that listening shapes conversations, and offer a model informed by motivational theory for why, and in which contexts, listening matters.

3.1 | A motivational framework for listening

This article approaches the issue of why listening matters by integrating it with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), a macro-framework dealing with how volitional and self-congruent behavior can be motivated and people's well-being supported (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT posits that people have three basic psychological needs which, when satisfied, encourage internalized or self-energized motivation, psychological growth, and well-being. These can be supported or frustrated as a function of individuals' social and environmental experiences (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The first is the need for *autonomy*, or feeling volitional and self-congruent in one's actions and self-expression, such that one experiences behaviors to emanate from within the self rather than from external forces or internally imposed judgments and pressures (Ryan et al., 2006). The second need is relatedness, individuals' feeling that they are are close and connected to others. The third is the need for competence, which refers to feeling effective in activities and capable of pursuing and achieving meaningful goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A substantial body of work has provided evidence that when these psychological needs are met, individuals experience well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017), engage with others openly and non-defensively (Weinstein et al., 2013), and pursue activities with energy and perseverance (Van den Broeck et al., 2008).

SDT further explores the characteristics of interpersonal contexts that support or frustrate psychological needs. It places particular emphasis on autonomy support, one distinct form of social support that involves encouraging others to express themselves genuinely, act volitionally, and behave in line with personally held values, emotions, and interests (Deci et al., 2006). Whereas social support more globally supports all emotional and material needs (e.g., including through hugs and advice-giving; Holden et al., 2014), autonomy support specifically encourages individuals to express and behave in self-congruent and self-driven ways. To achieve this, autonomy-supportive partners use many strategies to convey their perspective-taking, non-judgment, and support for personal choice, which allows the individuals receiving autonomy support to accept and value their own internal experiences and openly share thoughts and feelings (Uysal et al., 2010; Weinstein et al., 2017). Although autonomy-supportive strategies target the autonomy need, they can satisfy all three psychological needs because they create intimate, authentic, and empowering relational experiences that enable individuals to feel related and competent, as well as autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2014; Legate et al., 2017). Consequently, individuals benefit when they perceive autonomy support from any meaningful relational partner (e.g., teachers, healthcare providers, and parents) in terms of enhanced closeness, behavioral engagement, and well-being (e.g., Cadima et al., 2019; Neubauer et al., 2021; Reeve, 2006; Van Petegem et al., 2015; Williams et al., 1999).

4 | HIGH-QUALITY LISTENING IS AN UNSUNG HERO OF AUTONOMY SUPPORT

Although researchers tend to operationalize autonomy-supportive climates in holistic ways that predominantly assess broad perceptions of being supported or frustrated (e.g., "others took my perspective"), a developing body of research suggests there is value in directly examining the specific behaviors that give rise to these perceptions of autonomy-supportive contexts (e.g., in education, Flunger et al., 2019; healthcare, Teixerira et al., 2020). Multiple strategies have received empirical attention (e.g., providing a rationale, making choice salient; Flunger et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2021). Here, we suggest that high-quality listening is a key and often overlooked autonomy-supportive

strategy. Consider the core characteristics of autonomy-supportive partners. They take the other's perspective, support sharing feelings, and show they understand and value the other (e.g., teachers: Black & Deci, 2000; parents: Mageau et al., 2015; healthcare providers: Williams et al.,2009). These are the same interpersonal qualities that are often cited as key qualities of high-quality listening (Rogers, 1959). Often, autonomy-supportive partners are described as having "listened" as one way in which they provided autonomy support (Mageau et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2009).

High-quality listening is not often an explicit autonomy-supportive strategy, yet it underlies many autonomy-supportive strategies outlined in the literature. These strategies include understanding individuals' perspective, supporting their values and interests, giving a meaningful rationale when making requests or setting rules, offering choices, and avoiding pressuring and controlling the individual (Black & Deci, 2000; Cheon et al., 2020; Mageau et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). It is easy to see how high-quality listening is crucial for understanding someone else's perspective as it involves undivided attention and open-ended questions. Supporting someone's values and interests and offering a meaningful rationale also requires high-quality listening to attend to the person's values and interests, and understanding how to supply a meaningful rationale for that person. It seems then that one cannot provide proper autonomy support without listening well. Consistent with this view, training programs designed to teach parents and colleagues to be autonomy-supportive often involve learning how to listen with full attention, especially in the service of perspective-taking (Deci et al., 1989; Joussemet et al., 2014; Stone et al., 2009).

5 | HIGH-QUALITY LISTENING SATISFIES BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

One of the most intriguing questions concerning listening is *why* listening benefits speakers. As detailed by listening theorists and aligned with SDT concepts, high-quality listeners use non-verbal along with a small set of verbal behaviors that give voice to the speaker, demonstrate their willingness to take the speaker's perspective, show they understand the speaker's world view, and encourage the speaker to volitionally drive the conversation (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021). Other views, such as Carl Roger's humanistic approach and more recent therapeutic approaches that rely on high-quality listening such as Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2012) similarly highlight the role of listening to convey acceptance of the individual without judgment. In other words, the listener provides space and the willingness to understand the speaker's views, and conveys caring or valuing for the speaker without pressuring or judging. This suggests that high-quality listening is itself an autonomy-supportive strategy. It is crucial when information is shared or exchanged in the context of a discussion between partners or small groups.

5.1 | Autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction

Relationship Motivation Theory (RMT), a subtheory within SDT, posits that autonomy-supportive interpersonal climates satisfy both autonomy and relatedness needs, and that these two psychological needs together underlie true intimacy (Deci & Ryan, 2014). High-quality listening is an antecedent to both autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction—and therefore intimacy as operationalized in RMT—because it creates the specific relational space that fosters a sense of self-congruence, authentic self-expression, and personal volition that together engender a sense of closeness and intimacy (Weinstein et al., 2013). Of the three psychological needs, the most proximal and listening-specific may be autonomy, the sense of feeling choiceful, free in one's self-expression, and behaving authentically in line with one's values, beliefs, and emotions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When individuals feel that there is high-quality listening, they feel understood and that their perspective has been taken. They are also volitional in guiding or co-guiding a conversation with their interlocutor, and can express themselves authentically, without feeling pressured or judged.

In a conversation, speakers can feel understood by sensing that the perspective, idea, or feeling they shared was attended to and comprehended by their listeners. This positive relational quality of caring for, valuing, or aligning with

the speaker (which is likely relationship- or domain-specific) takes understanding to a deeper level to convey that the speakers and not just their views, have been understood. Both levels (understanding the view and understanding the individual) are likely important, but feeling truly understood and validated by another may be a particularly powerful catalyst of positive experiences and behaviors. In providing this relational climate, high-quality listening can make speakers feel safe to disclose thoughts, feelings, or personally relevant information (Castro et al., 2016) that they may not otherwise reveal for fear of rejection, stigmatization, or disagreement that feels threatening.

Alongside autonomy need satisfaction, listening satisfies the need for relatedness. Speakers who are listened to well feel that they are connected with their listeners, encouraged and fortified by their listeners, and have a partner in the conversation (Itzchakov et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2021), all of which promote relational valuing; that is, a sense of closeness and intimacy with the good listener (Deci & Ryan, 2014). Thus, because high-quality listening fosters genuine self-disclosure and sharing in a space free from judgment, this form of listening can create an intimate, close relationship in which the speakers feels close and connected to their listeners. Consistent with this, studies have documented that high-quality listening promotes intimacy (Kluger et al., 2021), trust (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997), and liking (Huang et al., 2017), all facets of relatedness need satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

Providing more direct evidence, early experimental research integrating listening and SDT has found that listening promotes both autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction. Both offer explanatory power for downstream outcomes. For example, in a preregistered experimental study of 1001 adolescents, participants viewed pre-recorded videos of a parent-adolescent dyad discussing one of two topics: in one conversation, the adolescent disclosed to the parent that he had transgressed by vaping with friends; in the second, he disclosed to the parent that he had been rejected by peers for refusing to vape. In these scenarios, based on the condition, the adolescent disclosed either feelings of remorse or sadness. Participants viewed videos depicting the parent responding with high-quality listening behaviors (demonstrating attention, comprehension, and valuing) or moderate-quality listening behaviors (merely attending to the information). Regardless of age (13–16 years) or gender, adolescents who observed high-quality listening behaviors reported they would feel greater emotional well-being after the conversation and would be more likely to disclose meaningful experiences to such a parent in the future. The listening conditions had large effects on both anticipated autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction as a result of the conversation. Furthermore, they mediated listening effects on well-being and self-disclosure intention when defined simultaneously in models (Weinstein et al., 2021). These findings, and both listening and SDT literatures, highlight that high-quality listening may promote genuine and open self-disclosures and other forms of communication that satisfy speakers' autonomy and relatedness needs.

5.2 | Competence need satisfaction

Although considerable work in the field of SDT has centered on all three basic psychological needs, more research is needed to understand the role of competence need satisfaction the context of high-quality listening. The need for competence is satisfied when individuals are pursuing external tasks or goals (Elliot et al., 2002). Listening is predominantly a relational experience in which the support for interpersonal connection (i.e., relatedness) and self-congruent expression (i.e., autonomy) are both salient and consequential (e.g., Kluger & Itzchakov, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2021). In contrast, there is little evidence that speakers regularly have an explicit task or goal in mind, aside from their implicit relational and self-expression (relatedness and autonomy) goals for the conversation itself (Horowitz et al., 2001). Yet there is reason to believe that listening may play a role in supporting competence as well.

Specifically, there may be instances in which felt competence is a relevant and important outcome of high-quality listening. For example, listening is often involved in workplace interactions when colleagues attempt to problem-solve together (Castro et al., 2018); listening during these interactions contributes to productivity (Bergeron & Laroche, 2009; Johnston & Reed, 2017). Therefore, in this context, listening is seen as an important mechanism for goal-pursuit and performance (Kocooglu et al., 2019; Kriz et al., 2021). Research also shows that conversations about

sex can increase adolescent girls' felt competence and their ability to engage in further constructive discussions on this topic (Mauras et al., 2013). Thus, certain types of conversations that are focused on activities, goals, or learning may satisfy the competence need when partners listen well to one another.

Competence need satisfaction may also be a proximal and important outcome of listening in certain types of conversations. For example, in a conversation in which Partner A attempts to convince Partner B of their particular viewpoint or position, Partner A may feel more competence need satisfied when receiving high-quality listening from Partner B, because listening may directly or indirectly contribute to the goal of persuading Partner B. In these and other conversations where high-quality listeners leave the speaker feeling competent, such experiences may drive downstream behaviors such as engagement and productivity observed in the workplace and in the parenting domains (e.g., Kocooglu et al., 2019; Mauras et al., 2013). It may also drive downstream effects of listening on well-being and behavioral change (e.g., Magaletta & Oliver, 1999; Schunk, 1995; Sheeran et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2009).

6 | LISTENING MAY REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS BECAUSE IT SATISFIES PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

The previous sections described why high-quality listeners are autonomy-supportive and satisfy psychological needs. By doing so, high-quality listeners can encourage speakers to non-defensively pursue self-awareness and incorporate new information into their world views, and they may promote constructive conversations that contribute to speakers' (and their own) personal growth.

This view is consistent with work on listening. Carl Rogers argued long ago that non-judgmental listening provides a safe space for the speaker by reducing the threat of evaluation. This threat reduction relaxes speakers and enables non-defensive introspection (Rogers, 1959, 1980). A recent line of work provided support for Rogers' arguments. Specifically, Itzchakov et al. (2017) found that speakers who experienced high-quality listening were less socially anxious and defensive when disclosing their attitudes than speakers who experienced lower quality listening. High-quality listening also increased speakers' openness to change to a greater extent when they shared prejudiced attitudes with high-quality listeners compared to speakers who shared their prejudiced attitudes with moderate-quality listeners (Itzchakov et al., 2020). Relatedly, in one study, canvassers who exhibited non-judgmental listening for 10 min made their speakers more open-minded toward transphobia, a reduction in this prejudiced attitude that lasted three months (Broockman & Kalla, 2016).

Together, these findings highlight the role of listening in reducing defensiveness, increasing receptiveness, and paving the way for open-minded conversations where speakers are willing to share their views, consider new information, and potentially change their attitudes. SDT theorists see the capacity for such open and genuine interpersonal- and reflective self-awareness as fundamental to self-regulation and flourishing (Ryan et al., 2021), and base their views on a growing body of work showing that supporting autonomy and thus satisfying psychological needs encourages such open and non-defensive internal experiences that are so essential for integrating new perspectives and relating to others in receptive and positive ways (Chang et al., 2014; Hodgins et al., 2006; Weinstein et al., 2013). For these reasons, autonomy-supportive strategies can lead to greater buy-in for attitudinal and behavioral change (Legate et al., 2021). These autonomy-supportive strategies crucially involve listening to the person once a change request is made (Legate & Weinstein, 2021).

7 | CASE STUDY IN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION EFFORTS

To illustrate how listening and the principles of SDT can affect attitude change, the example below describes Workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) implementations where solutions are greatly needed but there is little evidence that existing approaches are efficacious (Noon, 2018). This is a difficult context for applying listening principles, as people may instinctively demand, use guilt and shame, and lecture when trying to reduce prejudice (Legate & Weinstein, 2021). Decades of behavior-change work in SDT suggest that the instinctual approach undermines autonomy and is ineffective in changing behavior in the short- and long-run (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Applications in this domain also show that thwarting autonomy can reignite the prejudiced attitudes that motivators are hoping to change (Legault et al., 2011). By contrast, autonomy-supportive strategies such as providing a rationale for change and understanding how people's values fit in with workplace DEI principles can increase buy-in or volitional motivation for change (Legate & Weinstein, 2021).

Studies suggest that high-quality listening can produce this positive motivational climate. A recent series of experiments evidenced the needs, well-being, and attitudinal benefits of high-quality listening in the context of discussions on prejudice. In these experiments, participants were speakers who were randomly assigned to converse with trained listener(s) who exhibited either good or moderate listening qualities. Discussing prejudice with a good listener (vs. the moderate listener) increased self-insight and openness to change in the speakers' attitudes, which in turn predicted lower prejudice than when conversations were held with a moderate speaker (Itzchakov et al., 2021). Those participants who benefitted from high-quality listening when discussing prejudice also reported greater autonomy and relatedness need satisfaction. Consistent with SDT expectations, the satisfaction of both psychological needs mediated speakers' state self-esteem after the conversation, which had been threatened by the controversial topic being discussed. However, when modeled together, only autonomy need satisfaction drove the effects on self-esteem, presumably because having their autonomy need satisfied helped participants to experience that their true self, as expressed through personally held but controversial attitudes, and were given space in a social context that provided high-quality listening (Itzchakov & Weinstein, 2021).

Thus, it is likely that both high-quality listening and other autonomy-supportive strategies contribute to effective attitude-change efforts. For example, a DEI training session that would typically provide information about the problem of prejudice in the workplace, and provide strategies for changing behavior, could instead make the choices salient and provide a clear rationale for why these problems should matter to the attendees. However, these are all strategies that involve *talking*. It is likely that training programs of this type would benefit greatly if alongside these approaches, the trainer took the time to listen well to the attendees' perspectives, challenges, fears, and hopes to create a space where open conversation could take place.[1]

8 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The study of listening provides motivation researchers with an opportunity to ask and possibly answer the question of what it means to be autonomy-supportive in the context of conversations. This is an important question, with implications for lowering defensiveness and increasing openness, encouraging buy-in or volitional motivation for change, promoting well-being, and changing attitudes, all because conversations between people are more supportive and productive. We have discussed developing programs that apply listening and SDT principles to promoting change when views are disparate or polarized, or which involve disclosing difficult or controversial topics that could cause the speaker to be judged or rejected by the listener. In these cases, high-quality listening may mitigate the potential threat and pave the way for more self-awareness, greater non-defensive introspection, and openness that underlies positive change. However, much more work needs to be done in these areas.

One area in which listening research has not been sufficiently applied is in supporting stigmatized minority groups. A growing body of work on disclosing a sexual minority identity provides indirect evidence that there is a

role for listening since lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals disclose more to those who provide autonomy support, including but not limited to non-judgmental listening (Ryan et al., 2015) and at the level of daily interactions as well (Legate et al., 2017). This is important since the disclosure of a sexual minority identity allows individuals to express themselves authentically and has benefits for health and well-being (Ryan & Ryan, 2019), but only when those disclosures are met with acceptance (Legate et al., 2012). Future research developing supportive interventions for these vulnerable populations in educational, healthcare, organizational, and personal relationship contexts should consider the specific role of listening and listening training in providing support to stigmatized and minority populations.

Furthermore, recent work has started to explore the boundary conditions of listening; namely, those instances where listening is insufficient or ineffective in producing change. Castro et al. (2016) found that speakers with avoidant attachment styles do not feel a sense of psychological safety when listened to in a supportive manner. Relatedly, individuals high in neuroticism do not like to be the object of person-centered listening (Itzchakov et al., 2014). Supportive listening alone may not be beneficial in all situations, such as when speakers are angry. Such speakers were shown to solve their problems to a greater extent when their listeners reframed the situation than when they were merely supportive (Behfar et al., 2020). Finally, although giving advice is usually considered a sign of poor listening (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2018), managers perceived by their employees as excellent listeners also knew when and how to give advice (Zenger & Folkman, 2016). Note as well that listeners exposed to stories about traumatic events were reported to experience increased stress (Michelson & Kluger, 2021). Thus, even when listening aids speakers, it may be difficult for the individual to speak. These and other boundary conditions should be considered when testing listening effects and those that integrate SDT and listening principles. In and of themselves, these principles may not be effective in specific situations or across all individuals.

Difficult conversations that are affect-laden, threatening, or otherwise uncomfortable may also require strategies such as informing, challenging, reframing, and problem-solving to produce attitude change and resolve problems (Coffey et al., 2018; Kirsch et al., 2018; Shelton et al., 2006). However, these active approaches require input, effort, and openness from all parties involved (e.g., Burt et al., 2017). Listening alone is unlikely to resolve ingrained attitudinal or perspective differences or reshape long-standing attitudes. However, because it satisfies psychological needs and reduces defensiveness, high-quality listening may create a relational space that allows listeners to challenge, reframe, or problem-solve to promote buy-in and elicit change. There is little research on this topic to date, and vast opportunities to explore how listening, as a catalyst of autonomy and relatedness-supportive conversations can create intimate and open relational spaces where partners value one another and ultimately bridge divides.

9 | CONCLUSION

This article explored ways that listening research can inform the motivational framework of SDT as a specific strategy for creating an autonomy-supportive relational climate during conversations. SDT can also contribute to listening research by identifying the mechanisms (primarily in terms of psychological needs) underlying listening effects and their potential outcomes both relationally and intrapersonally. These two approaches provide informative, complementary perspectives on the listener's role in creating positive and open conversations.

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ORCID

Netta Weinstein https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2200-6617
Guy Itzchakov https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1516-6719
Nicole Legate https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8086-9643

ENDNOTE

[1] Note that listening in the context of speakers who express prejudices does not involve validating their prejudiced views, but rather recognizes the value of open conversation and the intrinsic value of speakers working through difficult and personal problems. Thus, trainers can express disagreement with stated views when this is done by valuing or setting limits and consequences on acting according to prejudiced views.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Netta Weinstein is an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences at the University of Reading. She holds an honorary research fellowship at Cardiff University and is a Research Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. She received her BA in psychology at San Diego State University (2004) and her Ph.D. in clinical psychology (2010) at the University of Rochester (USA) with a focus on quantitative research in the areas of social and experimental psychology. Informed, in part, by her clinical background, her research explores the complex, often recursive links between interpersonal interactions, motivation, well-being, and behavior. She places particular focus on understanding the relational and personal outcomes of high-quality listening. She is currently Associate Editor at the Journal of Personality and edited a book (Springer) titled Human Motivation and Interpersonal Relationships.

Guy Itzchakov is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humen Services, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Science at the University of Haifa. He received his BA in Psychology and Economics from the Open

University of Israel (2010), MA from Tel Aviv University in Public Policy (2011), and Ph.D. in Business Administration from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2017). Guy was a postdoctoral fellow at Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto (2018). Guy's research focuses on the effects of high-quality listening on speakers' emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. In addition, he conducts field studies that examine how listening training programs in organizations impact managers, employees, and organizational outcomes. His research appeared in journals such as *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Experiment Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *Harvard Business Review*, *and Applied Psychology: An International Review*.

Nicole Legate is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Illinois Institute of Technology. She teaches undergraduate courses in introduction to psychology and a special topics seminar in prejudice and stigma. She received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Rochester in 2014, and completed a pre-doctoral internship at the University Counseling Center at the University of Rochester. Her research interests are focused on how the social environment (friends, family, peers, etc.) can support those with a stigmatized identity to buffer against minority stress and its impact on health, but also how the social environment can thwart these individuals and contribute to the mental and physical health disparities gap. Much of this work has focused on the"coming out process, finding that lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals are more "out" with those who support their autonomy, and that they experience better mental and physical health with these people when they come out. Another major focus is on how environments can pressure people to exclude or hurt others, and the costs associated with doing that.

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