



Brief Report

The role of listening in interpersonal influence

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 February 2012

Keywords:

Listening
Influence
Persuasion
Personality
Big Five
Agreeableness
Openness
Narcissism

ABSTRACT

Using informant reports on working professionals, we explored the role of listening in interpersonal influence and how listening may account for at least some of the relationship between personality and influence. The results extended prior work which has suggested that listening is positively related to influence for informational and relational reasons. As predicted, we found that: (1) listening had a positive effect on influence beyond the impact of verbal expression, (2) listening interacted with verbal expression to predict influence (such that the relationship between listening and influence was stronger among those more expressive), and (3) listening partly mediated the positive relationships between each of the Big Five dimensions of agreeableness and openness and influence.

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1. Introduction

Who has influence and why? These straightforward and important questions have attracted a great deal of attention from scholars and the lay public alike (e.g., Cialdini & Trost, 1998). The answers vary, but many academic and popular accounts stress that those capable of effective expression—speaking up and holding forth—often garner influence (e.g., Anderson, Spataro, & Flynn, 2008). Yet, scholarship and everyday experience also suggest that receptive behavior, in particular listening, matters as well for at least two reasons. First, on an informational front, effective listening gives people access to others' beliefs, knowledge, objectives, and attitudes, in part because people disclose information more readily and effectively to those who listen well (e.g., Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983). As a result, effective listening may help individuals better understand the context in which their influence attempts transpire, thereby enabling them to tailor their persuasive behavior to that context. Second, effective listening can also have important relational benefits. When people feel “listened to” by would-be agents of influence their liking for, commitment to, and trust in the agents tend to increase, thereby expanding the agents' influence power (e.g., Blader & Tyler, 2003; Detert & Burris, 2007; Yukl, Kim, & Falbe, 1996).

In sum, those who listen well may reap both informational and relational benefits that make them more influential. In this paper, we build on this starting point to articulate and test three key predictions about who has influence and why. First, we evaluate whether listening has a distinct effect on influence, over and above the impact of verbal expression. Second, we examine whether listening and verbal expression may interact with each other to affect influence. Third, we consider whether listening may at least partly account for the effects of certain personality traits (the Big Five dimensions of agreeableness and openness) on influence. In short, the present study attempts to shed new light on the questions of who has influence and why.

1.1. A distinct effect of listening

Past work suggests that listening behavior affects influence and related constructs such as leadership effectiveness (e.g., Johnson & Bechler, 1998), but has not controlled for the effect of verbal expression, leaving open the possibility that the impact of listening is primarily due to facilitating effective verbal expression. Put another way, it could be argued that listening matters only insofar as it helps individuals subsequently say the right things or express them well. In contrast to this notion, the framework guiding the present study suggests that the informational and relational benefits of listening are not wholly subsumed by the bases of influence emanating from verbal expression. If our reasoning is correct, then listening should account for unique variance in influence. Specifically, we predict that listening will be positively associated with influence, over and above (that is, controlling for) verbal expression.

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1.2. An interaction with verbal expression

In addition to the predicted main effects of listening and verbal expression, we expect these two dimensions to interact with each other to affect influence. Tongue-tied, inarticulate leaders may not benefit tremendously from heightened listening behavior, having a more limited ability to translate the relational and informational benefits of listening into persuasive impact. In contrast, leaders able to express themselves well may be better positioned to capitalize on the relational and informational benefits of listening. In short, we expect that the influence power attributable to listening will accrue more strongly to those better able to express themselves. Thus, the positive relationship between listening and influence should be stronger among those relatively high in verbal expression.

1.3. Listening as a mediator of the relationship between personality and influence

Past work has revealed links between each of the Big Five personality dimensions and influence and related dimensions, in particular, leader effectiveness (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). An important purpose of the present research is to better understand why the Big Five are related to influence—and whether listening might be a mechanism in this link. We hypothesize that one way in which some of these personality dimensions express themselves in influence is via listening behavior. Hence, we predict that listening may at least partly account for the relationship between several of the Big Five dimensions (in particular, openness to experience and agreeableness) and influence.

Openness to experience, that is, the tendency to be intellectually curious, creative, insightful, and unconventional (e.g., John & Srivastava, 1999), maps in part onto the informational side of listening. Open individuals may appreciate diverse and novel ideas and perspectives (McCrae, 1996), making them willing to elicit and listen to others' points of view. Further, others may be more comfortable approaching and speaking to open individuals (Detert & Burris, 2007), giving the latter more opportunities to learn and thereby exercise listening behavior.

Agreeableness, or the tendency to be warm, caring, and trusting (e.g., Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997), maps in part onto the relational side of listening. Agreeable individuals are cooperative, get along well with others, and may be more likely to listen due to their empathy, concern for others, and trusting nature. In organizations, for example, subordinates may perceive agreeable supervisors as more approachable, putting the supervisor in a listening role with greater frequency and effectiveness. Agreeable individuals may gain influence by occupying central roles in social networks (Kanfer & Tanaka, 1993); this effect may be due in part to their ability to listen and forge powerful network connections.

Thus, we expect listening behavior to at least partially mediate the positive relationships between each of openness and agreeableness and influence. Moreover, and in accordance with our previous reasoning about how listening is distinct from verbal expression, we expect listening to act as a mediator over and above any mediating effect attributable to verbal expression. *A priori*, it is not clear that listening will mediate the links between the other Big Five dimensions (conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extraversion) and influence. (Indeed, in the case of extraversion, we expect that verbal expression, though not listening, will be a mediator.) In any event, we will test for these possibilities on an exploratory basis.

In sum, all of our predictions are derived from prior theory and research which suggest that listening will be positively related to influence for informational and relational reasons. We expect listening to have a distinct effect (separate from verbal expression)

on influence and also to interact with verbal expression to affect influence. We also expect listening to account for at least some of the effects of agreeableness and openness on influence, controlling for any mediating effects of verbal expression.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We collected data from 274 students enrolled in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at an East Coast university. Of the sample, 109 (36.0%) were women, and participants' mean age was 28.29 ($SD = 2.51$) years. (There was no evidence of gender differences in our results; therefore, we collapsed across this dimension in the analyses below.)

2.2. Procedure

As part of a course requirement, participants were rated on a variety of dimensions by several former coworkers. Participants identified informants who then completed anonymous materials online. On average, participants had 3.87 ($SD = 1.69$) former work colleagues serve as raters. Raters indicated how well they knew the target, using a four-point scale ranging from "not well at all" (1) to "extremely well" (4). The average score on the familiarity measure was 3.12 ($SD = 0.46$).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Influence

Former work colleagues rated the participants' influence power at work, using a seven-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (7), for four items: "S/he is able to persuade other people and change their opinions," "S/he is able to build coalitions to get things done," "S/he is able to build effective working relationships with others who have different opinions or interests," and "S/he fails to direct and steer meetings in his/her favor" (reverse-coded).

2.3.2. Listening

Raters judged participants' listening behavior at work, using a seven-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (7), for five items: "As a listener, s/he gets others to open up, elaborate, and share information," "S/he listens effectively to criticism and alternative points of view," "After listening, s/he builds on what s/he has heard, incorporating it into the conversation," "When someone else is speaking, s/he interrupts and/or shows impatience" (reverse-coded), and "When someone is speaking, s/he tends to drift off, appearing distracted or inattentive" (reverse-coded).

2.3.3. Verbal expression

Raters assessed participants' verbal expression behavior at work, using a seven-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (7), for seven items: "When making a point, s/he is concise, brief, and clear," "When communicating with others, s/he is honest, open, and candid," "S/he is able to use vivid images and compelling logic and facts to support an argument," "S/he speaks up and shares his/her view when it is appropriate," "S/he is unable to communicate effectively in person with larger groups and audiences" (reverse coded), "S/he does not produce well-written work and communications, including letters and email" (reverse-coded), and "The substance of his/her messages gets lost because of how they are communicated" (reverse-coded).

2.3.4. Big Five personality

Raters judged participants using Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann's (2003) validated TIPI measure of the Big Five personality dimensions (agreeableness, openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, and emotional stability) on a seven-point scale, ranging from "disagree strongly" (1) to "agree strongly" (7), including items for agreeableness (e.g., "S/he is sympathetic, warm") and items for openness (e.g., "S/he is open to new experiences, complex").

3. Results

We examined estimates of inter-rater agreement for each of the scales within each of the 274 participants, including within-group inter-rater agreement (multi-item rWG(J); James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984, with a suggested value of .7). All variables met these criteria and we therefore averaged rater judgments of targets in our analyses. Means, reliabilities, and correlations among our measures are shown in Table 1.

3.1. Distinct effects

A multiple regression in which listening and expressive communication were simultaneously entered as predictors of influence showed that both main effects were positively related to influence (Table 2). In other words, and as predicted, listening accounted for variance in influence over and above the effect of verbal expression.

3.2. Interaction with verbal expression

In a second regression model, we added the interaction between verbal expression and listening to the aforementioned main effects. As expected, the interaction was significant and positive (Table 2). Fig. 1 illustrates the nature of this interaction based on the procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991): as predicted, the positive relationship between listening and influence was stronger among those who were seen as more verbally expressive.

3.3. Listening as a mediator

As shown in Table 1, each of the Big Five dimensions was positively correlated with influence, consistent with the meta-analytic results of Judge et al. (2002). To test our predictions that listening would at least partly mediate the links between agreeableness and openness (as independent variables) and influence (as the dependent variable), we conducted multiple mediation models following the method outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Listening and verbal expression were examined simultaneously as mediators, thereby enabling us to evaluate whether listening has a distinct

Table 2
Regression models predicting influence.

Independent variables	β	p	Model statistics
<i>Model of simultaneous main effects</i>			
Verbal expression	0.48	<.01	$F(2, 272) = 119.06$, $p < .01$, R -sq = .47
Listening	0.30	<.01	
<i>Model including interaction term</i>			
Verbal expression	0.50	<.01	$F(3, 271) = 85.19$, $p < .01$, R -sq = .48
Listening	0.31	<.01	
Verbal expression \times listening	0.14	<.01	

role as a mediator. This method also allowed us to gauge the mediating role of verbal expression.

We conducted five separate multiple mediation tests, one for each of the Big Five. As predicted, listening emerged as a significant mediator of the relationship between agreeableness and influence, and between openness and influence (Table 3), controlling for the impact of verbal expression as a mediator. In both cases, verbal expression was a significant mediator as well.

As expected, the analysis done on extraversion showed that verbal expression acted as a mediator of its relationship with influence, whereas listening did not. Finally, the exploratory analyses done on conscientiousness and emotional stability showed that both listening and verbal expression emerged as significant mediators.

4. Discussion

Who is influential and why? Without a doubt, those who speak up, and who do so well, are more influential. But while the expressive aspects of influence have received a great deal of attention, less focus has been directed to receptive communication behaviors (i.e., listening), leaving many questions unanswered. Taking as its point of departure prior theory and research showing that listening is positively related to influence for both informational and relational reasons, the present study sheds light on a number of important questions. Does listening matter above and beyond expressive communication to shape influence? Does listening help account for the relationship between personality (in particular, agreeableness and openness) and influence?

The answer to all three questions is "yes." First, we found that people's listening tendencies are positively related to influence, over and above the impact of verbal expression. Second, we found that in addition to their main effects, listening and verbal expression interacted, such that the positive relationship between listening and influence was shown more strongly by those higher in verbal expression. Third, we found that listening partly mediated the relationships between each of openness and agreeableness and influence.

Table 1
Means, reliabilities, and correlations.

Variable	Mean (SD)	α (items)	Correlations							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. Verbal expression	5.86 (.50)	.75 (7)	–							
2. Listening	5.75 (.58)	.79 (5)	.51**	–						
3. Influence	5.54 (.53)	.69 (4)	.63**	.54**	–					
4. Agreeableness	5.66 (.91)	.53 (2)	.16**	.57**	.36**	–				
5. Openness	6.05 (.65)	.62 (2)	.39**	.29**	.40**	.30**	–			
6. Extraversion	5.46 (1.11)	.76 (2)	.27**	-.07	.23**	.00	.33**	–		
7. Conscientiousness	6.26 (.73)	.58 (2)	.38**	.42**	.38**	.36**	.26**	-.03	–	
8. Emotional stability	5.81 (.89)	.75 (2)	.42**	.56**	.49**	.51**	.28**	-.08	.44**	–

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

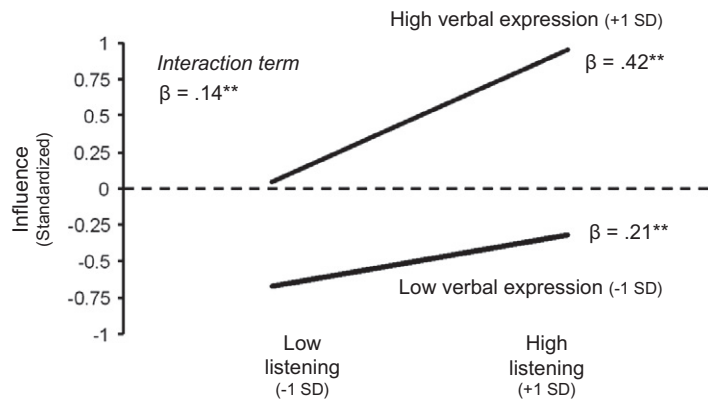


Fig. 1. Interaction between listening and verbal expression in predicting influence.

Table 3
Multiple mediation models predicting influence with Big Five personality dimensions.

IV	IV effect without mediators	IV effect with mediators	Mediator effects					
			Mediator	Effect	Z	p	CI: Lower	CI: Upper
Agreeableness	$\beta = .21$ $t = 6.28, p < .01$	$\beta = .10$ $t = 3.12, p < .01$	Verbal exp.	.0472	2.56	.01	.0039	.1044
			Listening	.0622	2.94	<.01	.0028	.1437
Openness	$\beta = .32$ $t = 7.23, p < .01$	$\beta = .13$ $t = 3.23, p < .01$	Verbal exp.	.1364	5.32	<.01	.0538	.2356
			Listening	.0649	3.68	<.01	.0214	.1447
Extraversion	$\beta = .11$ $t = 3.85, p < .01$	$\beta = .07$ $t = 2.94, p < .01$	Verbal exp.	.0543	3.98	<.01	.0224	.0964
			Listening	-.0119	-1.20	.23	-.0339	.0059
Conscientiousness	$\beta = .27$ $t = 6.68, p < .01$	$\beta = .07$ $t = 1.87, p = .06$	Verbal exp.	.1236	5.27	<.01	.0654	.1944
			Listening	.0815	4.21	<.01	.0289	.1509
Emotional stability	$\beta = .29$ $t = 9.25, p < .01$	$\beta = .11$ $t = 3.35, p < .01$	Verbal exp.	.1126	5.78	<.01	.0664	.1692
			Listening	.0717	3.61	<.01	.0112	.1440

Note: Mediation effects reflect indirect effects of IV (independent variable) on influence through mediators (verbal expression and listening) following Preacher and Hayes (2008); CIs (confidence intervals) reflect 95% confidence with 5000 bootstrap resamples.

These results not only help clarify the relationship between listening and influence, but also shed light on how personality relates to influence. In particular, the relationship between personality (as reflected in the Big Five) and influence is partly mediated by listening. Our results also show that part of the relationship between personality and influence is accounted for by verbal expression. Previous research has shown that all of the Big Five dimensions predict leader effectiveness (Judge et al., 2002), a construct closely related to our dependent variable of influence. The present results provide an important extension of the Judge et al. findings by revealing part of why the Big Five are related to influence, namely via listening behavior and verbal expression.

The present findings have additional theoretical and practical implications. If personality is related to influence in part through interpersonal communication dimensions such as listening and verbal expression, it may be worthwhile for future research to identify other interpersonal communication dimensions that account for the relationships between personality and influence. For instance, message clarity may result from conscientiousness and conversational reactivity may emanate from emotional (in)stability.

Another avenue for future research is to evaluate whether other personality dimensions interact with listening to affect influence. One personality dimension for which we have preliminary evidence is narcissism, a construct reflecting a grandiose sense of one's self and entitlement (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Participants in our study completed a self-report measure of narcissism (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). As might be expected, the measure of narcissism was inversely related to

listening and positively related to verbal expression, although both of these relationships were rather modest ($r_s = -.13$ and $.15$, respectively, both $p_s < .05$). There was no main effect of narcissism on influence, perhaps because narcissism had different relationships with listening and verbal expression. However, the interaction between narcissism and listening was significant ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$, in a multiple regression predicting influence along with the main effects of listening, narcissism, and verbal expression). The nature of this interaction was that narcissism tended to be positively related to influence at higher levels of listening and negatively related to influence at lower levels of listening. Previous research has found divergent effects of narcissism on influence, with some studies showing that narcissism is positively related to influence (e.g., Brunell et al., 2008) and others suggesting that narcissism has negative effects (Paulhus, 1998). The interaction between narcissism and listening suggests that taking listening into account may help us to predict when narcissism makes people more versus less influential.

Whereas the present study lent support to our predictions, it does have a number of limitations. For instance, the measure of listening behavior was based on informant perceptions and reflected naturally-occurring (rather than manipulated) variance in listening. Future work might seek more objective or behavioral measures of listening or might seek to manipulate listening behavior. Our research also focused on an organizational/work setting; future efforts might examine the relationship between listening and influence in other contexts. While acknowledging these limitations, we also believe the present findings have some practical implications. Whereas personality change in adulthood may be difficult,

developing listening behaviors may be more tractable. To the extent that receptive behavior facilitates influence, individuals may be able to increase their influence power by cultivating the kinds of listening behaviors measured in the present study: getting others to open up, reveal information, and share critical points of view.

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