CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LISTENING ENACTED BY

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

This study examined the listening behaviors of organization development (OD) practitioners that result in client transformation. Interviews conducted with eleven OD consultants with extensive experience in executive coaching pointed to engaged, focused attention as a core characteristic of their listening. OD practitioners regularly use three primary listening approaches (active, empathetic, and expansive listening) to drive insight and help clients transform their perspectives. Practitioners subsequently use two secondary listening approaches (critical and reductive listening) to anchor insight into action and help clients transform their behavior. Transformative listening describes the repeating process of inquiry that blends primary and secondary listening approaches and tends to transform client perspectives and behavior. Conversely, transactional listening describes a listening approach appropriate for the negotiation and execution of agreements in the transaction of routine business. Self-awareness and use of self foster sensitivity to client needs and practitioner agility in blending the listening approaches used in transformative listening.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

To listen fully means to pay close attention to what is being said beneath the words. You listen not only to the "music," but to the essence of the person speaking. You listen not only for what someone knows, but for what he or she is. Ears operate at the speed of sound, which is far slower than the speed of light the eyes take in. Generative listening is the art of developing deeper silences in yourself, so you can slow our mind's hearing to your ears' natural speed, and hear beneath the words to their meaning. (Senge, 1994, p. 3)

The acronym VUCA was introduced in the late 1990s by the U.S. Army War College to describe volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous aspects of the multilateral world that have developed in the wake of the Cold War (Kinsinger & Walch, 2012). Since then, the term has been adopted by business leaders to describe the chaotic, turbulent, and rapidly changing internal and external conditions faced by organizations on a daily basis.

Lawler and Worley (2011) identify technology, globalization, and workforce as the three primary agility forces that contribute to the accelerating pace and volatile nature of today's business environments. Connectivity, digitization, the liberalization of trade, and disruptive innovation in business models all contribute to the increase in turbulence and magnitude of change. This volatility makes it difficult for leaders to use past issues and events as predictors of future outcomes. Historically sound solutions may not work under VUCA conditions (Horney, Pasmore, & O'Shea, 2010). In the face of such uncertainty, forecasting can become extremely challenging, yet leaders may be pressed to make decisions about dilemmas for which there is no clear solution.

Addressing the greatest challenges that leaders face, John McLaughlin, former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, stated, "We get ambiguous,

incomplete, imperfect information arriving incrementally . . . and you're being pressured to act" (Ferrari, 2012, p. 37). Factors contributing to problems are often numerous, complicated, and interconnected, adding a layer of complexity that further confounds decision making. These combined forces beget a heightened level of ambiguity in how to interpret a reality in constant flux (Horney et al., 2010). Vague, mixed meanings of cause-effect relationships make unmanageable the process of accurately conceptualizing threats before they are serious and opportunities before they have passed.

In the face of such challenging VUCA conditions, the act of listening may be the most powerful tool of business leaders and those supporting professionals who help them. Treasure (2011) identified listening as the single most important communication behavior people enact. It is estimated that approximately 60% of our daily communication involves listening (Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, & Holly, 1980); yet, we only comprehend about 25% of what we hear (Nichols & Lewis, 1954). Research has connected listening to leadership effectiveness (Johnson & Bechler, 1998), to individual performance in the workplace, and to how people judge communicative competence (Haas & Arnold, 1995). Additional research shows that listening competence also leads to more productive interactions, increased satisfaction in relationships, greater academic and work success, and better health care provision (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010). In short, according to Jeffrey Immelt, Chairman and chief executive officer of General Electric, "Listening may be the single most undervalued and undeveloped business skill, especially in an age of increasing uncertainty and fast-paced change" (Ferrari, 2012, foreword).

Despite the prominent role that listening plays in day-to-day interaction, little training or education is offered regarding this vital communication activity (Coakley &

Wolvin, 1997). According to the American Society for Training and Development, over $100 billion is spent each year by US businesses and organizations to develop their workforce and roughly 20% of that sum is dedicated to improving worker communication skills. However, only 2 of the nearly 300 communications courses offered by the American Management Association deal directly with listening skills (Ferrari, 2012). Without rudimentary knowledge of the different types of listening and their associated uses, effects, and outputs, one's experience of this important and highly complex communication behavior remains collapsed as a simple, homogenous, and one-dimensional phenomenon. It is through a combination of formal study and personal experience that understanding, facility, and skill in listening are developed.

Research on listening is in a nascent stage of development. Due to its highly subjective nature, however, this new field of study is already a source of disagreement and consternation among listening scholars. As a result, the listening literature is complex, incongruous, and multidisciplinary, drawing from communication, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and management (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). Given the lack of academic consensus and dearth of attention on listening in formal education, there is an opportunity to expand understanding of the subtle distinctions that come with different kinds, qualities, and calibers of listening.

Despite these limitations, practitioners in the field of organization development (OD) must provide consultative support for leaders facing today's VUCA business environment. Lippitt offers a central definition of the consulting relationship as, "A voluntary relationship between a professional helper (consultant) and a help-needing system (client), in which the consultant is attempting to give help to the client in the solving of some current or potential problem and the relationship is perceived as

temporary by both parties" (Lippitt, 1959, p. 5). It is incumbent upon those in such helping relationships to understand how listening itself may be an important, causal antecedent to transformation of the client system.

The need for effective coaching and OD consulting is indicated by the observations of Vogt, Brown, and Isaacs (2003), that "the rapid pace of our lives and work doesn't often provide us with opportunities to participate in reflective conversations in which we can explore catalytic questions and innovative possibilities before reaching key decisions" (p. 2). In short, what is often lacking is taking time for *insight*, which has been defined as the resolution of an impasse or solution of a problem in an unexpected way, releasing energy and shifting perceptions (Rock, 2009). The insight experience is characterized by a lack of logical progression to the solution but instead a sudden "knowing" regarding the answer. The solution is simultaneously obvious yet surprising, and it is recognized with confidence when it arrives (Bowden, Beeman, Fleck, & Kounios, 2005). Research in neuroscience suggests that insight involves unconscious processing, which fits the common experience of an "ah-ha!" coming unexpectedly from nowhere and without conscious effort (Rock, 2009).

Albert Einstein was purported to have made the observation that a problem cannot be solved from the same consciousness that created it (Pfeiffer, 1987). A central issue for OD practitioners is perceiving beneath a presenting problem to help a client shift beyond the consciousness that created it. When leaders exhaust their resources in solving particularly elusive or complex problems, they turn to experts for solutions. Within the purview of process consultation, a problem-solving context creates a dichotomy for OD practitioners who seek not to solve problems directly but to help client systems diagnose

and improve themselves through clinical inquiry (Lambrechts, Bouwen, Grieten, Huybrechts, & Schein, 2011).

Thus, coaches and OD practitioners strive to set the context to allow leaders to pause and reflect, thereby accessing insight around how they and their organizations may navigate dynamic VUCA forces. An overarching proposition of the present inquiry is that helping clients to slow down, to reflect, and to listen inwardly is one of the most effective interventions for generating client insight in the face of today's VUCA business environments.

Research Purpose, Questions, and Setting

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the potential connection between listening and client transformation within the context of the client-consultant helping relationship. The main research question is: "What are the characteristics of the listening enacted by OD practitioners while engaged in consulting?" The following three research sub-questions were also identified:

1. What types of listening are used and what are their characteristics?

2. In what ways is listening enacted?

3. What are the effects of transformative listening on consultants and clients?

Findings from the literature on counseling have portrayed helpful, supportive listening as a dyadic mechanism that differs from other types of listening (Jones, 2011). From this perspective, attention and emotional involvement of an intimate nature are required of the listener in order to provide beneficial support. As such, the current study targets more intimate kinds of OD engagement, such as executive coaching and one-on-one or small systems engagements.

Setting

This research project gathered data from OD practitioners with at least ten years experience in such engagement contexts. Conventional views of consultants include anyone who gives advice, mentoring, or counsel in an area of specialized expertise. Schein (1999) distinguishes the roles, responsibilities, and inherent philosophical approaches of OD consultation from those in the more conventional expert and doctor-patient models. According to Schein, the process consultant is never more of an expert on the client system than is the client themselves. They do not simply offer solutions to problems, as is more common and appropriate for the doctor-patient model. A third mechanic model (Kahnweiler, 2002) may appeal to senior executives and line managers with constricted time in the face of VUCA intensity. This model is distinguished by actively chosen ignorance, a lack of participation in diagnosis, and a subsequent lack of responsibility in solution. Distinct from these more conventional approaches to helping relationships, Schein defines process consultation as "the creation of a relationship that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in [his or her] internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client" (p. 20, 1999).

From Schein's (1961) perspective, potential for change is accessed through dialogic interaction, in which consultants help clients to reconstruct, redefine, or reframe reality. It is the shift in client perspective that affords alternative solutions that had not been formerly perceived or possible. Listening is a critical component of this dialogic interaction. According to Weinmann (1978), listening and listening-related abilities such as understanding, open-mindedness, and supportiveness constitute the single dimension upon which people make judgments about communication competence. OD practitioners

must know when to bring empathy into their listening to have clients feel emotionally validated in their experience. In the course of client engagement, practitioners must be able to distinguish when to listen with an expansive orientation to help generate possibility, and when to be reductive in approach to move into execution and action. Research has suggested, however, that support providers have a tendency to collude with those they support by jumping to solve problems rather than practicing supportive listening behaviors (Perrine, 1993). This may be a contributing factor to the general tendency for many to prefer the help of informal caregivers to formal helpers (Barker & Pistrang, 2002).

Potential Research Gaps to be Addressed

To identify the gaps the current study hopes to address, it is important to assess the limitations of the existing research on listening. The listening literature can be broken down into the three overarching approaches that scholars have used to understand listening (Bodie, et al., 2008). Early information processing tended to produce research with a narrow focus due to its underlying simplification of listening as a linear phenomenon. The ensuing research trend in listening competency did capture more of the complex nature of human interaction, however this approach made evident the effect that contextual and relational factors have on the perception of "competence." This inherent subjectivity in turn spawned the third major research trend exploring how personal factors affect listening. A common problem across the field has been generalizability, in that isolating contextual factors or "single" personal differences does not necessarily produce findings that are relevant beyond research settings.

With a multitude of disciplines advocating diverse perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and inconsistent definitions, this relatively new area of scientific inquiry is a

hotbed of academic controversy. Furthermore, the general lack of agreement on methodological approach across the field makes it difficult to compare study outcomes or draw confident conclusions. These may be contributing factors to the lack of formal education available on listening (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997). As late as the mid-1990s, less than 2% of articles in business journals dealt with listening effectiveness despite agreement between academics and business practitioners that listening is one of the most important skills for an effective professional (Smeltzer, 1993). There is clearly a need for further empirical contribution that may help integrate and mature this developing area of scientific study. Where preceding empirical approaches have attempted to uncover listening truths by testing hypotheses in controlled settings, a potential gap in the research may be an inductive approach that explores the experience and perceptions of working professionals for whom listening is a critical part of their practice. The current research project attempts to view the academic landscape of the listening literature from the perspective of veteran OD practitioners who can speak to the fundamental role listening plays in the context of client-consultant engagement.

Potential Contribution

The current study has the potential to contribute on multiple levels. Three listening dimensions from the literature were explored to examine their application and relevance to small systems engagements. Data also were gathered regarding the types of listening practitioners enacted to achieve certain outcomes. Practitioners also speak to the potential distinction between the listening broadly used in the transaction of day-to-day business and the specific listening used by OD practitioners that is perceived as transformative in nature. According to author and senior partner at Korn/Ferry International, Kevin Cashman (2012), "The greater the complexity, the deeper the

reflective pause required to convert the complex and ambiguous to the clear and meaningful. Pause helps us to move from the transactive or the hyperactive to the transformative" (p. 26). Borrowing from the seminal work of Burns (1978) on transactional and transformational leadership styles, transactional listening and transformative listening are explored as potentially useful descriptors to distinguish OD practitioner listening from the default listening of everyday business.

As Hanson and Lubin (1995) suggest, the work of OD practitioners has similarities to that of leaders and managers, from administrative roles to work in the promotion of learning, development, teamwork, problem solving, and more. "Fundamental to their work are their skills and competencies as social change agents" (p. 87). OD practitioners and leaders may benefit from refined distinction of different listening approaches and their potential effects. The research may evoke new perspectives connecting listening intentionality with insight and change readiness. Bringing systematic inquiry and attention to the role listening plays in client transformation may offer participants the opportunity to draw connections they may not have previously made.

More importantly, increased effectiveness in transactional and transformative listening may help leaders in supporting their organizations to navigate change. Within the last decade, empirical research conducted by Brownell (1994) indicated that listening is perceived as increasingly critical to managerial effectiveness, especially with advancement to more senior leadership positions. The majority of routine, day-to-day operation in a stable business environment can be accomplished with critical and reductive listening at the level of transactional exchange. Leaders may not realize, however, that staying at a transactional level of communication may not be effective in helping people face the uncertainty and discomfort of unstable, changing environments.

Transformative listening may help leaders be more impactful as change agents themselves, effectively fulfilling on the organizational changes they hope to achieve.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduces how the field of OD provides support for today′s leaders facing the VUCA business environment. Joint diagnosis and client insight are connected to process consultation and helping relationships in executive coaching and small systems engagements. The importance of listening relevant to business contexts is portrayed with a review of the gaps in the current listening literature. The central research questions of the study are presented, accompanied by the potential benefit and contributions of the investigation.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the listening literature, including information processing, listening competence, and listening dimensions. A theoretical framework is borrowed from the literature on leadership styles in order to introduce transactional and transformative listening as areas of investigation for the present study. Related content areas include insight, transformation, and practitioner skill in use of self.

Chapter 3 describes the study methodology of the investigation, including the research design, sampling and participants, listening definitions used in the study, and data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collection and analysis, describing participant demographics, the types of listening used, and their characteristics. Results are presented and organized in conjunction with the study's core research questions.

Chapter 5 is a discussion and analysis of results, presenting nine key findings of the research. A model for transformative listening is presented with implications for

listening theory. The chapter closes with recommendations for practitioners and leaders,

study limitations, and proposed directions for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of theory and research to provide a foundation for the investigation. An overview of literature on listening is presented first. Given the diversity of listening research, focus is given to the listening more relevant to helping relationships. Practitioner use of self is defined. A theoretical framework borrowed from the literature on leadership styles is explored for implications on listening.

Overview of the Listening Literature

A review of the literature largely trisects empirical research on listening into three general categories and the respective advances made in each. Within the last half century, listening was first explored as information processing, followed by a trend exploring general listening competence. Additional potential influences on listening, such as personal biases and factors, were then investigated (Bodie et al., 2008). In this relatively new field of study, agreement on the subjective phenomenon of listening has not come easily. Consensus in the literature has been as elusive to achieve as listening itself has been to define, with only occasional pockets of accord depending on theoretical approach or school of thought. To the degree they serve the research questions explored in this thesis, elements of these three major categories of investigation will be presented.

Information processing. As one of the three major categories of empirical research on listening, models for human information processing were first introduced more than a half century ago by Broadbent (1958). Within this framework, most models attempted the systematic study of information retention through at least three stages with minor variation: perception, response processing, and response selection (Johnson & Proctor, 2004). Psychological research on listening conducted in the middle of last

century generally focused on signal detection or word/pattern recognition, however these made the underlying assumption of information as somewhat constant, homogenous, and independent of the perception and meaning ascribed by the receiver (Bodie et al., 2008).

The seminal work of Wolvin and Coakley (1996) explains listening as generally involving "the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli." Their now widely-accepted model depicts a listening response that is prompted by an initial stimulus once the stimulus has been filtered through the following three layers: (a) receiving verbal messages and nonverbal cues, (b) giving focused attention (engaged effort and desire) to these messages and cues, and (c) assigning meaning to messages and cues, as interpreted through intellectual/emotional processes, cultural contexts, and personal attributes. A limitation to thinking of humans as complex information processors was the narrow focus of research, which concentrated on the nature of these stages, the processing time used in each stage, and the nature of memory as an integrative function that enables storage and retrieval (Massaro, 1987).

Perhaps a greater limitation of this perspective is the underlying assumption that communication is a linear phenomenon that can be understood by measuring information degradation. Where a nonlinear model can account for complex behavioral interaction between multiple individuals, a fixed, linear view of listening gives indirect priority to the message sent over the message received (Schramm, 1954). This school of thought ultimately simplified listening to the "acquisition of information" (Bostrom, 1990). As previously noted, this approach may describe passive retention of instruction or direction, but findings are not easily extrapolated to the more interactive nature of conversational listening in everyday life. In this regard, information processing as the first major category of the listening literature only describes part of the picture, leaving much

underdeveloped and underappreciated when it comes to the truly multidimensional nature of listening.

Listening competence. The history of the listening literature depicts a second major research trend that emerged in the 1970s as empirical study began to address listening competence and effectiveness. Given their initial focus on overt behaviors, early competency models viewed competence as the appropriate use of listening behaviors to accomplish communication goals for a given situation (Weinmann, 1978). Within the same decade, the first clear distinction was also introduced between listening competence and listening comprehension, when Jones and Mohr (1976) and Pearce (1971) began exploring the effects of nonverbal behaviors on attention, perception, and meaning. Feyten's (1991) important empirical contributions depicted how shared meaning is constructed through many kinds of contemporaneous speaker-listener interaction, including linguistics (spoken word), *paralinguistics* (such as tone of voice, intonation, and pitch), and nonverbal kinesics (body language).

Building on Weinmann's (1978) model, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) refined listening competency to the more widely-accepted definition: the impression of speaker and listener as to the appropriateness and effectiveness of communication behaviors for a given context. Addressing listening competency in organizational settings, a study by Cooper (1997) suggested that workers better understand the content of communication when it adheres to acceptable conversational norms and rules (appropriateness), as well as when it satisfies the needs, desires, and intentions of the interaction (effectiveness). Restated, listening competency displays adaptation to situations in order to accomplish directed outcomes through communication (Cooley & Roach, 1984).

The largely behavioral and more intuitive approach of Brownell (2002) has also been well received by scholars. The H-U-R-I-E-R model uses six basic components of effective listening to describe the process of ascribing meaning to a message received:

- Hearing, with specific focus on the message;

- Understanding, to derive a literal message or meaning;

- Remembering, as capacity for recall of the message;

- Interpreting, with caution against adding "spin" to the message;

- Evaluating, applying logic with an open mind to assess message value;

- Responding, depicting the verbal messages and/or nonverbal cues to imply participation in communication.

Overall, the body of research on listening competence revealed the potential impact of relationships on perceptions of listening competence. More importantly, the question emerged of who it is that should be rating listening when the elements construing competence are predominantly perceptual, contextual, and functional (Bentley, 1997). A core problem with this second major category of listening research is that if the subjective judgment of appropriateness and effectiveness in behavior is primarily dependent on a particular relationship in a particular context, then research findings may lack generalizability beyond the confines of immediate research settings.

Personal factors. The third major category of empirical study on listening reflected growing awareness of the impact of personal factors on this highly subjective communication behavior. Much of this leg of the literature examined how personality differences may predisposed individuals to listen in certain ways (Daly, 1987). The research teams of Watson and Barker (1992) and Watson, Barker, and Weaver and Kirtley (1995) offered an alternative perspective on individual differences using listening

style preferences. Their findings suggest that people may have habituated preferences for listening that are oriented to action, time, people, or content. This contribution to the field spawned much subsequent investigation to identify other preconditions and relational factors that might affect these listening preferences, such as empathy and conversational sensitivity (Chesebro, 1999). In the context of relational listening, empathy has been examined for its central role in building relationships with others. Weaver and Kirtley (1995) connected elements of empathy (such as empathetic and sympathetic responsiveness) to the ability to decode and interpret communication with greater sensitivity. Specifically relevant to helping relationships, these findings suggest that in some way, emotional attunement and empathy may hone one's ability to listen.

This body of literature fostered an appreciation for the crucial role that human emotional connection plays in the experience of listening. In their summary of the state of listening theory, Bodie et al. (2008) gave a comprehensive review of the myriad personal differences, predispositions, and situational attributes that have been shown to effect listening. Several weaknesses of this body of literature stand out. Given the subjective nature of the subject matter, the general lack of agreement on methodological approach makes it difficult to compare study outcomes. Furthermore, as Bodie et al. point out, a majority of studies examined personality characteristics in isolation. It is unclear whether isolating any "single" individual difference reveals anything about the complex and multifaceted nature of human interaction.

Listening Dimensions

Relationships between different types of listening can be portrayed through the use of listening dimensions or continuums. Julian Treasure, a leading expert in sound consultation to clients such as BAA, BP, Nokia, and Coca Cola, has identified three

listening dimensions which offer a conceptual framework for the present investigation: (a) passive versus active listening, (b) critical versus empathetic listening, and (c) reductive versus expansive listening (Treasure, 2011). Each dimension will be explored to understand how listening may relate to helping relationships.

Passive versus active. The passive versus active listening dimension describes the level of engaged, focused attention present or absent in listening. The following sections examine both ends of this spectrum in detail. Passive listening is portrayed as a conscious process devoid of interaction, commentary, or evaluation (Treasure, 2011). Although often used interchangeably, listening is not to be confused with the less conscious process of hearing sound. According to a review by Purdy (2008), research in the late 1960s indicated that proficiency in hearing, which is a physiological process, is largely unrelated to skill in listening, which is fundamentally a psychological act.

Examples of passive listening include appreciative listening for enjoyment, such as to music, poetry, performances, or ambient sound beyond engaged concentration (Purdy, 2008). To some perspectives, the value of passive listening is the temporary break it offers the conscious mind from its habitual and incessant narrative of thoughts, self-criticisms, projections, and judgments (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Other perspectives, however, use the term passive to describe transactional listening: exchanges of information, where interaction and co-creation of meaning do not occur, such as when listening to lectures or reports, or when taking instruction or direction (Imhof, 1998). Related to the history of listening literature, passivity has also been predominately associated with the receiving side of communication, as explored in early empirical research on information processing.

Active listening indicates an ability and willingness to focus attention. Attention is crucial in active listening and has been defined as a mental state involving intense voluntary direction and concentration of consciousness upon a person or object (Farrow, 1963). Active listening is a deliberate process demanding constant mental effort:

> It requires us to be highly present and to get involved; as receiver, our mind continually monitors all aspects of the listening process: the state and effects of our own perspectives and filters; all the possible intended meanings and implications of the content; the context of the sound; both parties' physical and mental state; the sender's background and the nonverbal communication they are using. (Treasure, 2011, p. 66)

From a broader perspective, active listening of this nature implies intentionality, self monitoring or self awareness, and active participation on multiple levels. A more narrow application of active listening is the classic communication technique (also known as reflective listening) used widely in counseling, training, and conflict resolution. In these contexts, listening effectiveness involves reflecting back client communication free of coloring or judgment. This greatly reduces communication errors, challenges preconceived assumptions, and creates common ground (Purdy, 2008).

Basic listening competence, as previously described by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), is defined as using appropriate and effective communication behaviors for the given context. As noted, passive listening is perceived as appropriate for settings in which information acquisition is the intended outcome. To understand perceptions of listener effectiveness beyond this limited application, Coakley, Halone, and Wolvin (1996) investigated stakeholder and manager expectations around listening practices. The research team developed a taxonomy of 20 qualities of effective listeners in order to help individuals understand what is required of the role of an effective listener in workplace settings. Research findings revealed perceptions that effective listeners show engaged,

focused attention and display behavior that acknowledges message receipt, understanding, and the relationship between speaker and listener. The diversity of day-to-day communicative transactions requires varying levels of focused attention, for which both passive and active approaches can be perceived as appropriate depending on context.

      Critical versus empathetic. The critical versus empathetic listening dimension addresses how message value is derived from judgment (Treasure, 2011). In critical listening, judgment allows the listener to compare and determine the value, quality, and validity of informational transactions (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). The skills for critical listening are built upon what is known as appreciative listening, in that the act of appreciation results in increased awareness, refined level of discernment, and greater capacity for impartial evaluation (Purdy, 2008). As a part of effective, day-to-day communication, critical listening involves the continuous application of conscious filters to information received in order to discern merit. Information that matches these filters is retained and anything does not contribute to the structure, discipline, and clarity of a discussion is discarded (Treasure, 2011).

      Listening is fundamentally a process of extraction. Consciously or not, we focus on part of the received information thereby excluding whatever is irrelevant. Central to all listening, but in particular to critical listening is the reticular activating system, an automatic listening function colloquially referred to as one's editorial department. This psychoacoustic system incorporates two techniques to filter incoming sound: pattern recognition and differencing (Treasure, 2011). Borrowing from conventional understanding of Pavlov's dogs, we learn to link auditory patterns with a range of appropriate and often unconscious responses, including emotional, mental, and

physiological reactions. Equally crucial to survival is the process of differencing, which continuously scans the sonic horizon for changes in patterns that may indicate potential threat. In addition to these automatic processes occurring at the level of sensory input, many other filters have been identified for their potential impact on listening, including culture, language, values, beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and intention (Treasure, 2011).

Portrayed as the opposite of a critical listening orientation is empathetic listening. Empathy involves identifying with another person on an intuitive, emotional level, or perhaps more simply, "one feels with and for that person" (Hobart & Fahlberg, 1965, p. 596). Psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) coined the term empathetic listening to describe a deeply engaged active listening, which abandons assumptions and egocentric perspectives. Also known as supportive listening, this listening approach is free of judgment and used with the intention of creating emotional understanding between communication partners. The objective of empathetic listening is to have one's communication partner feel emotionally understood. According to Treasure (2011), empathetic listening "involves a connection where the listener gives back something, in the form of caring, support, identification through sharing his or her own personal experience or perceptions . . . . It requires (and builds) trust, understanding and loyalty— but it also involves some vulnerability, risk and commitment." Terms such as empathetic, supportive, therapeutic, and others help distinguish these specific listening practices from the default listening used in everyday life.

In his dissertation on the listening practices of leaders, Orick (2002) suggests that leaders hone the capacity to listen with an open mind without becoming emotional or defensive. This kind of person-centered listening is extremely relevant in organizational settings, especially in demonstrating care in relationships. Applications of this approach

fall under the domain of human relations and general management and are useful for motivation, appraisal, correction, personal issues, conflict management, and disciplinary circumstances.

Four characteristics of empathetic listeners identified by Pickering (1986) portray how empathetic listening helps to strengthen and build relationships:

- Desire to be other-directed, avoiding projection of one's own thoughts and feelings onto another;

- Desire to be non-defensive and focused on another, rather than focusing on protection of one's self;

- Desire to imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of another instead of assuming they are similar to one's own;

- Desire to listen unconditionally to understand another rather than trying to reach agreement or to change the other person.

The connection between empathetic listening and client transformation comes from the literature on therapeutic support. According to Jones (2011), supportive listening is "a central dyadic mechanism of providing, perceiving, and receiving beneficial emotional support." Similar to empathetic listening, this approach demands the high focus of attention indicative of an active, not passive listening orientation. As Jones elaborates, "it requires that the support listener demonstrate emotional involvement and attunement while attending to, interpreting, and responding to the emotions of the support seeker" (p. 86). Veteran practitioners like Schein clearly advocate the importance of empathy in leadership: "The ability to empathize, learning to see and experience the world through someone else's eyes and to establish relationships across boundaries, is a crucial ability for everyone in a leading function" (cited in Lambrechts et al., 2011, p. 139).

Supportive listening helps a seeker to cope beneficially with events that are appraised as difficult or potentially threatening. Research has substantiated the effects of personal emotional states on cognitive processing: increased stress may reduce available cognitive resources, which can result in decreased comprehension of feedback (Gaddis, Connelly, & Mumford, 2004). When the experiences of a support seeker are deeply listened to and explicitly acknowledged, "awareness of and adaptation to the subjective, affective, and relational reality" is shown in relation to the difficult or potentially threatening event (Burleson, 1987, p. 305). This validation and integration allows for cognitive reappraisal, affective improvement, and the potential of a shift in perspective (Jones & Wirtz, 2006). In the context of helping relationships, the process of cognitive reappraisal, a shift in perspective, and a subsequent opening for possibility are all set in motion by being deeply listened to with emotional attunement and empathy.

Reductive versus expansive. A third listening dimension depicts the degree to which solution, action, and closure are prioritized or not. According to Treasure (2011),

> Reductive listening usually has a specific goal in mind. It is trying to arrive at a defined destination . . . [such as] listening for "the point," which is either something to contribute, or more often something to do to solve a problem. (p. 72)

For this kind of listening, incoming information is judged for its immediate usefulness in achieving goals. The efficiency associated with reductive listening precludes exploring new ideas and irrelevant information is discarded. In his most recent publication on humble inquiry, Schein (2013), points to the common expectation for this default listening position in workplace contexts:

> When we are listening to someone and don't see where it is going, we say, "So what is your point?" We expect conversations to reach some kind of conclusion. . . . When we listen, we want to feel that it was worthwhile to listen. It is frustrating to have someone tell us something that we cannot use or that is boring.

What we want to be told and what we choose to tell have to be useful—they need to be in context and they need to be relevant. (pp. 60-61)

The solution-driven nature of reductive listening makes it a powerful and effective tool, especially in communication exchanges where outcome is more important than relationship. As Treasure (2011) suggests, reductive listening produces a sense of satisfaction when targeted communication achieves an intended outcome or solution. Its efficiency, however, can often leave people feeling unheard, unacknowledged, and undervalued.

Critical, reductive listening (which features a combination of critical listening, discussed earlier, and reductive listening) efficiently discerns purpose and relevance through continuous processes of extraction and verification: "what listeners actually do is continuously verify aural stimuli as they are attending to it, and constantly assign and reassign meaning to the aural stimuli. This process appears central to what we call listening because of its apparent relationship to how humans learn" (Schwarz, 2012, p. 290). Relevant to organizational settings, management consultant Peter Drucker described information as data endowed with purpose and relevance. In a critical-reductive listening orientation, incoming information is compared against existing schema and past experience, reinforcing automatic filters and confirming our experience of reality. From the perspective of neuroscience, "The connections we have, our own mental maps, can strongly influence the reality we see, often more than the inputs themselves" (Rock & Schwartz, 2006, p. 33).

The rigidity of a critical-reductive listening approach can at times result in impasse. Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks (1993) explain that it is common to apply strategies that worked in prior experiences to new problems and situations. Neuroscience

suggests that focusing on the solutions actually creates solutions, while focusing on the problems can deepen those problems in our thinking (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). Reapplication of incorrect strategy becomes a source of cognitive impasse itself:

> The projection of prior experience has to be actively suppressed and inhibited. This is surprising, as we tend to think that inhibition is a bad thing, that it will lower your creativity. But as long as your prior approach is most dominant, has the highest level of activation, you will get more refined variations of the same approach, but nothing genuinely new comes to the fore. (Schooler et al., 1993, p. 166)

Portrayed as the opposite of a reductive listening orientation is expansive listening. According to Treasure (2011), this listening approach values curiosity, discovery, and the emergent journey itself of the conversation. It is driven by ideas and insight, not agendas. Where reductive listening seeks closure, expansive listening invites exploration and divergent thinking, such as in brainstorming sessions. Treasure explains, "Although it's often repressed, expansive listening is just as valuable in business. . . . It's where flow originates, and where creative ideas come from" (p. 74). Fostering insight and ideation, expansive listening offers "the best access to intuition and to inspiration for problem-solvers."

These six listening approaches presented in the literature can be explored as single orientations or as opposites of listening dimensions. It is worth pointing out the potential impact of distinctions in listening. A listening descriptor may change the feel and quality of the listening, what gets retained versus filtered out, listener intentionality, and perhaps most importantly, the experience of the communication partner.

A part of this research project is the exploration of the potential usefulness of two new types of listening: transactional listening and transformative or transformational listening. Neither has received more than cursory reference in the literature, and there is

no presently known research that explores the application of these types of listening to the unique population and context chosen for the present study. Conceptually, transactional and transformative listening may not fall to either side of a continuum as clearly as do other types of listening. They may be useful in portraying the role listening plays in client transformation. They may also help us distinguish practitioner listening from the default listening used in the routine transaction of everyday business. The next section reviews literature in support of these types of listening.

Transaction and Transformation

Relevant to the broader field of OD, the terms transactional and transformational have been primarily used in the domain of leadership styles, which are addressed in the next section. In business and organizational contexts, transformation is conventionally viewed as a process of profound and radical change that orients an individual or organization in a new direction at a higher level of effectiveness and often with a fundamental change of character. Transaction, on the other hand, typically identifies an exchange, such as the trading of goods, services, or money in traditional business settings. Applied to human behavior and interaction, Blau's (1964) seminal social exchange theory described the transactional nature of behavior modification through the negotiation of reward or punishment. Central in a transactional relationship is some form of agreement and exchange, where voluntary individual behavior is motivated by psychological or economic reward from others.

Transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional models see the leader-follower relationship as a series of exchanges based on, for example, performance expectations and psychological, political, or economic benefit (Bass, 1985). This leadership style does not seek to establish an enduring, purpose-driven relationship as

much as one focusing on control of subordinate behavior through compensation methods, contingent reward, and management by exception (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Bass & Avolio, 1990). Transactional styles of leadership clarify employee roles, expectations, and goals in an efficient and risk-free manner by rarely (if at all) including subordinates in decision-making processes or the exploration of their own creative solutions (Patiar & Mia, 2009). In transactional exchanges, leaders and subordinates transact commitments based on compensation. This may limit sense of ownership and personal growth in employees, which in turn may limit growth of the organization.

Where the aim of transactional exchange is efficient and effective behavior modification through reward/punishment, transformational interaction seeks to create the conditions that foster internalized employee choice to align with leaders in achieving organizational goals. In appealing to a strong, positive, and meaningful vision of the future, transformational leaders enable followers to challenge themselves, to reflect on circumstances, and to take action in new ways, often acting beyond the status quo of transactional performance expectations. The literature indicates that while both transactional and transformational leaders proactively intervene to solve problems, transformational leaders overall may be more effective than transactional leaders (Bass & Bass, 2008).

Early in the literature, a transformational style of leadership was characterized by a relationship that is motivational to both leader and follower in the context of organizational transformation (Downton, 1973). Transformational leaders inspire the loyalty, respect, and trust of subordinates by activating higher motive development and appealing to an inspired vision of the future (Bass, 1985). Employees are moved to act in ways that contribute to this shared vision and often perform beyond the expectations set

in otherwise transactional exchanges. Transformational leadership builds on a transactional base, adding charismatic behaviors such as motivating and inspiring followers, engaging cognitive stimulation, and showing care for individual employee needs and development (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985).

Consulting, transformation, and insight. The client-consultant relationship has been defined as a voluntary and temporary engagement between a professional helper (consultant) and a help-needing system (client) with the end goal of supporting a client system to improve itself (Lippitt, 1959). Inherent in this definition is the dichotomy that the client-consultant helping relationship is by nature simultaneously transactional and transformative: OD practitioners negotiate a temporary transaction to enter and transform a client system to a new, higher level of effectiveness. Yet, by its very nature, the client-consultant relationship is a departure from normal, routine operations. As a helping relationship, its aim typically is to enhance clarity, performance, and effectiveness, among other objectives (Cummings & Worley, 2014). In other words, clients may often seek consultants when transformation, or profound and radical change, is needed.

Levitt et al. (2004) and Miller (2000) have suggested that connections exist between change, transformation, and insight. Connecting insight to helping relationships, a New York University research team used functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to observe the mental function of clients during executive coaching sessions and confirmed that "a central feature of effective coaching is the appearance of some kind of 'insight' by the client" (Rock & Schwartz, 2006, p. 40).

Rock (2009) defined insight as the resolution of an impasse or solution of a problem in an unexpected way, releasing energy and shifting perceptions. Rock and Schwartz (2006) explained,

When we have an illumination experience we are creating a super-map (of other maps) that links many parts of the brain. The creation of this new map gives off substantial energy, energy that can be tapped as a valuable resource. (p. 12)

The insight experience is characterized by a lack of logical progression to the solution, but instead a sudden "knowing" regarding the answer. According to Beeman, "In insight, the solution comes to you suddenly and is surprising, and yet when it comes, you have a great deal of confidence in it. The answer seems obvious once you see it" (Bowden et al., 2005, p. 324). Research in neuroscience suggests that insight involves unconscious processing that results in what is commonly experienced as an "ah-ha!" coming unexpectedly from nowhere with little to no effort (Rock, 2009).

In conceiving his brain-based approach to coaching, Rock (2009) developed the ARIA model to aggregate findings from four main areas of scientific research to explain how coaching impacts the brain: Attention, Reflection, Insight, and Action. His research recommends against focusing attention on problems. Insights arise in reflection, not in deductive reasoning or pure calculation. "Studies have shown that during reflection we are not thinking logically or analyzing data; we're engaging a part of our brain used for making links across the whole brain. We are thinking in an unusual way" (p. 12). In the moment of insight, our perspective of reality shifts to reveal a new possibility. This illumination, according to Rock, gives off substantial energy, evoking a state of intense motivation and action-readiness:

One of the important realizations I had from seeing this model was that the energy of insight might be the thing that propels people through the fear of change and their automatic homeostasis response. If we want people to change, they need to come to an idea themselves, to give their brain the best chance of being energized by the creation of a wide scale new map. (p. 12)

To lay a theoretical foundation for the exploration of the role of listening in helping relationships, the rich history of distinction developed between transactional and

transformational leadership styles can be repurposed to offer similar distinctions between transactional and transformational communicative exchanges, specifically targeting the role of listening in both. Additional references to transactional listening may be drawn from Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, as well as research on information processing (Imhof, 1998). Understanding about what may constitute and lead to transformative listening may be drawn from Rock (2009) and Rock and Schwartz (2006). These theories together provide a well-established framework that can help organize our exploration of listening. The following sections explore transactional and transformative listening.

Transactional listening. The term transactional listening has appeared previously in the literature, when Imhof (1998) used the term transactional to describe information processing, such as in the learning of a new language (Rost, 1990). According to Imhof, transactional listening would be typical of settings in which the listener has limited opportunity to interfere or to collaborate with the speaker in negotiating the meaning of the message. This description is especially appropriate for instructional or passive settings, such as taking instruction or direction. Transactional may be useful as a descriptor for listening in two ways however. In theory, it may identify a targeted and immediate information exchange that lacks potential for co-creation of shared meaning or further exploration.

In practice, on the other hand, transactional listening may occur differently. This study explores the potential application of transactional listening in context of everyday business, where characteristics of its use may resemble characteristics of a transactional style of leadership. Many of the distinguishing elements of this leadership style correlate with descriptions of critical and reductive listening. We may start to extend our transactional lens to incorporate critical and reductive approaches to listening.

Transactional listening may therefore be conceived of as the listening most appropriate for transactional exchanges, such as effective negotiation, clarifying agreements, and contracting conversations.

Transformative listening. Drawing a potential parallel between listening and transformational leadership styles requires precision in choice of the terminology. Merriam-Webster's (2014) online dictionary defines *transformational* as of or pertaining to transformation, while *transformative* is defined as transforming or tending to transform, or causing or able to cause a change. For the purposes of this investigation, transformative will offer a more precise application to listening, though the terms are commonly used interchangeably.

While the history of discourse around transformational leadership is vast, we may draw three specific parallels between characteristics of this leadership style and the kind of listening that is transformative in nature. The first centers on engaged, focused attention. The literature describes transformational leaders as demonstrating care for individual employee needs and development (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985). As stated earlier, individualized attention of this nature is a core attribute of active listening. The second is the presence of a strong relationship built on trust that is motivational to both leader and follower (Downton, 1973). Emotional connection of this nature is characteristic of empathetic listening. And third, transformational leadership enables followers to reflect on circumstances in a similar manner to expansive listening. As leaders activate higher motive development and appeal to an inspired vision of the future, followers are energized to action (Bass, 1985). Brain-based coaching has substantiated that insight gives off substantial energy and evokes a state of intense motivation and action-readiness (Rock, 2009).

In this way, transformative listening may be conceived of as the adaptive mix of active, empathetic, and expansive listening that tends to transform or change a client system. Its primary characteristics might include engaged, focused attention, empathy or emotional connection, and an openness to reflection and insight. Possible effects of this listening approach might include a sense of trust and care in the communicative relationship, shared emotional understanding, and a state of intense motivation and action-readiness.

Though new and largely unsubstantiated, transformational listening has appeared previously in the literature. It was connected to sense making in narrative interventions in organizational settings. Applied at the level of conversation, Swart (2013) explained that transformational listening can create understanding through the reconstruction of shared organizational realities. Rock and Schwartz (2006) have also suggested that illumination and insight emerge under conditions of attention, support, and safety, which may align best with active, empathetic, and expansive listening. The body of literature on what constitutes transformative or transformational listening is sparse, however, if it exists at all. Beginning to examine this type of listening is the focus of the present study.

Applied to the more targeted setting of executive coaching and client transformation, this investigation will explore how practitioners themselves understand and explain the mix of listening perceived to result in client transformation. It will also look to understand how practitioner use of self may contribute to the sensitivity and agility required to moderate and mix one's listening approaches in highest service to the client system.

Self-as-Instrument

A central competency in helping relationships and one that is critical for effective OD consulting has been termed use of self or self as instrument. This high degree of self awareness and self management is often colloquially described as, "how we show up." A formalized definition was offered by Jamieson, Auron, and Schechtman (2011): "the conscious use of one's whole being in the intentional execution of one's role for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting" (p. 58).

As noted in relation to process consultation, clients play a central role in owning and diagnosing their own core issues (Schein, 1999). Self as instrument skills are believed to help both client and consultant throughout this process. According to Lange (1981) and Schein (1999), these skills and abilities on the part of the practitioner include suspending one's biases, accessing one's ignorance, and promoting a true spirit of inquiry. Furthermore, practitioners must develop the capacity to listen on multiple levels, that is, to overt content shared by the client and to what might not be shared. Listening to intuition and somatic queues may help practitioners know how and when to modify their listening mix to best serve each unique client, situation, and consulting dynamic. In addition to exploring its characteristics, the present study will examine how transformative listening is enacted, the skills and activities it potentially demands, and its perceived effects on clients and consultants.

Summary

The purpose of the current investigation was to explore the potential connection between listening and client transformation within the context of the client-consultant helping relationship. A curiosity of the investigator is distinction between transactional and transformative approaches in listening, with specific interest in learning how and if

listening itself can be experienced as a powerful catalyst of change. The main research

question addressed in this work is, "What are the characteristics of the listening enacted

by OD practitioners while engaged in consulting?" This chapter presented a review of the

literature as a theoretical foundation upon which the present investigation is built. Six

types of listening were substantiated by the listening literature. The rich body of research

around leadership styles provided the framework to explore two new types of listening

for their potential usefulness in answering the core research question of this thesis. The

following chapter presents the methods used for this investigation.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of the current investigation was to explore the potential connection

between listening and client transformation within the context of the client-consultant

helping relationship. The research question addressed in this work was, "What are the

characteristics of the listening enacted by OD practitioners while engaged in consulting?"

This chapter describes the methods used in this investigation, including research

paradigm and design, procedures related to sampling and participants, data collection,

and procedures for data analysis.

Research Design

The research design used for the present study was a qualitative descriptive

research design, also known as qualitative research interviewing. This design is useful for

"exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or

human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Sofaer (1999) provided an overview of the value

of qualitative methods,

> in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena; tracking unique or
> unexpected events; illuminating the experience and interpretation of events by
> actors with widely differing stakes and roles; giving voice to those whose views
> are rarely heard; conducting initial explorations to develop theories and to
> generate and even test hypotheses. (p. 1101)

Germane to this study, qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for

examining a research topic with existing theories that may not have been applied to a

particular sample of people (Morse, 1991). As a form of data collection, qualitative

interviewing served the present investigation well in two ways. It provided a level of

flexibility in responsiveness to participant sharing (Bryman, 2008), and allowed the

researcher to pursue additional data that was introduced by participants and which resulted in emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Although the listening literature broadly draws from communication, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and management (Bodie et al., 2008), the present study gives voice to practitioners in the field of organization develop around their subjective experience of the listening they use in client engagement. Therefore, an important aspect of this research is exploration of the subjective social reality of participants, from what linguists and anthropologists call the emic perspective (Harris, 1976).

Exploration of one's perception and experience of listening is a distinctly self-referential kind of inquiry. As participants were asked to reflect on the listening they use in client engagement, they naturally gave attention to and deepened awareness of their own listening experience, past and present. Phenomenological inquiry of this nature allows for exploration of the lived experience of participants respective to the concept or phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative interviews also helped draw out the meaning ascribed by participants to the phenomena, behavior, and circumstances of their experience. This is a process of searching "for essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience" associated with a particular phenomenon (p. 52). The phenomenon in this case was listening.

In order to heighten understanding of individual process and context, an in-depth, one-on-one interview process was chosen as a more appropriate choice for the present study than survey, observation, or other forms of data collection. The use of qualitative interview as a tool for data collection can serve in exploring another person's or group's perspective of a particular topic of scientific inquiry, which includes an underlying

assumption that participant perceptions are knowable, are meaningful, and can be articulated and captured explicitly using the interview tool (Patton, 2002).

Sampling and Participants

The research purpose guides sampling procedures, including sample size, sampling strategy, and other considerations (Punch, 2005). Smaller sample sizes can be appropriate for qualitative research; therefore, it is important to assure that participants have the characteristics needed to provide relevant data. The participants chosen for this study must have had extensive experience in intimate client engagement to be able to describe and communicate their experience of listening. The sample for this study was limited to practicing or semi-retired consultants in the field of OD with at least 10 years experience in executive coaching or small systems and one-on-one client engagement.

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques were used, drawing participants from the professional network of the researcher as well as the alumni community of the MSOD Program at Pepperdine University. By engaging this purposeful sampling technique, the present study was able to focus more on the quality of data collected, which is both appropriate and necessary for studies of a qualitative nature (Patton, 2002).

An invitation was emailed to all participant prospects to explain the nature and purpose of the research project and invite their participation. A consent form was then emailed to each prospect containing pertinent information about participant rights and explaining the process of data collection and recording.

Ethical Considerations

All human participant protection guidelines provided by the Institutional Review Board were observed during the present study. It was assured that the participants were

protected from harm and that any risks they faced in participating were mitigated.

Participants were advised of why the research was being conducted. Participants were

advised of all procedures involved in the study, as well as the approximate time required

for participation. Risks and safeguards for mitigating the risks were outlined. It was

clarified that in order to protect confidentiality, participant ID numbers would be used

instead of names throughout the data collection process. Furthermore, digital recordings

were transcribed directly by the researcher and subsequently destroyed, with no

identifying elements retained in transcription.

The consent form assured participants that they could withdraw from the study at

any time without penalty, or refuse to answer any question at any time. Each participant

understood that their identity was kept confidential in the results of the study. A

participant replying confirmation of participation also agreed to a one-hour recorded

interview. All consent forms, communication, transcripts, and interview notes will be

saved on a hard drive in a locked cabinet separate from the data for 3 years after

completion of the study, at which time all data will be destroyed.

Data Collection

Chapter 2 of this thesis provided an extensive review of major trends in the

scientific study of listening over the past half century. This included several existing

types and dimensions of listening, as established in the literature. Three listening

dimensions and seven types of listening from the literature were used in developing the

interview script for participants (see Appendix). Following are the definitions of each

type of listening as written by the investigator. These were emailed in the script in

advance, as well as explained to participants during the interview:

1. Passive listening has been described as listening with passive attention and

without interaction, commentary, or evaluation. Due to its lack of engagement, passive listening may be prone to distraction. It can be useful for information acquisition, such as when listening to lectures, reports, or instruction where there is little participation in a co-created meaning.

2. Active listening has been described as listening with engaged, focused attention; it may include reflecting and summarizing a message to reduce misinterpretation. To one's communication partner, active listening may communicate message reception, a shared sense of understanding, and care for the speaker-listener relationship.

3. Critical listening has been described as listening with critical judgment for the purpose of discerning the quality, validity, or merit of information received. Critical listening prioritizes structure, order, and discipline in communication, independent of emotional context.

4. Empathetic listening has been described as listening without critical judgment; it may be used for the purpose of having a communication partner feel emotionally understood. Empathetic listening may produce a sense of care, support, and validation of one's personal experience.

5. Reductive listening has been described as efficient, pragmatic, and destination-driven for the purpose of accomplishing task and attaining closure. Reductive listening prioritizes 'getting to the point' and may be useful in solving problems and/or achieving immediate outcomes.

6. Expansive listening has been described as curiosity-driven; it prioritizes reflection and the exploration of new ideas or different perspectives. Expansive listening is often associated with brainstorming and may be useful for inspiring creativity, innovation, or insight.

7. Transactional listening may be described as listening for the purpose of transactional exchange. It may be useful in contracting expectations or in negotiating reward or penalty conditional upon the achievement of specific outcomes.

All interviews for the present investigation were approximately one hour in duration and were conducted by phone. During the interview, participants were invited to explore their usage, experience, and perceptions of the listening they enact in client engagements like executive coaching. Probe questions for each type of listening explored frequency of usage, perceptions of the look, sound, and feel of the listening, and any perceived connection to client insight and transformation. Participants also shared their

perceptions of the appropriateness of transactional listening as a descriptor for the listening used in routine, day-to-day operation. The final listening approach explored was transformative listening. By this time in the series, participants had learned and refined their own process of mapping listening terms to their phenomenological experience. An inductive approach here allowed the researcher to capture definitions and descriptions of transformative listening from an emic perspective (Harris, 1976) in the words of the participants themselves. Finally, participants were invited to share any other unique listening approaches they might use in their practice.

As noted, the ten questions comprising the interview script were emailed to participants in advance of the interview to orient them to the nature of the discussion. At the start of the interview, participants' rights were acknowledged, including their right to answer or pass on questions of their choice. Participants were also informed that aggregate data would be presented in the final research product. An executive summary or full copy of the thesis has been made available upon request.

Data Analysis

Literature on qualitative methods suggests that optimal qualitative research "is systematic and rigorous, and it seeks to reduce bias and error" (Sofaer, 1999, p. 1101). Codes and analyses were driven by the data rather than by a pre-existing coding framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were subsequently developed that were linked to the data, which allowed the researcher to make meaning of the data while maintaining the unique experience described by study participants (Creswell, 2014). Subtleties in participant responses were distinguished and preserved, including thoughts, reactions, reflections, and anecdotal stories. The step-by-step procedures for data analysis were as follows:

1. The researcher read the notes from all the interviews to review the range and depth of data gathered.

2. The researcher created a start list of codes that appeared to reflect the data in the interview notes.

3. Interview notes were coded to reflect which phrases and sentences fit with which codes.

4. Following coding, the start list of codes was reviewed for fit and power (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Codes that were lightly used, not used at all, or whose wording did not appear to best reflect the data were revised and the interview notes were recoded accordingly.

5. The level of saturation was indicated for each code when code revision was complete. Saturation was indicated by counting the number of people in each group who reported each code.

6. Three secondary coders reviewed the data analysis to determine whether the coding results appeared to be valid. One coder was a doctoral-level researcher with substantial experience analyzing qualitative data, one was an OD professional, and one was a student in Pepperdine University's master of science in OD program. The coders were provided with the interview notes and asked to identify the codes that emerge in each category. The coders provided their analysis and the researcher compared the results to his own. Where discrepancies were found, the researcher and second coder discussed and agreed upon definitions of these themes and what data should be coded with that theme. This process was repeated until interrater reliability (calculated as the number of matching codes divided the number of total codes) was 0.80.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the methods used for the present study, including the research design and procedures related to sampling, ethics, and data collection and analysis. A qualitative descriptive design was used and 11 experienced coaches and consultants were interviewed. Data analysis took an inductive approach to determining and understanding themes that emerged related to the unique phenomenological experience and sense-making of participants around their perceptions of listening in the context of client engagement. The next chapter reports the study findings.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter reports the study results. Participant demographics are presented first, followed by findings related to the types of listening used. The characteristics participants assigned to various types of listening are then identified, followed by activities or actions taken while listening. Effects of transformative listening on consultants and clients are presented fourth. The chapter closes with a summary.

Participant Demographics

Eleven experienced coaches and consultants (six men, five women) were involved in the present study. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 78 ($M = 58.27$, $SD = 11.06$). Their experience in the OD field ranged from 8 to 41 years ($M = 25.45$, $SD = 10.63$) and their experience in helping professions ranged from 13 to 53 years ($M = 32.1$, $SD = 12.24$. The participants' demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Years in OD	Yrs in Helping Profession	Current Work Status
1	56	M	10	25	Full-time
2	59	F	35	35	Full-time
3	55	F	30	30	Full-time
4	64	F	25	40	Semi-retired
5	78	M	41	53	Retired
6	65	M	35	40	Semi-retired
7	62	M	28	40	Semi-retired
8	63	M	23	23	Full-time
9	33	M	8	13	Full-time
10	51	F	15	15	Full-time
11	55	F	30	30	Full-time
Totals	$M = 58.27$ $SD = 11.06$	6 Male, 5 Female	$M = 25.45$ $SD = 10.63$	$M = 32.1$ $SD = 12.24$	7 Full-time 3 Semi-retired 1 Retired

OD = Organization Development

Participant gender for the sample was fairly balanced, with 55% male (n = 6) and 45% female (n = 5) participants respectively. The mean participant age was 58.27 years, which aligns with the career average of more than 25 years of practice in the field of OD. All participants have had experience as internal and external consultants. Six participants (55%) self-identified as external, and the other 45% (n = 5) had career-defining roles as internals with large organizations. Though one participant self-identified as retired and three others as semi-retired, all participants indicated some level of current professional activity.

Participants shared a common work history in the field of OD, with a minimum of 10 years experience in the field. Within their respective career histories, participants served client systems of a range of sizes, from individuals or small systems engagements to large systems in organizations of up to 10,000 members. Industries served by participants and their organizations represent the for-profit, nonprofit, government, and educational sectors, predominantly centered in the US.

Three participants have held senior executive or C-suite level leadership positions at some point in their careers, and another six have held director positions at their respective organizations. Seven participants currently work as external consultants with their own practices or connected to boutique consulting firms. Two participants bring to their OD perspective backgrounds in academic research and expertise in the fields of neuroscience, organization behavior, and counseling. Another two have extensive functional expertise in training and development, and one specializes in addiction recovery for executives. Three participants also teach OD at the university level as fulltime or adjunct faculty. All participants received graduate degrees with fields of study

ranging from OD and organization behavior to business administration. Nine participants are graduates of the MSOD Program at Pepperdine University.

All participants reported extensive experience in small systems and 1-on-1 client engagement, with at least half identifying executive coaching as a core component of their professional practices. Participants indicated that the majority of their coaching clients tended to be front line and senior managers, C-suite executives, heads of boards, and others in leadership positions on behalf of their organizations.

Types of Listening Used

This study investigated the listening enacted by OD practitioners in helpful relationships such as executive coaching. Frequency of use was considered for six common types of listening from the literature and two relatively new listening descriptors: transactional and transformative listening. An overview of usage frequency presented in Table 2 indicates that 100% of participants (n = 11) reported regular use four types of listening: active, empathetic, expansive, and transformative listening. Ten participants (91%) reported at least occasional, intentional use of critical, reductive, and transactional listening as well.

Table 2

Types of Listening Used

Type of Listening	Never or Rarely Used	Used Occasionally with Intention	Used Regularly
Passive	10 (91%)	1 (9%)	
Active			11 (100%)
Critical	1 (9%)	4 (36%)	6 (55%)
Empathetic			11 (100%)
Reductive	1 (9%)	1 (9%)	9 (82%)
Expansive			11 (100%)
Transactional		2 (18%)	9 (82%)
Transformational			11 (100%)

N = 11

Focusing on the listening modalities used less often or by fewer participants, 55% (n = 6) reported regular use of critical listening; another 36% (n = 4) use this approach only on occasion and with intention. Interestingly, the data revealed similar usage for reductive and transactional listening: 82% of participants (n = 9) use these approaches regularly, however 18% (n = 2) do not. The outlier here was the sole, fully-retired participant who at his stage in life expressed clear preference for empathy and exploration and lack of interest in critical and reductive listening.

All participants (n = 11) reported regular or occasional use of the eight types of listening explored in this study with one exception: no participant reported regular use of *passive* listening. Participant 3 shared,

> One of the key elements of my practice is listening. It's one of my key skills, and I think I'm really good at it. I would say that active listening is a keystone to the work that I do. It takes a really long time to be a good active listener, because you have to let go of yourself. It can't be about us, it has to be about the speaker. So I really use [listening] as my key tool; it brings me to more questions. If you're not actively listening, you don't know what questions to ask.

> Participant 6 gave an overview of how active listening serves him in his practice:

> Clearly, I use active listening. It's always part of my client engagement process to gather information to get a clear picture of the situation I'm walking into. That includes a lot of one-on-one interviews with direct reports and other stakeholders to expand my view of what's going on; I find out people's concerns, issues, objectives, expectations, strengths, weaknesses, etc. and I'm always using active listening when I'm out talking to people.

> Participant 2 shared her perception of a continuum operating within her listening:

> I definitely use active listening. Passive is not particularly helpful, but there *is* a continuum: there's a point where you can become overly active, where there's so much focus, it becomes de-energizing for people and you're doing the thinking for them.

Like others, Participant 9 interpreted active listening as active participation, rather than the common communication technique used in counseling, training, and conflict resolutions:

> By the nature of the kind of work I do, I'm always actively participating. This can be externally with a client, but also internally just to the point of being stirred. I try to be aware of things that are arising in me from my interaction with the client . . . .that's all active.

Participant 11 shared a neuroscience lens of the importance of active listening:

> A part of active listening is quieting the inner narrative so you can really listen to a person. Active listening is being able to step outside of your own narrative circuitry, so if I'm listening to you, I'm not remembering something about me that I may want to share with you later. And that's part of quieting that narrative circuitry and being fully present. It's a skill.

Ten participants (91%) reported that they rarely or never use passive listening in client situations. Participant 11 explained,

> If I find myself tuning out to that engaged state of listening deeply, then I usually know there's something for me to pay attention to in the interaction. If I'm getting bored, I need to figure out why, because it's not really my role to be bored while I'm working with clients or with students. So I try to give voice to whatever the source of the boredom is if it's appropriate, and sometimes it is, and sometimes that's an intervention. But it's almost never in a client situation that I'd be in a passive listening mode.

Participant 7 admitted, "Sometimes I revert to passive listening when my role is not critical. I think it's human nature when that happens, and I have to own up to that." 10 explained that she uses passive listening occasionally for specific situations: "Every once in a while, I can tell by the mood that the person just needs to talk things out, so I let them run."

Beyond the active versus passive listening dimension, participants reported varied use of critical, empathetic, reductive, expansive, transactional, and transformative

listening approaches. The next section provides detailed description on participants' uses and characterizations of these types of listening.

Characteristics of Listening Types

Analysis of the interview data indicated that engaged, focused attention in active listening plays a central role in each of the other types of listening examined here. Two participants characterized transactional listening as more passive in nature, however their interpretation is unclear. The following sections describe the characteristics of each type of listening as identified by the participants.

Critical listening. Table 3 presents the characteristics of critical listening. Similar to how this listening is portrayed in the literature, Participant 1 equated this modality with judgment, explaining,

> When I think of the critical listening dimension, what we're really talking about is judgment, and for the most part judgment has to be suspended. What you want to do with your client is mirror things back or help them think about something in a new way. If you present something with a sense of judgment around it, it's very unlikely to be received, and transformation can't happen then.

Table 3

Characteristics of Critical Listening

Characteristic	n
Illuminates inconsistencies to the client	5 (45%)
Supports an action orientation	5 (45%)
Allows for the filtering of information and identification of salient issues	4 (36%)
Provides order and structure	3 (37%)
Enhances consultant credibility	2 (18%)

$N = 11$

Forty-five percent of participants ($n = 5$) associated critical listening with illuminating inconsistencies to the client. Participant 8 shared, "When I'm listening to a client's story, I have to use critical listening to discover the inconsistencies. I listen for what they're sharing as well as to the spaces of what they're not sharing. So judgment in

this case is useful, but only in providing the support my clients need." Participant 10

elaborated,

> I try to lean into the empathetic listening at first. But over time as I develop a
> relationship with the client, I'll start to incorporate critical listening to help point
> out inconsistencies. I use critical listening against this internal criteria I develop as
> I work with a client, and it lets me check for consistencies or inconsistencies with
> their stated goals or directions that they want to stretch themselves.

Forty-five percent of participants (n = 5) also perceive this listening as supportive

of an action orientation. Participant 2 explained, "Critical listening is useful for the

evaluation of the content of what a client has shared; there's also an evaluation in me to

get a sense of what choice of action I take next—where and how I can guide the

conversation to help the process move forward." Four participants shared that critical

listening allows them to filter information and identify salient issues. "You have to be

able to filter things for your client," stated 1. This point was expanded on by Participant

11:

> With critical listening I'm measuring what [clients] are saying against what their
> stated intentions are, or against certain goals they want to achieve or qualities
> about themselves they're trying to lean into. Often a client won't even see that
> they've veered off from what they're trying to make happen, and reminding them
> of their stated intentions can help direct their thinking. Critical listening can help
> me notice patterns in the way a client is talking or thinking about something, so
> I'll bring it to their attention to see if they notice or think it's a pattern as well.
> Often it's a surprise to them they hadn't realized and an insight comes out of that.

Other characteristics included use of this listening to provide order and structure

(n = 3) and to enhance consultant credibility at the outset of an engagement (n = 2).

Participant 9 stated that critical listening can help "the practitioner or coach to know how

to translate things to the language of the client and when to put structure in place in order

to move to execution and action." Reflecting over her career, Participant 2 intimated,

> Critical listening is what actually earns me the ability to sit in an empathetic place
> with a client and have the client be willing to let me be empathetic with them. In

business settings, some of this is gender related. When I was younger, it was hard to have an impact as a young female trying to coach a male leader older than me by 15-20 years. Having the ability to use critical listening established credibility for me to be seen as a business person bright enough and smart enough to work with more senior leaders. From there it was easier for the client to accept me in more of an empathetic role.

Empathetic listening. All participants stated that they engage regularly in empathetic listening. "When I'm listening to a client's story," explained Participant 8, "I have to use empathetic listening to have them feel heard." Addressing its relationship to critical listening, Participant 9 emphasized the crucial role empathy plays in his practice:

> I start with empathetic listening to allow me to accept my client wherever they are, but it also sets the context for me to notice and accept in me whatever critical judgments might arise as I'm listening. So I use both kinds of listening in my practice, but fundamentally, it's not coaching if empathy is not involved.

As portrayed in Table 4, 36% of participants (n = 4) described empathetic listening as allowing the coach to "take in" the client's world. Participant 8 explained, "I try to show up without any preconceived ideas or notions about what's going on for them. I'll ask a few open-ended questions, but essentially I'm just listening and taking it all in to understand their world." Three participants shared that empathetic listening involves suspending and emptying oneself as the coach. Participant 1 elaborated,

> You have to be able to suspend yourself, your thinking, and your opinion in order to show up with empathy to the other person. . . [You must not] make it about you but about someone else. That's what going to have the impact on the client.

Table 4

Characteristics of Empathetic Listening

Characteristic	n
Allows coach to "take in" the client's world	4 (36%)
Involves suspending and emptying oneself as the coach	3 (27%)
Amplifies what is really going on for the client	3 (27%)
Involves holding the space for the client	2 (18%)
Informs critical listening	2 (18%)

$N = 11$

Other descriptors of this type of listening included amplifying what is really going on for the client (n = 3), holding the space for the client (n = 2), and informing critical listening (n = 2). For example, Participant 8 explained,

> I use empathy and the feeling realm to inform my critical listening. If there's not enough tension, pain, or joy there, if there are no true emotions that hit me on a visceral level, then I know the person is not being truly authentic. . . . [It] tell[s] me when we're getting somewhere, and when it's not deep enough and I need to try a different approach.

In particular, one participant with an academic background in the neurosciences elucidated why critical and empathetic listening might be difficult to use simultaneously:

> What I would like to call out is that there is a shadow on both of the ends of the continuum. The shadow on the critical judgment end is becoming critical to the point of not hearing what the person is saying because my own judging voice is so strong that I've simply excluded something you're telling me that doesn't fit within my frame.
>
> On the other end of the spectrum, the classic Rogerian empathetic listening is completely nonjudgmental; it's valuing the personhood of the person *despite* what they're saying. I think the shadow of that is really becoming disconnected from your own voice or intuition for what's happening . . . .
>
> The research of Matt Lieberman from UCLA on social circuitry and analytic circuitry in the brain suggests that those circuits are really distinct and that most people aren't very good at switching between them. I have a hunch that has something to do with the capacity to be both empathetic and in critical judgment. To use both with some kind of fluidity and consciousness is probably the mark of someone who is fairly integrated or has a pretty high degree of neural integration.
>
> I think critical and empathetic listening have to happen in the right degree in any [coaching] conversation at all times, and the real key is being conscious of where I am on that continuum without it getting in the way of the interactions.

Reductive listening. As depicted in Table 5, nine participants use reductive listening to efficiently select actions, and seven reported that it promotes clarity and resolution. Themes also emerged around timing and when to use reductive listening.

Table 5

Characteristics of Reductive Listening

Characteristic	n
Used to efficiently select actions	9 (82%)
Promotes clarity and resolution	7 (64%)
Timing	
Used at end of discussion	5 (45%)
Used at various times	2 (18%)
Used at beginning of discussion	2 (18%)

$N = 11$

"Reductive listening is definitely a part of the process," stated Participant 2, "because usually when you're trying to help someone move to action, that's where having a clear destination or outcome is important." Participant 4 elucidated,

> There is a clear and distinct value in my role that comes from reductive listening. When people are trying to make sense of complex circumstances it can be hard for them to summarize and reduce complexity to get clear on where we're going, how we're going to get there, and what action can be taken. That's an important part of my role as a coach.

Some participants reported using this listening at the beginning (n = 2) or at other times in a discussion (n = 2) especially as part of a repeating process. Consultants most often use reductive listening after expansive listening at the end of a coaching conversation (n = 5), as explained by Participant 2:

> Both reductive and expansive listening get used, and you have to know how to flow back and forth between them. Business coaching is not just a normal conversation; you're trying to get to an action, so typically at the end of a session, I try to anchor the learning or new awareness with a kind of reduction: "So what's more clear for you now, or what are the next steps you see?" This is where we try to close the conversation or "unit of work" down.

Expansive listening. All 11 participants reported regular use of expansive listening. Participant 3 offered an analogy here: "I experience it almost like an accordion, where I help people to expand their possibilities and expand their ideas, but then we pull

it back in to reduce and focus. . . . Ninety percent of the time I'm listening for clues that give a greater possibility of growth on the part of the client or small client system."

As depicted in Table 6, 10 participants (91%) connect this type of listening to exploration and discovery, while seven (64%) characterize it as deepening understanding and insight. Participant 6 shared, "The majority of listening I use is expansive. I'm always trying to bring people out of their bubble, to generate other ways of viewing things, to get people out of limited mindsets they have. I'm always trying to expand people's horizons."

Table 6

Characteristics of Expansive Listening

Characteristic	n
Fosters exploration and discovery	10 (91%)
Deepens understanding and insight	7 (64%)
Timing	
Used at beginning of discussion	6 (55%)
Used at various times	2 (18%)

$N = 11$

Expansive listening is generally used at the beginning of a discussion (n = 6) or at other various times (n = 2), however is almost always followed by its reductive counterpart. Participant 10 explained,

> I definitely use both reductive and expansive listening in my practice. I generally start with curiosity and expansive listening in order to help generate options. I try to increase their choice and the number of ideas and possibilities they have. As a coaching session goes on, however, and definitely by the end of it, I move to using reductive listening to get them to choose from the options and possibilities we discussed.

Transactional listening. This study explored transactional listening as a potential descriptor of the listening appropriate for the transaction of everyday business. Speaking from his former role as senior executive in the hospitality industry, Participant 8 stated,

"The majority of the listening used in corporate America is very transactional." Participant 3 reflected on her own day-to-day business, stating, "I use transactional listening in my work. I use it a lot, because we have to get stuff done. We have to make plans, and we have to decide what to do. Transactional listening is how we get work done."

Of the six types of listening from the literature, 73% of participants (n = 8) perceived transactional listening as a combination of reductive and critical listening. The same number (n = 8) see this orientation as necessary for defining agreements, and another five consider it to promote clarity (see Table 7). "In client engagement," explained Participant 1, "there's a life cycle to the conversations I'm describing. Transactional listening plays a part at the beginning in what we think of as the contracting phase in OD, when it's my job to help the client get clear on the outcome they want to achieve with our time." Reflecting on the value of contracting, Participant 6 noted, "Transactional exchange actually helps both of us accept and be clear about how to show up for each other to do the work."

Table 7

Characteristics of Transactional Listening

Characteristic	n
Helpful for moving to action	10 (91%)
Necessary when defining agreements	8 (73%)
Is reductive and critical	8 (73%)
Commonly practiced by business leaders	6 (55%)
Promotes clarity	5 (45%)
Is passive	2 (18%)

N = 11

Six participants characterized this listening as commonly practiced by business leaders. While two perceived transactional listening as a more passive and/or default

choice, 91% of participants (n = 10) described this listening as helpful for moving to action. Participant 1 offered a thorough summary of transactional listening:

> Transactional listening is all about clarity and making decisions; it's about "just the facts, ma'am" where you're dealing with fact-based and tangible issues to cut to the chase and move into action. Ninety percent of the kinds of conversations people have in business are more of a transactional nature. Unless they are engaged in a development conversation or trying to shift something to a different level, most day-to-day issues are more transactional: what are we going to do, when and how are we going to do it, what is it going to cost, etc.

Transformative listening. Last in the inquiry of listening types was the newest term for participants, transformative or transformational listening (used interchangeably by interviewees). Participant 3 depicted this orientation as "making change possible through your listening." Having mapped seven other listening approaches to their phenomenological experience, participants easily described the key role this listening plays in their work (see Table 8).

Table 8

Characteristics of Transformative Listening

Characteristic	n
Requires engaged, focused attention	11 (100%)
Is a mix of active, empathetic, and expansive listening	9 (82%)
Fosters exploration and insight	6 (55%)
Displays empathy and emotional connection	3 (27%)
Fosters a spiritual or deep connection	3 (27%)
Incorporates all types of listening	3 (27%)
Pushes toward action that makes transformation possible	3 (27%)

N = 11

Participant 3 further explained, "Transformational listening helps the client discover and transform himself, and your acts of listening and asking different kinds of questions help someone see what's possible." Participant 6 had a similar perspective: "Transformational listening requires figuring out ways to have clients see the same things that I'm seeing and come up with the same conclusions. It's tricky and takes longer than

pointing out the answers right away, but that's when I'm doing my best work as a

consultant."

As portrayed earlier, this listening was the fourth orientation used regularly by

100% of participants; the other three were active, empathetic, and expansive listening.

Nine participants (82%) perceive transformative listening as a mix of these primary

listening approaches with shared characteristics that include engaged, focused attention

($n = 11$), exploration and insight ($n = 6$), and empathy and emotional connection ($n = 3$).

Participant 2 explained the interplay of listening types here:

> Transactional listening won't move past a critical and reductive place. For
> transformative listening, the engaged attention of active listening is necessary for
> transformation to occur; so are empathy and insight. But over the course of client
> engagement, the listening I use will cycle between empathetic and critical
> listening as well as between expansive and reductive listening depending on client
> needs in the moment.

Three participants perceive transformative listening as incorporating any and all

listening modalities needed to serve transformation of the client system, as explained by

Participant 9, "I associate all of them with transformative listening . . . . There's a time

for expansiveness, a time for empathy, and a time for being reductive and moving into

action." For some participants, this listening mix displays discrete, observable behaviors,

such as pushing towards action that makes transformation possible ($n = 3$). For others,

however, it is characterized by less tangible attributes, such a spiritual or deep connection

($n = 3$). Participant 9 explained, "Transformative listening is fundamentally being able to

listen for what is deeper, more sustainable, and more life giving. It's more emotional,

connective, and powerful." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 4, who reflected,

> I experience a sense of appreciation for the human condition—that we can learn
> and change even though it's really hard. Sometimes we actually work to not to be
> open to change or consistent in how we deal with it, so for me there's a sense of
> triumph for the human species in having the capacity to better ourselves.

Ways that Listening is Enacted

Participants were asked to describe the ways in which they enacted listening during client engagements (see Table 9). Participants connected several activities to their experience of listening in the client-consultant relationship. These included listening with whole body, to the whole person, and at multiple levels (n = 9), practicing presence and intention (n = 6), and creating a safe container (n = 2) for the engagement. "There's a consciousness that you bring to [coaching] through the quality of your listening," shared Participant 10. "Thinking about the somatic," explained 2, "it's about the level of energy I'm bringing into each coaching engagement and understanding how I'm sitting with this energy while being present with a client."

Table 9

Actions Taken During Listening

Activity	n
Listen with whole body, to the whole person, at multiple levels	9 (82%)
Practice presence and intention	6 (55%)
Extend warmth, acceptance, and trust in the client's capability	6 (55%)
Ask insight-provoking questions	5 (45%)
Amplify and validate the client's voice	4 (36%)
Create a safe container	2 (18%)
Gather data about the situation	2 (18%)

N = 11

By accessing this additional emotional and somatic information, practitioners are able to gather data about the situation (n = 2) from multiple levels to inform their perspective. "It's a way of listening that goes beyond the ears and eyes," explained Participant 2. Other activities associated with practitioner listening include extending warmth, acceptance and trust in the client's capability (n = 6), asking insight-provoking

questions (n = 5), and finally amplifying and validating the client's voice. Participant 2

offered her perspective:

> My presence functions like a kind of container that allows the client to explore their fears, their concerns, their ideas, whatever they need, and through this process they soften enough to have a transformational experience. I'm not doing the work here, it's more about increasing client receptivity to their own creativity and ideas.

Effects of Transformative Listening on Consultants and Clients

Finally, participants were asked to identify the perceived outcomes of

transformative listening for both consultants and clients (see Table 10). Client insight was

the most commonly perceived outcome of transformative listening. Participant 1 shared,

"Usually, there's a shift in direction of a client's thinking where two things get connected

that had never been connected before, and people experience this ah-ha!" Interestingly,

insight was experienced by practitioners as well (n = 3). Participant 8 offered his

explanation: "The experience of transformational listening is the same on both side,

giving and receiving." Participant 6 echoed, "I'm just like my clients. When I'm listening

transformationally, I experience an openness to new possibilities, an awareness of

judgments that are holding me back, and a generous presence with others."

Table 10

Outcomes of Transformative Listening

Outcome	n
Consultant Outcomes	
New insights	3 (27%)
Shifts in manner of inquiry	2 (18%)
Client Outcomes	
New insights	6 (55%)
Enhanced listening skills and other capabilities	6 (55%)
Meaningful results and making new choices	5 (45%)
Shift to a more generative, life-giving state	3 (27%)
Enhanced trust in coach	2 (18%)

N = 11

Outcomes reported by participants for both consultants and clients also tended to reflect a shift of some nature, often from exploration of possibility to goal setting and execution. "Transformation is taking the insight into action to get the result," stated Participant 1. For consultants, this occurred as a shift in manner of inquiry (n = 2), while for clients it was characterized as meaningful results and making new choices (n =5) and perceived as a shift to a more generative, life-giving state (n = 3). Other outcomes included enhanced capabilities such as listening skills (n = 6) and enhanced client trust in their coach (n = 2).

Summary

Participants reported using active listening almost exclusively, with regular use of empathetic, expansive, and transformative listening. Reductive, critical, and transactional listening were used regularly by fewer participants or on occasion and with intention. Leading descriptors for how participants enacted listening was to do so with their whole bodies, to the whole person, at multiple levels. They also described practicing presence and intention, as well as extending warmth, acceptance, and trust in the client's capability. Client outcomes of transformative listening included new insights, meaningful results and making new choices, a shift to a more generative, life-giving state, enhanced listening capabilities, and enhanced trust in the coach. Consultant outcomes of transformative listening included new insights and ensuing shifts in their manner of inquiry. The next chapter provides a discussion of these results.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of the current investigation was to explore the potential connection between listening and client transformation within the context of the client-consultant helping relationship. A focus of the research project is understanding the potential distinction between transactional listening and transformative listening, with specific interest in learning how and if listening itself can be experienced as a powerful catalyst of transformation. The main research question addressed in this work is, "What are the characteristics of the listening enacted by OD practitioners while engaged in consulting?" The following three research sub-questions were also identified:

1. What types of listening are used and what are their characteristics?

2. In what ways is listening enacted?

3. What are the effects of transformative listening on consultants and clients?

This chapter presents and discusses key findings related to the results from examining the above research questions. Implications for listening theory, recommendations for practitioners and leaders, limitations of the study, and directions for future research are subsequently presented.

Overview of Key Findings

Nine key findings were generated from the data that were collected and analyzed in the present investigation. An overview of key findings is presenting in Table 11. What has emerged from the rich, qualitative data of this study is a new understanding of the transformative and catalytic role that listening plays in the client-consultant relationship.

Table 11

Summary of Key Findings By Research Question

Key Finding

Research Question 1: Types of Listening
1. The engaged, focused attention of active listening is a fundamental characteristic present all listening approaches used by OD practitioners.

2. OD practitioner listening is distinguished by three primary listening approaches that are used regularly: active, empathetic, and expansive listening.

3. OD practitioner listening is also distinguished by two secondary listening approaches that are used occasionally and with intention: critical and reductive listening.

4. Transactional listening is a useful descriptor for listening used in the transaction of routine business, where clarity, structure, execution, and action demand critical and reductive listening orientations.

5. Transformative listening is useful descriptor for OD practitioner listening that results in client transformation and may be defined as the adaptive mix of primary (active, empathetic, expansive) and secondary (critical, reductive) listening approaches used in a repeating process of inquiry that tends to transform or change a client system.

Research Question 2: Ways Listening is Enacted
6. Use of self is the foundation for listening in OD practitioners and informs most activities or actions taken during the listening process.

7. A core aspect of OD practitioner listening is an adaptive moderation and mix of listening in highest service to the client.

Research Question 3: Effects of Transformative Listening
8: A core outcome of the three primary listening approaches may be described as a transformation of perspective: client ability to reframe presenting problems depends on trust in the helping relationship, validation of client experience, and insight from exploration of alternative perspectives.

9. A core outcome of the two secondary listening approaches may be described as a transformation of behavior: insight must be translated into the language of the client and executed in action that increases effectiveness of the client system.

1. Active listening as a common orientation. The first key finding of the study is that engaged, focused attention is the single, common characteristic to all listening approaches used by OD practitioners during client engagement. Attention has been defined in the literature as a mental state involving intense voluntary direction and concentration of consciousness upon a person or object (Farrow, 1963). For purposes of the present investigation, active listening was portrayed as a generic listening modality characterized by engaged, focused attention, rather than the specific communication technique commonly used in counseling, training, and conflict resolution. Active listening has been distinguished in the literature for its capacity to greatly reduce communication error, challenge preconceived assumptions, and create common ground in communicative exchange (Purdy, 2008).

The findings of the present study related to active listening are congruent with the literature. Together, these suggest that it is important for OD practitioners to bring engaged, focused attention to their listening in helping relationships; passive listening is not recommended. Reflecting on her own practice, one participant with a background in academic research and organizational behavior offered a substantive perspective in summary of this key finding:

> Engaged, focused attention is pretty critical to my practice. I'm going back to the literature on what [makes] an effective client relationship in therapeutic relationships, and the data suggest that if you control for the type of therapy somebody's engaged in, then what really matters is the relationship between the therapist and the client. And I think that's true in OD as well.
> Any kind of human systems intervention at the individual or group level is as much a success because the practitioner is focused, attuned, and fully present as any particular model the practitioner is using. That's my belief, and I think there's some research that supports it.

2. Three primary listening approaches. The second key finding of the study is that OD practitioner listening is distinguished by three primary listening approaches that

are used regularly during client engagement: active, empathetic, and expansive listening. The defining characteristics of these three primary listening approaches are engaged, focused attention, empathy, and insight, respectively.

Support from the literature related to active listening was discussed in Key Finding 1. Findings of the present study on empathetic listening also appear to be largely supported by the literature. Participants of this study described characteristics of the empathetic listening they use in their practices. These largely mirrored the person-centered characteristics of empathetic listeners outlined by Pickering (1986). Empathy involves identifying with another person on an intuitive, emotional level (Hobart & Fahlberg, 1965). In the context of helping relationships, the process of cognitive reappraisal and a subsequent opening for clients to reframe their presenting problems are set in motion by the generous and profoundly simple act of listening. When grounded in intentionality and emotional attunement, empathetic listening helps clear the space to invite client transformation.

Expansive listening, according to the literature, values curiosity, discovery, and exploration; it is driven by insight and invites alternative perspectives (Treasure, 2011). Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) of the mental function of clients during executive coaching sessions confirmed insight as a central feature of effective coaching (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). Findings of the present study on expansive listening are supported by research in brain-based coaching that portrays insight as the fundamental antecedent to change readiness in the client system.

3. Two secondary listening approaches. The third key finding of the study is that OD practitioner listening is also distinguished by two secondary listening approaches, which are used occasionally and with specific intention. The defining

characteristics are clarity and structure for critical listening, and execution and action for reductive listening.

In critical listening, Wolvin and Coakley (1996) describe the listener using judgment to compare and determine the value, quality, and validity of informational transactions. Several participants of the present study, however, advocated the opposite, explaining the importance of suspending critical judgment in the context of the helping relationship. The literature further portrays critical listening as the continuous application of conscious filters to communication to sort what is retained and what is discarded (Treasure, 2011). Based on the maxim in process consultation that everything is data (Schein, 1999), OD consultants do not likely discard information. On the contrary, practitioners retain data and, as reported in this study, listen for inconsistencies between the client narrative and the internal criteria developed from stored data over time. Furthermore, when used constructively and with the intention of highest service, participants described their experience of critical listening as discernment. This key distinction sheds light on the fundamental difference in how this listening modality is used and experienced in the context of helping relationships. It was elucidated by Participant 11:

> I think the benefit of the critical judgment is the word *discern.* Discern means you sort through to find value in what [a client] is saying. This is critical not in the sense of judging, but in the sense of weighing what somebody's saying with the context, with what you know about the person, and with the intention that is in the relationship. So I can be very discerning and critical in a conversation with someone who has given me information about what they would like to be doing and where we've set some behavioral standards and they want my support as a coach. I can be incredibly critical in a positive way.

In reductive listening, according to the literature, incoming information is judged for its immediate usefulness in achieving goals, with all irrelevant information discarded

(Treasure, 2011). Critical and reductive listening are perceived as the two most common orientations used in the transaction of routine business. Reductive listening is appropriate for execution and action, as well as problem solving and getting to "the point." The literature portrays cognitive impasse as a problem-solving loop that is fed by repeat application of incorrect strategies that ultimately prevent insight (Schooler et al., 1993). Facing the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous realities of the modern business environment, overuse of default critical and reductive approaches to problems may inadvertently compromise the effectiveness of today's leaders.

Results from the present study depart from how the literature portrays more common usage of critical and reductive listening. The significant contribution here is the particular and judicious manner in which coaches enact these secondary listening approaches. Implemented with greater intentionality, OD practitioners temper their critical listening with empathy and balance their reductive listening with expansive exploration and insight.

4. Transactional listening. The fourth key finding of the research project is that transactional listening is a useful descriptor for listening used in the transaction of routine business. In these contexts, the appropriate mix of critical and reductive listening orientations achieves clarity and structure, as well as execution and action. Compared to its primary and more regularly-used counterpart, transformative listening, transactional listening functions as a secondary listening approach that is used by coaches with targeted intentionality. "Where transactional listening plugs into my work," explained 1, "is that point in the coaching conversation where expansive shifts to reductive listening; the transactional piece is where you're listening with clarity to help the client nail down how they are going to take action, the scope of what they are going to do and by when."

As the default listening of everyday business, it may be more comfortable or familiar for clients to stay at a transactional level of exchange. Consultants, however, must know how and when to move into deeper levels of communication. "If you're just listening transactionally at the surface-level content," the participant continued, "you don't hear the game changers that can blow everything wide open."

In the literature, transactional listening described settings in which the listener has limited opportunity to interfere or collaborate with the speaker in negotiating the meaning of the message (Imhof, 1998). Participants of the present study helped to distinguish theory from real world application, where characteristics of this listening resemble characteristics of a transactional style of leadership (Burns, 1978). Used by practitioners for contracting and coaching agreements, transactional listening may be conceived of as the listening most appropriate for transactional exchanges, for effective negotiation, and for clarity and execution in agreements.

5. Transformative listening. The fifth key finding of this study is that transformative listening is useful descriptor for the OD practitioner listening that results in client transformation. The definition of this listening proposed in chapter 2 had focused on only three of types of listening: active, empathetic, and expansive. Secondary listening approaches had been discounted for their role in transformation. Based on study data, however, an updated working definition for transformative listening is *the adaptive mix of primary (active, empathetic, expansive) and secondary (critical, reductive) listening approaches used in a repeating process of inquiry that tends to transform or change a client system*. Its three defining characteristics include engaged, focused attention, empathy and emotional connection, and an openness to exploration and insight.

These defining characteristics are supported by the literature on transformational styles of leadership. Similar to the engaged, focused attention of active listening, transformational leaders demonstrate care for individual employee needs and development (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985). The trust and emotional connection possible from empathetic listening resemble the strong, trusting relationship that is motivational to transformational leaders and their followers (Downton, 1973). Lastly, transformational leadership enables followers to reflect on circumstances in a similar manner to expansive listening. As leaders activate higher motive development and appeal to an inspired vision of the future, followers are energized to action (Bass, 1985). Brain-based coaching has substantiated that insight gives off substantial energy and evokes a state of intense motivation and action-readiness (Rock, 2009). A noteworthy response from Participant 1 explains how transformation occurs in practitioner and client listening alike:

> Transforma[tive] listening is listening for aspects of a conversation that become game changers for the client. Because I'm listening for it, I'll hear something that I can use as the linchpin to help a client shift the conversation, the way they're thinking, and how they're operating. If you're just listening transactionally at the surface-level content, you don't hear the game changers that can blow everything wide open.
>
> Transformational listening happens on the client side too. They come in facing a problem and listening and thinking in a reductive way. Over the course of our interaction as they shift into an expansive mode, insight becomes possible and they start listening in a way that is open to new solutions that had never occurred to them before. In a certain sense, the practitioner is opening up the client to be in a place of listening transformationally.
>
> Another way of looking at it is that transforma[tive] listening invites a shift in how the client is listening to themselves, where they move from a transactional level to the deeper level where transformation is possible.

6. The role of self as instrument. The sixth key finding of the study is that use of self is the foundation for listening in OD practitioners. Self as instrument is the common denominator to most actions taken during the listening process, as expressed by Participant 2: "The core of the issue is around use of self. When I sit with a client, my

intention is to be a particular kind of presence that enables them to have that transformational moment."

The literature describes awareness and management of oneself as use of self or self as instrument skills, which comprise a central competency in helping professions. OD practitioners naturally have their own internal and external reactions to communicative exchanges with clients, which, in turn, affect practitioner ability to be helpful (Jamieson et al., 2011). Participant 9 explained, "If I'm fully identified with my judgment and I'm not aware that I'm fully identified with it as my current filter and mode, that's where I can get in my own way."

Practitioner ability to access a full range of data from multiple levels depends on the use of self. Probing deeper into the phenomenological experience of their listening, many participants described a certain way of being or presence on their part. Described in the literature as "how we show up" (Jamieson et al., 2011), this presence helps create a container safe enough for clients to explore alternative ways of looking at their issues. As participant 11 clarified, "The ability to really step outside of yourself to be truly reflective to understand what's happening in the moment is rare; it's just uncommon, probably less than 10% of the population." Schein (1999) asserted that consultants' use of self as instrument-related abilities were necessary for building effective helping relationships in which clients could explore their own core issues. Results from the present study were largely supported by the literature. Particularly germane is the explanation offered by one participant who is a graduate-level professor of OD:

> What's critical here is the level of consciousness on the part of the practitioner or leader, because if I'm defaulting unconsciously into either one of those [listening] styles—if I have a default preference, which is typical and most of us do—then I'm likely to use an inappropriate listening mix. I'm likely to be mismatched between what the client needs and what I'm providing.

What's key is the level of individual consciousness. If I'm operating out of fear, then I'm probably going to default to something that's less appropriate. If I feel like my status is threatened, then I'll go to what I know, versus what the situation might call for.

7. Adaptive moderation and mix of listening approaches. The seventh key

finding of the study is that OD practitioners employ adaptive moderation to their choice

and mix of listening approaches. Use of self and activities or actions taken during the

listening process provide the sensitivity and agility required of transformative listening.

Participant 10 explained her experience:

Once you've gotten practice and experience, it becomes more intuitive and automatic, and you're simply observing the process and occasionally reflecting on how and when to shift the energy. Being aware and intentional in moving between empathetic, critical, expansive, and reductive listening is important.

From the literature, listening competency has previously been defined as

adaptation to situations in order to accomplish directed outcomes through communication

(Cooley & Roach, 1984). In the present investigation, transformative listening was found

to incorporate nearly all of the listening modalities examined: active, critical, empathetic,

reductive, expansive, and transactional. Effective OD practitioners must remain agile and

capable of adapting their listening approach to the emerging needs of each client,

situation, and coaching dynamic. The views of Participant 9 offered a refined

explanation:

The highest level of mastery in listening incorporates all the levels beneath it and covers all the different kinds of listening you're exploring in your research— active, critical and empathetic, reductive and expansive—but it does so in a way that is unconsciously competent. Here the listening is able to flow exactly where the client needs to go, and it doesn't hold one kind of listening as better than another. Mastery for me is intuitively knowing how and when to move to whatever listening is of highest service in support of the client in the moment.

Several participants perceived a polarity between seemingly opposite listening

modalities. The same participant above explained the adaptive listening agility needed to

move between expansive and reductive listening:

> There truly is a polarity between the expansive and reductive that is in play all the
> time, and as a practitioner, we're just working one side or the other of this
> polarity. There's a fluidity in the polarity. Conversation, listening, and human
> interaction by nature are not static, they can't be. So there's no inherent set point
> of tension in the polarity between expansive and reductive. In order for me to
> help, I have to be aware of how and when the conversation may need to shift back
> and forth within the polarity.

Being of highest service to the transformation of the client system appears to

require a greater degree of sensitivity, agility, neural integration, and use of self than may

be demanded of the more common and default listening used in the transaction of

everyday business. If listening is fundamentally a process of extraction (Treasure, 2011),

then different listening approaches extract different perspectives and conclusions, which

in turn produce different client interactions and, ultimately, different results. It can be

posited that above all, intuitively knowing how and when to moderate one's listening

may be one of the most important aspects of being an effective OD practitioner.

8. Transformation of perspective. A direct effect of the three primary listening

approaches may be described as a transformation of perspective, which Participant 1

described this way: "In a certain respect, it's the client's listening and thinking that is

transforming." Compared to the lesser use of secondary listening approaches, a majority

of practitioner time and attention is regularly dedicated to shifting how clients perceive

their own circumstances. According to study data, insight is the single, most common

effect of transformative listening. Client ability to reframe and hear their own situation in

a new way depends on trust in the helping relationship, validation of client experience,

and exploration of alternative perspectives. These outcomes directly link to active,

empathetic, and expansive listening. A contribution from Participant 9 squarely captures

this finding:

> I think of transformation as moving from one way of being to another, from one
> belief system to adopting another. It's not just putting a new process in place, it's
> being able to see the world through new eyes. By definition a transformation in
> perspective provides insight and solution where operating at a transactional level
> cannot.

As supported in the literature on brain-based coaching, Rock and Schwartz (2006)

used fMRI scans to validate insight as a defining outcome of effective coaching. The

experience of insight is characterized by a lack of logical progression to the solution but

instead a sudden "knowing" regarding the answer; the solution is simultaneously obvious

yet surprising, and is recognized with confidence when it arrives (Bowden et al., 2005).

Restated, insight is not accessed by the default critical and reductive listening orientations

used to solve problems and get things done in business. Results of the present study

reflect the literature, as further explained by Participant 9:

> Emotion drives behavioral change. All transformation has an emotional
> component to it—a somatic component to it as well—and these are felt in the
> body. What is felt generally is not associated with parts of the brain that are
> critical and reductive. So when my relationship with a client gets to the point
> where emotional and somatic aspects are present and it becomes highly personal,
> the opening that occurs is absolutely generated by empathetic listening.

The literature on brain-based coaching similarly portrays the *ah-ha!* moment of

insight as less logical and more visceral and emotional by nature, punctuated by aspects

of recognition, new mental or perceptual connections that had not been present before,

and a cognitive energetic release that is experienced as motivation, change readiness, and

an internal call to action (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). Participant 1 refines understanding:

> Usually, there's a shift in direction of a client's thinking, where two things get
> connected that had never been connected before; people experience this ah-ha!
> Drawing that relationship and making that connection feels like plugging in both
> ends of a power cord and getting the electrical spark that was needed to make the

transformation happen. Another important part is that the ah-ha resonates with such truth to a client that they can't help but pay attention to it. It's the ah-ha that leads them down the path of taking action to achieve the result that they want.

Perceptions in the present study directly align with how insight and transformation are portrayed in the literature. As Participant 1 alluded to, however, data from this study suggest that insight may be only part of the process. A contribution of this study is refined distinction in how coaches themselves experience client transformation. The second and equally significant part of the transformation process is presented in the final key finding of this investigation.

9. Transformation of behavior. The ninth and final key finding of this study reveals a dual nature to transformation itself. Key Finding 8 illustrated the essential role of insight in what was portrayed as a transformation of perspective. Data from the present investigation portrayed two primary effects of transformative listening, one centering on insight, and the second indicating a shift into action. Key Finding 9 is that lasting and effective client transformation depends on what may be called a transformation of behavior. This finding was clearly articulated by Participant 10:

> Insight feels like a metaphysical shift in reality, where an opening occurs or new possibility is seen that wasn't there before. Insights are very ephemeral, and if you don't help clients anchor them down, they lose them. Just knowing or thinking something doesn't turn into behavioral change, and without turning around and applying the insight to real life dynamics or circumstances, it won't stay powerful and meaningful to the client.
> Without action, an insight doesn't get embedded into one's nervous system so that they can use and access it over and over. It's where the rubber meets the road, so you always need to anchor the insight through a reductive process that has client apply the insight to their choice of what to do next.

Used with targeted intentionality, it is the secondary listening approaches—critical, reductive, and transactional—that anchor insight into behavior change through clarity, accountability in agreements, and execution of actions taken in between coaching

sessions. This illustrates a fundamental difference between executive coaching and psychotherapy. In therapeutic relationships, counselors strive to practice the suspension of judgment and goal orientation in order to prioritize emotional understanding (Rogers, 1961). In coaching relationships, however, OD practitioners must demonstrate empathy, yet remain grounded in the communicative norms and business objectives that align with increased effectiveness. A final contribution from Participant 9 drives this point home:

> For coaching and OD facilitation there's a polarity between the inquiry, the processing, the depth, and the soul . . . .and the linearity of execution. Empathetic listening and deepening the relationship has to happen first, and a coach intuitively needs to know when to radically alter the client relationship by taking it to a deeper level. Within this context, transformation is much more likely to occur on an individual emotional level than if we keep things at a logical, linear, or quantitative level. What's equally important though is for the practitioner or coach to know how to translate things to the language of the client and when to put structure in place in order to move to execution and action.

Implications for Listening Theory

As a relatively new area of scientific inquiry, listening theory is still in its adolescence. Empirical research can be trisected into three phases of development over the past 60 years: information processing, listening competence, and personal factors or biases. The literature is messy, incongruous, and multidisciplinary at best, drawing from communication, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and management (Bodie et al., 2008). This growing field of research is already a source of contention between listening scholars due to the complex and highly subjective nature of listening itself.

Embedded within the interview protocol of this project was a probe question inviting participants to share any unique listening modalities they might use in their practice. Responses did not generate usable themes germane to the three core research questions, and were not presented as results of this thesis. From select participant responses, however, an evocative theme emerges.

Participant 11 described her use of mindful listening, as "being fully present in the moment without judgment and without any intention of [the conversation] going a particular way." Participant 4 made a recommendation for appreciative listening: "Focusing on what a person is doing well helps them see that they can do it again." Participant 2 shared, "For me there's an aspect of holistic listening that goes beyond just the language. There's the body, the emotional layer, as well as the content; there are many layers of listening going on at the same time." Participant 10 added, "I sometimes support clients with generous listening to help them improve the quality of their relationships by improving the generosity of their listening."

Several observations may be made here. Some participants described their listening in terms of its process (mindful and holistic) and others in terms of its effect (appreciative and generous). The trend in listening research exploring personal factors or biases does little to explain differences in how listening is subjectively experienced (i.e., in terms of process versus effect). What is common to this collection of otherwise uncommon kinds of listening is that each squarely describes a clear intentionality to the focus of attention in the process. Listening is fundamentally a process of extraction (Treasure, 2011). That to which one gives intentional attention expands in awareness yet sharpens in discernment. As data of the present study revealed, listening is often experienced on some level by both the listener and the person being listened to. There is a simultaneity in the relationship between cause (intention) and effect (outcome) in listening; the two are virtually inextricable.

What starts to become evident as a potential contribution to listening theory is the causal and impactful nature of listening when practiced as the intersection of intention, attention, and extraction. Furthermore, what this offers to practitioners in the field of OD,

to leaders of organizations, and to members of the helping profession is a deeper understanding of the causal and generative nature of listening. Though undervalued and overlooked, the act of listening may indeed be one of the most subtle, accessible, and powerful interventions at our disposal.

Figure 1 presents a visual Model for Transformative Listening based on this study's key findings. OD practitioners regularly use three primary listening approaches (active, empathetic, and expansive listening) to drive insight and help clients transform their perspectives. Practitioners subsequently use two secondary listening approaches (critical and reductive listening) to anchor insight into action and help clients transform their behavior. Transformative listening describes the repeating process of inquiry that blends primary and secondary listening approaches and tends to transform client perspectives and behavior. Conversely, transactional listening describes a listening approach appropriate for the negotiation and execution of agreements in the transaction of routine business. Use of self fosters sensitivity to client needs and practitioner agility in blending the listening approaches used in transformative listening.

Implications for Managers, Leaders, and Organization Development Practitioners

The present study's findings have implications for OD practitioners and leaders. Effectiveness in transactional listening may be honed and developed when managers value this listening not only in terms of outcomes, but as a practice worthy of rigor at the levels of intention, attention, and extraction. Transactional listening is an excellent and appropriate tool for planning, managing, and getting things done in the operation of routine, day-to-day business. Critical and reductive listening orientations can benefit from judicious balance with their respective empathetic and expansive counterparts. It is

Three primary listening approaches (active, empathetic, and expansive) tend to drive client insight and result in **transformation of client perspective.**

Two secondary listening approaches (critical and reductive) tend to anchor client insight to action and result in **transformation of client behavior.**

Transformative Listening: The repeating process of inquiry blending primary and secondary listening approaches that result in transformation of client perspectives and client behavior.

Figure 1

A Model for Transformative Listening

important for managers and leaders to know the appropriate listening mix to best achieve business outcomes during routine operation in stable environments.

Leaders, however, cannot escape the constant of VUCA forces, which drive the demand for innovation and need for organizational change. In these contexts, applying transactional listening inappropriately may be as ineffective and unhelpful as applying inappropriate transactional leadership. Like practitioners of OD, leaders are agents of change. It is incumbent for them to know how and when to foster transformation in human systems, especially in the face of unstable, dynamic environments. Veterans in the field of OD who clearly understand the connection between listening and transformation can challenge themselves to refine and better distinguish transformative listening so that it may be effectively transferred as a capacity of value to the leaders and client systems they serve.

For practitioners of OD, a terse summary of recommendations includes almost exclusive use of active listening; passive listening is not recommended. Development of self as instrument is a critical component of listening that helps to remove bias, increase perceptiveness, and maintain the sensitivity needed to moderate one's listening in highest service to the client. Aiming attention and inquiry at the various listening modalities presented in this study will deepen understanding of how and when to use them, as well as the outcomes associated with each.

Limitations

Several limitations of the investigation should be acknowledged. First, this study utilized a small sample of participants (n = 11), and thus was exploratory in nature. The professional background of participants was limited to practitioners in the field of OD, so it is difficult to predict if study results are generalizable beyond the narrow setting of the research project. To validate study findings, a quantitative survey instrument could have been useful for accessing a wider and more professionally diverse sample. A follow-up survey could have also gathered additional relevant data, such as interviewee insights, learnings, and reflections on their experience of the interview process itself as an intervention.

Second, not all participants were familiar with the listening modalities as defined and used in this study. More time than expected was spent clarifying these definitions. The differences between various types of listening may not have been clear to some participants. For example, participant perceptions that critical listening supports an action orientation are not backed by the literature; this characteristic more commonly describes reductive listening. Though listening definitions had been emailed to participants and repeated verbally in the interview process, additional precautions could have been taken

to assure comprehension. The study could have also simplified definitions to layman's terms and included examples of common usage.

A third limitation of the study may have been the construct itself of listening dimensions. These were used to introduce pairs of related approaches, such as passive and active. Depicting these as opposites on a continuum may have inadvertently suggested a mutual exclusivity to their usage. In this way, findings around use of critical listening revealed an unpredicted insight for the investigator. Viewed and presented as a continuum between empathetic listening (free of evaluation) and critical listening (evaluative, yet lacking in empathy), one necessarily draws binary, either-or conclusions. As depicted in chapter 4 results, the unanimous regular use reported for empathetic listening could lead one to predict a predominant non-use of critical listening, however only one participant reported that they never or rarely use critical listening. What is unclear here is how this or other responses may have been affected by bias inherent in the construct and presentation chosen for the interview protocol.

Directions for Future Research

This study identified four areas of possible future research. A primary direction for research is to examine whether participant demographics such as age, gender, educational level, or ethnicity moderate listening capacity, skills, and preferred style. Examining these moderators would be helpful for more deeply understanding what traits and backgrounds may prepare helping professionals to be particularly gifted at engaging in transformative listening and who might need additional experiences and training to reach that level of listening competency. Appropriate training and education could then be developed accordingly.

Another suggestion for further investigation is conducting field research where coaching sessions are recorded, after which both consultant and clients are interviewed during playback sessions to gather impressions, experiences, and meaning making regarding the interaction. This approach could enable data collection from both practitioner and client perspectives in order to help control for self-report bias.

A third suggestion is to examine the role played by self awareness and use of self in different listening modalities, including potential practices that connect self as instrument to listening. Findings from such investigation could lead to best practices for consultants in continually developing their mastery of listening.

A fourth suggestion is to examine the mechanisms used by practitioners whereby they are able to simultaneously enact seemingly opposing styles of listening (e.g., critical and empathetic). Findings from such a study could illuminate how listening as a complex communication behavior may be more effectively taught or transferred to client systems.

Summary

The purpose of the current investigation was to explore the potential connection between listening and client transformation within the context of the client-consultant helping relationship. A qualitative descriptive research design was used and 11 experienced coaches and consultants were interviewed. An inductive approach to data analysis was used to determine themes. Participants reported using active listening almost exclusively, with regular use of empathetic, expansive, and transformative listening. Reductive, critical, and transactional listening were used regularly by fewer participants or only on occasion and with intention. Leading descriptors for how participants enacted listening was to do so with their whole bodies, to the whole person, at multiple levels.

They also described practicing presence and intention, as well as extending warmth, acceptance, and trust in the client's capability.

Outcomes of transformative listening included new insights for consultants and clients, as well as shifts in the consultant's manner of inquiry. Outcomes for the client also included enhanced capabilities such as listening, meaningful results and making new choices, a shift to a more generative, life-giving state, and enhanced trust in the coach.

Nine key findings were drawn from the results: (a) active listening is a fundamental characteristic present all listening approaches used by OD practitioners; (b) three primary listening approaches used regularly by consultants are active, empathetic, and expansive listening; (c) two secondary listening approaches used occasionally and with intention by consultants are critical and reductive listening; (d) transactional listening describes a listening approach appropriate for the negotiation and execution of agreements in the transaction of routine business, where clarity, structure, execution, and action demand critical and reductive listening orientations; (e) transformative listening is useful descriptor for OD practitioner listening that results in client transformation and may be defined as the repeating process of inquiry that blends primary and secondary listening approaches and tends to transform client perspectives and behavior; (f) use of self is the foundation for listening in OD practitioners and informs most activities or actions taken during the listening process; (g) adaptive moderation and mix of listening may be the consultant's highest service to the client; (h) the three primary listening approaches lead to transformation of client perspective; and (i) the two secondary listening approaches lead to transformation of client behavior.

Based on these findings, a model of transformative listening was offered. More research is recommended to examine whether participant demographics moderate listening approach and to further examine listening from multiple perspectives.

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Appendix: Interview Script

<u>**Demographics**</u>

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Years practicing in the field of OD:
4. Currently practicing or retired:
5. Total years in consulting/helping profession:

<u>**Warm-up Questions**</u>
6. Can you tell me about your work in the field of OD as it specifically relates to executive coaching and/or consulting engagements with small systems or in 1-on-1 engagements?

   Possible probe questions (if needed):
7. Describe your clientele. Is there a typical kind of client you serve in your practice?
8. What are the presenting problems for which clients seek your help?
9. What is your typical approach?

For the present study, we will focus on a particular aspect of your work, which is the way that you *listen* when you are working with clients in 1-on-1 or small systems engagements. This study explores the potential connection between practitioner listening and client transformation.

For the first half of the interview, I'd like to share three listening dimensions from the research literature to understand their potential application to the listening you use in client engagement. I'll define and approach each separately. I'm happy to repeat any definition at any time.

<u>**Passive versus Active Listening**</u>
Passive listening has been described as listening with passive attention and without interaction, commentary, or evaluation. Due to its lack of engagement, passive listening may be prone to distraction. It can be useful for information acquisition, however, such as when listening to lectures, reports, or instruction, where there is little participation in a co-created meaning.

Active listening has been described as listening with engaged, focused attention; it may include reflecting and summarizing a message to reduce misinterpretation. To one's communication partner, *active listening* may communicate message reception, a shared sense of understanding, and care for the speaker-listener relationship.

2. Please tell me about your use, if any, of passive and/or active listening in client engagement.

<u>Possible probe questions (if needed):</u>

A. What does it look/sound/feel like when you use these types of listening?
B. About what percentage of your time do you use these types of listening with clients?
C. In what ways, if any, are these types of listening connected to client insight or transformation? *Or more specifically,* in what ways, if any, is passive attention versus engaged, focused attention connected to client insight or transformation?

Critical versus Empathetic Listening

Critical listening has been described as listening with critical judgment for the purpose of discerning the quality, validity, or merit of information received. *Critical listening* prioritizes structure, order, and discipline in communication, independent of emotional context.

Empathetic listening has been described as listening without critical judgment; it may used for the purpose of having a communication partner feel emotionally understood. *Empathetic listening* may produce a sense of care, support, and validation of one's personal experience.

3. Please tell me about your use, if any, of critical and/or empathetic listening in client engagement.

Possible probe questions (if needed):
A. What does it look/sound/feel like when you use these types of listening?
B. About what percentage of your time do you use these types of listening with clients?
C. In what ways, if any, are these types of listening connected to client insight or transformation? *Or more specifically,* in what ways, if any, are critical judgment or empathy connected to client insight or transformation?

Reductive versus Expansive Listening

Reductive listening has been described as efficient, pragmatic, and destination-driven for the purpose of accomplishing task and attaining closure. *Reductive listening* prioritizes 'getting to the point' and may be useful in solving problems and/or achieving immediate outcomes.

Expansive listening has been described as curiosity-driven; it prioritizes reflection and the exploration of new ideas or different perspectives. *Expansive listening* is often associated with brainstorming and may be useful for inspiring creativity, innovation, or insight.

4. Please tell me about your use, if any, of reductive and/or expansive listening in client engagement.

Possible probe questions (if needed):
A. What does it look/sound/feel like when you use these types of listening?
B. About what percentage of your time do you use these types of listening with clients?

C. In what ways, if any, are these types of listening connected to client insight or transformation? *Or more specifically,* in what ways, if any, are communication efficiency or reflective exploration connected to client insight or transformation?

Other Types of Listening
5. What other types of listening do you use, if any, in client engagement?

Possible probe questions (if needed):
A. What does it look/sound/feel like when you use these types of listening?
B. About what percentage of your time do you use these types of listening with clients?
C. In what ways, if any, are these types of listening connected to client insight or transformation?

Now that we have discussed the three listening dimensions from the research literature, the second half of our interview will shift gears to introduce a potential way to explore listening. From research on leadership styles, we'll borrow the terms *transactional* and *transformational* to explore their potential application to the listening you use in client engagement.

Transactional Listening
Transactional listening may be described as listening for the purpose of transactional exchange. It may be useful in contracting expectations or in negotiating reward or penalty conditional upon the achievement of specific outcomes.

6. When you think about the listening used in the transaction of day-to-day routine business, how different or similar is it to the listening you use in client engagement?

Possible probe questions (if needed):
B. What does it look/sound/feel like when or if you use *transactional* listening?
C. What connections, if any, might you see between *transactional* listening and some of the presenting problems that clients seek coaching to work through? Or rather, is there any connection between listening (or the lack thereof) and the problems people face?
D. When or at what phase(s) might you use *transactional* listening, if at all, during the course of client engagement?
E. From the research literature, which types of listening, if any, might you associate with *transactional* listening from the three listening dimensions previously described: *passive* versus *active*, *critical* versus *empathetic*, and *reductive* versus *expansive* listening?

Transformative or Transformational Listening

7. When you think about the various types of listening we've discussed, how would you in your own words characterize *transformative* or *transformational* listening, meaning the kind of listening which results in client insight, change, and transformation?

Possible probe questions (if needed):
- A. What does it look/sound/feel like when you listen in this way?
- B. From the research literature, which types of listening, if any, might you associate with *transformative* or *transformational* listening from the three listening dimensions previously described: *passive* versus *active*, *critical* versus *empathetic*, and *reductive* versus *expansive* listening?
- C. What is the relationship, if any, between quality, kind, and caliber of listening and client insight or transformation?
- D. What differences, if any, do you experience *in yourself* when you listen in this way?
- E. What role, if any, does intentionality play in this kind of listening?
- F. What do you think is actually transforming here?
- G. What outcomes have you or your clients achieved as a result of this kind of listening?

8. People can often best speak to experience they have had for themselves. I'm curious if you have ever had your own experience of transformation or insight as a result of the way someone listened to you?

Possible probe questions (if needed):
- A. What did it look/sound/feel like when someone listened to you in this way?
- B. What was your experience of being on the receiving side of this kind of listening?
- C. From the research literature, which types of listening, if any, might you associate with the listening you experienced from the three listening dimensions previously described: *passive* versus *active*, *critical* versus *empathetic*, and *reductive* versus *expansive* listening?
- D. What changes or shifts, if any, did you experience *in yourself* when someone listened to you in this way?
- E. What was the impact on your own listening, if any, from being listened to in this way?
- F. What outcomes did you achieve as a result of experiencing this kind of listening?

9. What might be the potential impact(s) of OD practitioners understanding the connection between listening and insight or transformation?
Possible probe questions (if needed):
- A. What might be the potential impact of OD practitioners being able to adapt and modify the listening they use during client engagement?
- B. What might be the potential impact of OD practitioners modeling this skill and transferring it to their clients?
- C. What might be the potential impact of leaders experiencing and learning how to adapt and modify the listening they use with their teams and organizations?

D. From your perspective, what might be important to consider in exploring a *transactional* versus *transformational* model for listening?

<u>**Closing**</u>
10. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the topic of listening as it relates to transformation within the context of client-consultant engagement?

Thank you for your participation in my research project. I care about your contribution.

If I need to clarify data once I've reviewed the transcripts and integrated findings, I may reach back out to you for a short, targeted follow-up conversation.

And if you know any fellow practitioners for whom the exploration of *transformative listening* would resonate, please let me know.

Thank you again. Your time and contribution are valuable and have been very appreciated.

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[contact information]