Machines Don't Listen (But Neither Do People)
A Keynote Address prepared for the Interdisciplinary Workshop on Feedback Behaviors in Dialog

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Listening is the capacity to discern the underlying habitual character and attitudes of people with whom we communicate. It goes beyond perception and sensation of sound and is more than the mere comprehension of another's utterance (Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). At its best, listening brings about a sense of shared experience and mutual understanding through the co-creating of rules based on sharing of meaningful and conscientious dialogue (Bodie & Crick, 2012). As such, it is something humans do innately but not necessarily something we all do *well*. When we are "listened to" we experience a range of positive outcomes from feeling better about ourselves to improved immunological function and better psychological well-being (Bodie, 2012). When we feel misunderstood or otherwise ignored, however, our health and relationships suffer.

The importance of listening is something that we all know on an intuitive level. Perhaps that is why self-help gurus and academics alike hold a central place for listening in their advice for how to improve at a wide range of life tasks. Unfortunately, it is far easier to praise listening than to articulate a *clear* idea of just what listening *is* or to detail just what listeners *do* in order to be perceived as competent and to engender the myriad positive associated outcomes. Being a good listener is important to parenting, marital relationships, salesperson performance, customer satisfaction, and healthcare provision; and the list could go on. Good listeners can enhance others' ability to cope with and remember events; they are more liked and garner more trust than those less proficient; and they have higher academic achievement, better socio-emotional development, and a higher likelihood of upward mobility in the workplace (for review see Bodie, 2012). But what specific messages and behaviors lead to impressions of individuals as good listeners? This question has been largely ignored in the extant literature.

My colleagues and I have begun to answer this important question by building an empirical database of the attributes (what listening is) and behaviors (what listeners do) associated with effective listening in two contexts, initial interactions (Bodie et al., 2012; Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012) and supportive conversations (Bodie & Jones, in press; Bodie, Jones, & Vickery, 2012; Bodie, Vickery, & Gearhart, in press). This talk will outline those behaviors most important to perceiving others as "good" listeners in order to spur discussion about how to apply our work to contexts outside of interpersonal interaction and about the inherently interdisciplinary future of listening research. This talk will additionally posit that although research is underway by several to create "humanlike" machines, machines do not and never will, in fact, "listen."

References:

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Bodie, G. D., Worthington, D. L., Imhof, M., & Cooper, L. (2008). What would a unified field of listening look like? A proposal linking past perspectives and future endeavors. *International Journal of Listening, 22*, 103-122. doi: 10.1080/10904010802174867