



A Discursive Approach to Young Adult Romantic Couples Use of Active Listening to Manage Conflict During Natural Everyday Conversations

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ABSTRACT

The present study uses a discursive psychological approach to examine naturally occurring bids at active listening as they arise spontaneously in the everyday interactions between young adult couples. To date, there is scant research examining in microanalytic detail how active listening works as it spontaneously emerges in everyday natural troubles-talk contexts between romantic partners. Five discursive methods for engaging in active listening are identified: 1) the use of psychological attributions, 2) judgmental questions, 3) subtle reframes, 4) story-topping, and 5) minimal recycles. The findings reveal that active listening is less about simply reflecting what one is hearing in neutral, open, and/or nonjudgmental ways, but is mostly about managing accountability, blame/attribution, identities, and perceived relational symmetries and asymmetries. The findings offer a new and exciting perspective for researchers interested in understanding how active listening spontaneously emerges and how couples use it in everyday natural relational contexts.

Introduction

In communication studies and psychoeducational therapeutic contexts, active listening (also called active-empathic listening, reflective listening, dialogic listening, etc.) has for decades received widespread attention and has been generally lauded as a valuable relational skill across a range of interpersonal contexts. Active listening involves various communicative elements that may include signaling involvement and interest through nonverbal back channeling cues (McNaughton et al., 2007), nonjudgmental paraphrasing of the speakers feelings or message (Garland, 1981; Levitt, 2001), and asking questions that encourage elaboration of feelings and thoughts (Paukert et al., 2004). Active listening responses are believed to be valuable for communicating empathy and unconditional regard (see Gordon, 1975; Orlov, 1992; Rogers, 1951) toward the other's experience, thus building trust and intimacy (Lester, 2002). Generally, active listening is either examined experimentally (as a variable that gets correlated with relational outcomes), analyzed via retrospective self-reports of it, or implemented as part of a therapeutic intervention. In contrast, the present study uses a discourse analytic approach to examine attempts at active listening as it arises spontaneously and organically in the everyday natural conversational interactions between young adult couples.

Over the last several decades, the bulk of research on active listening generally either touts its relational benefits across a range of occupational and therapeutic fields or debates its usefulness for enhancing relational satisfaction and stymieing conflict as compared to other types of listening responses and/or forms of engagement (for overviews, see Adler & Proctor, 2011; Weger et al., 2014). Research has shown active listening to be an advantageous skill in the medical field (Bryant,

2009), leadership training (Hoppe, 2007), social work (Rogers & Welch, 2009), and sales (Boe, 2008), to name a few. Active listening is generally positively correlated with positive interactional outcomes, like uncertainty reduction, informational management, comprehension and retention, increased positive affect, trust, attraction, and warmth toward the other (see Drollinger et al., 2006; Janusik, 2007; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997; Weger et al., 2010). Yet, despite this, little empirical evidence exists to support the idea that active listening *causes* more positive interactions or is any more advantageous than other types of listening (see Weger et al., 2014). Gottman and Silver (1999) observed that “positive affect” toward the other was more predictive of relational happiness than active listening in older more established couples.

Research has, however, shown some benefits of active listening in *early* or *initial* romantic partnerships, particularly in the context of troubles-talk (see Jones & Joyer, 2020; Kuhn et al., 2018; Pasupathi et al., 1999; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). In early romantic partnerships, active listening during conflict talk has been shown to be related to lower reactivity, anger, and hostility and a more positive overall feeling toward the other (see Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Again, these findings come largely through self-report and experimental design. Although the present study is not focused on entering the debates surrounding the benefits for or against active listening in general, it does take its cue from research on the positive that role active listening may play in young/early romantic partnerships, particularly during conflict, and examines the function of active listening in the often unexamined arena of natural everyday conversations. The present study looks at how spontaneous and organic moments of active listening are attempted in various ways by burgeoning romantic partners and how they are taken up and oriented to and thus made relevant (or not) in the flow of talk about everyday conflicts.

It is important to note that attempts at active listening in natural/organic social interactions are likely to look quite different from the scripted versions of active listening that we are accustomed to finding in the clinical or psychoeducational contexts, where there are often more formal reframe prefaces (e.g., “what I hear you saying is . . .”) or formal acknowledgments of receipt followed by requests for elaboration (e.g., “I hear that you are upset. Can you explain why a bit more?”). For the present study, active listening is defined as “any response where the listener attempts to signal that/how they have heard the feelings or position of the speaker.” In natural conversations that occur on the fly, bids at active listening are likely to appear quickly and without formal or scripted setups or prefaces. To date, there is scant research examining in microanalytic detail how attempts at active listening naturally arise and function in everyday unscripted troubles-talk contexts between romantic partners. The purpose of this study is to examine how attempts at active listening function relationally as they spontaneously emerge in everyday natural troubles-talk contexts between romantic partners.

A Discursive Psychological Approach to Active Listening

Discursive psychology (DP) has provided a very subtle and analytically descriptive account of human subjectivity, relationships, and social interaction (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2017; Potter, 1996). DP approaches subjectivity and relationality not through self-report, but by examining how speakers construct and respond in live social interactional spaces to their own and other’s feelings, dispositions, and mental states and tie them to descriptions and assessments of what they take the world (or the other) to be like. A DP approach does not treat talk about feelings or dispositions as reflections of an inner psychological or mental world, but rather treats them as social and interactional resources that speakers use to tend to the business of producing an identity or being in a relationship.

In the case of the present data on couples attempts to engage in active listening in the context of troubles talk, the bids at active listening are often an interactional consequence of the couple talking about their often differing “feelings” about something that has happened (which generates the conflict), i.e., discrepant feelings about the other person, about what happened, how they expected the other person to react or not, and so on (see Edwards, 1995). Active listening, then, from a DP perspective is an interactional move used to manage, facilitate, or orient to the other’s feelings. In DP, attempts at active listening are not taken as a capacity or feature of the person’s inner psychological dispositional world,

but instead are analyzed as interactional resources used to manage some bit of relational business presently relevant for the speakers. Talk about feelings often manages accountability or blame (Edwards, 1995), as it rhetorically positions actions, reactions, dispositions, and motives in emotionally laden descriptions of people and their conduct. By extension, active listening is not simply showing the extent to which a speaker cares (or does not) about the other; nor is it simply a way of revealing listening capacities or one's disposition toward the other. It is more than that. Active listening is itself a discursive action or a way of taking a position *rhetorically*, thus engaging in accountability.

A rhetorical approach to active listening is concerned with identifying the persuasively and argumentative organization of talk (Billig, 1987). Potter (1996) notes that there is an “offensive” and “defensive” rhetorical nature to the ways assessments and descriptions are built in conversational interaction, an idea highly resonant for a discursive approach to moments of active listening in conflict talk. Active listening may work in a rhetorically *offensive* way in so far as it undermines alternative positions and it works *defensively* in so far as it has the capacity to resist or deflect potential challenges or counters. Since active listening to other's feelings during conflict talk is delicate, it will likely encompass a variety of rhetorical functions (both offensively and defensively) to subtly make claims that are well-fitted or not easily assailable.

As such, the kind of interactional work brought off during moments of active listening in argumentative contexts between intimates is clearly a matter of accountability (see Edwards & Potter, 2017), e.g., subtly challenging the other's feelings, carefully delivering and deflecting blame, constructing veracity, and owning epistemic rights, as well as handling the sensitive issues surrounding being liked/loved by one's partner. Accountability in DP highlights the ways versions of events are constructed to imply responsibility. When versions or descriptions are offered, they are responded to in specific ways (like active listening) that manage the delicate issues of blame and mitigation (Edwards, 1995; Edwards & Potter, 2017). In DP, attention is given to the ways speakers assign (and deflect) responsibility, meaning that the ways speakers take up and respond to descriptions are generally likely to have an inferential relationship to the actions and agency of the speaker. Within cases of active listening in argumentative contexts, issues of accountability are thus likely to be central. Examining how active listening manages accountability during delicate interactional moments is one of the key benefits of a discursive approach.

Data and Participants

The current project is part of a larger series of studies interested in intimacy, identity, and romantic attraction in emerging adults (see Korobov, 2011a, 2011b, 2017, 2018, 2020; Korobov & Laplante, 2013). Young adult couples (ages 19–26) were recruited from a large university in the Southeast USA through word of mouth, posters, and e-mails. To be eligible to participate, all couples had to report being in a committed romantic relationship for at least 6 months. Although the study was open to both heterosexual and homosexual couples, all the couples that agreed to participate were heterosexual. The resulting participant pool was thus composed of 20 heterosexual young adult romantic couples (40 participants) from the university and the local community. The participants self-identified as “White” (22), “Black” (17), and “Hispanic” (1). The study received IRB approval. Proper ethical guidelines were adhered to including the provision of pseudonyms for all participants.

The aim was to procure data from natural settings rather than researcher-moderated interviews or questionnaires. Participants were told that they would be participating in a study interested in the conversations that take place between young adult couples in the spaces of their everyday home lives. Each couple was given a digital audio recorder to take home for 2 weeks with the instruction to simply turn the recorder on whenever they were hanging out (i.e., eating meals, driving in the car, taking a walk, cuddling, watching TV, cooking, etc). At the end of the two weeks, the digital recorders were returned, and the participants were paid \$25. In sum, each couple produced an average of approximately 7 hours of recorded conversational interaction, for a total of approximately 140 hours of conversational data.

Although the conversations took place in the couple's natural everyday settings, the participants did have to self-select about when to turn the audio recorders on and tend to them somewhat. That said, the participants rarely oriented to or made mention of the audio recorders, nor did any participants self-censor or display discomfort about being recorded. Their conversations had a very natural rhythm and feel to them, which is not surprising given the fact that young adults are now, more than ever, thought of as an increasingly confessional generation of young adults accustomed to recording and presenting their relationships and identities on camera across an array of social media outlets with regularity and ease (see Nosko et al., 2010). Social scientists have further noted that arguments and verbal tiffs are normalized as parts of candid self-presentations, which are often edgy and provocative (Chiou, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Weisbuch et al., 2009). As such, the natural interactional contexts used in this study, as well as this developmental age of young adulthood, may be apropos for capturing the kind of troubles talk where active listening might occur and be relevant.

The data presented here focus specifically on moments where the couples attempted active listening during arguments and conflict. Analysis began by culling from the data set all stretches of interaction that included argumentative/conflictual exchanges. Coders were the first author and two graduate students. To achieve an acceptable rate of agreement, only segments that included arguments that were over 20 seconds in length were included. The reliability of the initial parsing of argument segments was 88% agreement. In sum, 79 segments of argumentative exchanges were reliably identified and extracted. These segments were then analyzed for the presence of any attempts at active listening from either of the speakers. As noted above, active listening was defined "any response where the listener attempts to signal that/how they have heard the feelings or position of the speaker." In sum, 46 distinct segments of active listening were identified.

Coding then proceeded to subdivide attempts at active listening into functional types, which describe the main discursive activity being carried out vis-à-vis the active listening. These types constitute the structure of the below analysis. They offer deeper insight into how the active listening is being used to manage broader interactional issues between the speakers. Five distinct types were identified. These types are 1) *Psychological Attributions* – where the listener reflects back the speaker's position by speculating about what might be psychologically causing the speaker feelings; 2) *Judgmental Questioning* – where the listener displays uptake of the speakers position by directly questioning it, where the questions were seldom open-ended questions that seek expansion but rather were direct questions that pinpoint or challenge a particular aspect of the speakers position; 3) *Subtle Reframes* – where the listener's reflection back is a subtle reframing of the speaker's feelings or position; 4) *Story-topping* – where the listener's way of displaying active uptake is to launch their own similar story; and 5) *Minimal recycles followed by full-stops* – where the listener responds with a verbatim repetition of some select portion of the listener's position and then says nothing more. These 5 types are the focus for the current study, and select illustrative excerpts from each category are presented according to a light version of Jefferson's (2004) transcription conventions (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Analysis

Psychological attributions

In these first two excerpts, the listener engages in active listening but does so by reflecting what they take to be the underlying psychological motivations that are causing their partner's feelings. Note the effect this has on the way accountability is constructed around the problems being discussed. In this first excerpt, F is upset that her mother takes so long to return her phone calls. M's attempt to actively listen to F's frustration involves him making psychological attributions about her and her mom.

(1) (LR)

- 1 F: she isn't gonna call back (.) never fuckin does.
 2 M: mmmhmm (.) right yeah.
 3 F: n' I always do (.) I say PLEASE call me the fuck
 4 back (.) never does (.) or does like a week later
 5 er' somethin.
 6 M: hhhahhaa she's like a millennial (ha).
 7 F: it's not funny.
 8 M: okhhahy (hh).
 9 F: I ask Michael does she call you back like 9 years
 10 later or what n' he's all uh:: no she calls me
 11 right back (.) fucking hurts my feelings.
 12 M: babe I know (.) maybe it ain't intentional by her and
 13 that she just knows he's needy n' your independent?
 14 F: wuh:? uh(huh) (.) no dude what the fuck.
 15 M: I mean I feel ya (.) jus' don't be jealous of him.
 16 F: jealous? uhhh (.) are you serious? Jesus.
 17 (3.0)
 18 F: that's a shitty thing to say.
 19 M: I'm trying (.) am I wrong maybe you can't see it.
 20 F: whatever (.) this is pointless (.) jus' nevermind.

F opens by noting the problem (her mom “never” returns her phone calls). Initially, M responds with simple response tokens and affirmations of agreement that display alignment (line 2). The result is topic expansion. F continues her elaboration of the issue (lines 3–5). In line 6, M continues to display that he is listening, but he makes a conjecture that is laced with laughter that is designed to be funny because it plays off of a cultural stereotype about millennials as people who never return phone calls. Note the effect this has. It is met with rejection by F (line 7), thus threatening the extent to which M and F can pursue connection amidst troubles talk, it signals a playful tease rather than straightforward support, and it temporarily stymies her topic expansion and instead invites her to take it up her issue as something to laugh about.

Nevertheless, F regains her footing (lines 9–11) and continues topic expansion by noting that her mom calls her brother (Michael) back promptly and that this hurts her feelings. M's reply (line 12) comes in two parts; first, he displays intersubjective affiliative support (“babe I know”). But then, he speculates that her mom's dismissiveness may not be intentional but may be the result of F's independence (as compared to her brother's neediness). M attempts to make sense of the situation by pointing to a psychological attribute of F to account for her mom's hurtful behavior. F immediately rejects this (line 14) by displaying confusion and the idiomatic expression “what the fuck,” which treats M's conjecture as absurd and potentially offensive. M then responds with another two-part turn, beginning first with another intersubjective nod of support in line 15 (“I mean I feel ya”), but then yet again lapses back into psychological attributions by advising her not to be “jealous” of her brother. This again situates accountability on F. M has positioned F as both too independent and now jealous. It is at this point that any affective alignment between the two collapses. F launches a two-part (lines 16 and 18) rejection and remonstrance of M's conjecture that is separated by 3 full seconds of pronounced silence. In line 19, M again constructs the two-part active listening response, where he begins with a nod toward alignment (“I'm trying”) that underscores his own effort and then yet again offers psychological speculation (“maybe you can't see it”) that situates accountability back on F. F rejects this yet again and calls the conversation “pointless.”

As is the case with all of the excerpts that follow, while there were always moments where the listener displays brief active listening turn-initial openers (i.e., M's initial positions in lines 12, 15, and 19), the ways that the listener actively listens almost always become more inferentially elaborative as

a means of taking up and making sense of the speaker's position. In this first excerpt, M offers psychological attributions of F that implicitly account for F's issues, which circumvent topic expansion and escalate disaffiliation with F. In this next excerpt, F engages in psychological attributions as a way of actively listening to and taking up M's concern about a male rival.

(2) (GT)

- 1 F: game starts at 7 I dunno (.) I think? Why?
 2 M: ain't nobody gonna be there that early.
 3 F: well we going then (.) Cece b'here at 6:30.
 4 M: n' who else?
 5 F: huh? (.) wha[you
 6 M: [who else?
 7 F: I dunno (.) the usual.
 8 M: Sean.
 9 F: no:: why?
 10 M: *mmhmm*::=
 11 F: baby are you upset (.) you know me I ain't=
 12 M: =yeh I know you (.) I know him too.
 13 F: but baby you know ME (.) look at me look at me.
 14 M: *mmhmm*.
 15 F: it ain't nothing (.) you gon' making shit up in yo'
 16 head n'getting worked fur'nothing.
 17 M: nothing? huh(haha) *oh:kay* *mmhm*.
 18 F: dis jus your insecurities ain't nothing bout reality.
 19 M: yeah ok we will see I got eyes there.
 20 F: that is weak shit bruh come'on.
 21 M: you do you.
 22 F: I will (.) I will n' you figure that shit out.
 23 ((shuffling noises, M moving away from microphone))
 24 M: gon' call bout that pizza (.) taking forever.

By line 8 in this excerpt, it becomes clear that M is concerned that another man (Sean) will be part of the group going to the game with his girlfriend. M displays some minimal response tokens (lines 10 and 14) that potentially display skepticism about the situation, while F attempts to intuit what he is feeling ("baby are you upset") and also reassure him (see lines 11 and 13) that he can trust her. However, beginning in line 15, note the shift in the way she orients to hear his concern. In lines 15–16, F orients to M as someone who is delusional for no reason, thus making M accountable for his own discomfort. As expected, M rejects this (line 17) through recycling and thus challenging key phrases, laughed through, and tongue-in-cheek exaggerated agreement, which renders F's interpretation as absurd. F again (line 18) hears M as "just insecure" and out of touch with reality, which again cements the responsibility on M. In line 20, F calls it "weak shit," while M continues to reject her psychological attributions. As expected, the interaction becomes adversarial and eventually, there is a topic shift. F's move to treat M's concerns as being motivated by underlying and unfounded psychological insecurities was met with strong resistance and triggered interactive trouble and a nonaffiliative outcome. What is clear in these first two excerpts is that in natural everyday troubles talk, speakers rarely simply show the speaker *that* they hear them. They often also show *how* they are hearing the problem and, in so doing, they account for it by constructing attributions about it.

Judgmental questioning

In the psychoeducational literature on active listening, asking open-ended nonjudgmental questions, which display curiosity and acceptance and encourage elaboration of one's feelings and topic expansion, are often touted as healthy interactive moves (Paukert et al., 2004). In the present data, the listener often asked clarifying questions, which encouraged elaboration of the speaker's feelings as well as topic expansion.

However, the questions were almost always oriented to as if they were judgmental and challenging, rather than open and accepting. In this next excerpt, F expresses that she is uncomfortable with M taking a new job. M questions why she is uncomfortable but does so in a way that leads to disaffiliation.

(3) (TC)

- 1 M: the position starts February (.) it's gon'b a lot
 2 I dunno maybe four times a'week t'start.
 3 F: oh: I um: (.) I feel uncomfortable with that.
 4 M: uh::: why?
 5 F: why? really? cause I do.
 6 M: ok I hear ya but (.) can ya say (.) like what's
 7 the big deal?
 8 F: you gon' be gone way more.
 9 M: ok right (.) why's that the end of the world?
 10 F: OH I DUNNO (.) guess it isn't.
 ((long silence; various sounds of them moving))

In line 2, F delicately hedges into stating her feelings about M's new potential job. She signals surprise ("oh:") and then hedges ("I um:") and then pauses before going on to record with her feelings. This mitigates the appearance of having a preorchestrated reaction. Rather, her feelings appear natural and spontaneous and thus unguarded. M's elongated emphatic "uh:::" followed by a bald-faced "why" with a questioning rising intonation is colloquially hearable as an expression of disapproving confusion, and it is taken up and reacted to in that way by F in line 5 as she recycles "why" (which defensively questions his questioning), expresses surprise ("really?") that he would ask, and then restates her position without explanation ("cause I do"), which positions her feelings as the kind of obvious response that does not need explanation.

It is at this point that the interaction is clearly becoming contentious, and M orients to this at the opening of his turn in line 6 as he actively listens to her and thus softens his challenge with "ok I hear ya." But he undoes that with a "but" and returns to asking her to say more about her feelings, but judgmentally constructs her feelings as a "big deal," which makes her feelings the problem, not what he is doing. Again, issues of accountability are seemingly always at stake during moments of active listening. After she states what the issue is for her (line 8), he initially agrees (a move that signals he hears her and encourages topic expansion), but then quickly follows with a judgmental question designed as an idiomatic caricature ("why's that the end of the world?") that positions her feelings as overly sensitive and perhaps unwarranted. In line 10, she not surprisingly erupts with defensive sarcasm.

This next excerpt begins as a kind of playful repartee where M is trying to steal her fries. The tone shifts in line 3 as F asserts that she is "serious," but M persists creating a conflict.

(4) (BN)

- 1 F: dude do not touch em (.) I SWEAR TO GOD Ima
 2 beat yo'ass if you grab an[other
 3 M: [hahahha JUS'lemme get
 4 that last one(hhhaa).
 5 F: SERIOUSLY stop this is my dinner I gotta go soon.
 6 M: jus a couple(hahaha) mor(hhaha) n'here this one small.
 7 F: ok now I'm not pissed (.) f'real what da fuck.
 8 M: over fries? what?
 9 F: no it's (.) YEAH FRIES (.) over fries (.) JESUS.
 10 ((4.0))
 11 M: this about 3 fries? baby fries?
 12 F: NO it's about my dinner (.) don't matter what it is
 13 or how much (.) it's about jus'takin my shit.
 14 M: 3 fries? that's YOUR shit we be talkin' bout? 3 fries.
 15 F: you ain't listening.
 16 M: no I am (.) you mad bout 3 fries (.) your shit here
 17 is 3 fries (.) righhh(ahh)t?
 18 F: I'm leaving (.) bye.

By the end of line 7, F is “pissed” at M for taking her fries. M’s first attempt to take up F’s feelings comes as a question in line 8. But note the way his question reduces the scope of F’s upset (“over fries”) and then tags it with a display of uncertainty (“what?”). F’s turn initial reply is to reject his question (“no it’s”), but then she quickly pivots and sarcastically recycles his question with exaggerated intonation, which orients to it as not just untrue but absurd before punctuating her caricature of his question with “JESUS.” Her sarcastic rejoinder is rhetorically important. A flat “no” response would signal she takes his question seriously, which she does not. Her response rhetorically positions his seemingly open-ended question as designed to expose and trivialize her feelings rather than openly seeking to understand them.

A full four second pause follows before M yet again returns with another very similar line of questioning that reduces her feelings to being about “3 baby fries.” His question engages in accountability work yet again, as it positions her feelings as over the top since they are ostensibly about something as trivial as three baby fries. Although she explains (lines 12 and 13) that this is not about fries, but about respecting what is hers, M again (line 14) uses a question not to proffer elaboration of her feelings but to rhetorically refocus the argument on the content of what she is asking him to respect, which is “3 fries.” Again, in lines 16 and 17, while he assures her that he is listening, he uses judgmental questioning to ask yet again, this time with a laughed through delivery, if it is true that she is upset because the “shit” he took from her is “3 fries.” His questions not only evade the spirit of F’s position (that she feels violated), but also they rhetorically situate accountability on her for being upset over something trivial. It is no surprise that the interaction remains adversarial and the conflict goes unresolved.

Subtle reframes

In this next excerpt, F wants M to watch a show that has a “psycho dude” character in it that reminds her of her previous boyfriend, “the narcissist.” She notes that seeing this character brings back bad memories of how he would negatively impact her, and she wants M to understand how this negatively affected her. As she explains this in lines 1–11, M offers minimal response tokens (lines 3, 6, and 9) to show he is listening, which allows topic expansion. But then in line 12, M subtly reframes the way he hears her description of this type of guy, which leads to interactive trouble.

(5) (RE)

- 1 M: wha'was that show (.) what channel?
 2 F: it's in the queue but you gotta start it from beginning.
 3 M: kkay(hh).
 4 F: this is the show that had what I was talking to you'bout
 5 with psycho dude who was like my ex (.) the narcissist.
 6 M: oh (.) yeah.
 7 F: brings back so: much bad stuff (.) how he would fuck with me
 8 n' how hard I had to fight to stay sane (.) you know?
 9 M: yeah tha=
 10 F: =something I jus'wanted you to get bout how tripped up I
 11 got (.) or triggered is the word (.) I guess.
 12 M: yeah baby I know (.) those guys are just like super
 13 fucking intelligent about it (.) mental ninjas.
 14 F: well::
 15 M: you ever see 'In the Company of Men' (.) the character
 16 played by that guy from the Batman (.) Aaron Eckhart?
 17 F: maybe I dunno.
 18 M: yeah dude was like that (.) insanely smart and methodogical.
 19 F: well I feel it's a sickness.
 20 M: oh yeah (.) they prey on the weak n' vulnerable.
 21 F: I wasn't either of those fucker so:: yeah (.) just leave it
 22 here put this show on.

In line 12, M begins with agreement (“yeah”), a term of endearment (“baby”) and a display of understanding (“I know”), but in the second part of his turn, he subtly reframes the characterization she has offered of her ex-boyfriend. M characterizes this type of person as “super fucking intelligent” and “mental ninjas,” descriptions that sound potentially complimentary. F responds with an exaggerated turn-initial contrastive “well:” in line 14, which signals marked disagreement. Across lines 15, 16, and 18, M again subtly reframes F’s position on her ex by euphemistically referring to this type of person as “insanely smart and methodological.” In line 19, F begins again with the turn-initial contrastive “well” to signal disagreement as she uses feelings talk to call it a “sickness.” M takes this up with a turn-initial “oh yeah” in line 20 to signal alignment, but again follows this with an uncharitable read that positions the targets of these types as “weak” and “vulnerable,” which indirectly positions F in negative terms, which is hearable as a subtle reframing of her self-characterization in line 8 as someone who had to “fight hard to stay sane.” M’s subtle reframes position F as potentially accountable to some degree for the suffering she endured. The interaction becomes markedly adversarial in the final turn as F flatly rejects his implied characterizations of her, calls him a “fucker,” and redirects the conversation. M’s use of subtle reframes to actively listen to F’s experience utterly fails to promote affiliation.

(6) (JO)

- 1 M: oh by the way Dan isn’t coming do not invite him.
 2 F: ok (.) what happened?
 3 M: he can’t anyway but still like don’t invite him (.) I don’t
 4 want him thinking he can (.) you know.
 5 F: ohkay
 6 M: cause the Liz thing (.) that still ain’t right by me.
 7 F: with Jon?
 8 M: Jon’s my boy n’it still ain’t right like I introduced them n’
 9 he went for that n’he knew he (.) like that ain’t (.) yah’no.
 10 F: so you’re upset with Dan now?
 11 M: for now (.) yeah (.) he needs to know.
 12 F: sovereignty wars (.) as my dad would call it.
 13 M: wha?
 14 F: a power war with ya’ll (.) ego (.) respect.
 15 M: he fuckin(hhha) straight(hha)t up moved on Liz like
 16 right away.
 17 F: moved on his ex (.) Liz ain’t his property=
 18 M: =ohk(ha) ohkhkhah yeahhaaha.
 19 F: but isn’t that (.) you mad cause you feel Liz still belongs
 20 to Jon n’ so Dan somehow violating Jon’s rights to her?
 21 M: nope (.) ain’t it all.
 22 F: oh:kay (.) mmhhmm.
 23 M: jus’ leave it (.) are the keys in the car still?

In lines 1–11, M tells F not to invite Dan (a friend of M’s) to an upcoming gathering because Dan has romantically shown interest in one of M’s male friend’s (Jon) ex-girlfriends (Liz). This move by Dan “ain’t right” by M. F listens by offering minimal agreement tokens (lines 2, 5) and asks open-ended questions (lines 2, 7, and 10) that encourage topic expansion. During this time, the two seem aligned. However, in line 12, F subtly reframes what she hears M’s issue to be. She refers to it as “sovereignty wars” or a power war between M and Dan rooted in “ego” and “respect.” This subtly shifts accountability to *both* M and Dan for the problem, rather than it being only Dan’s fault. M quickly orients to this as a challenge and immediately goes defensive in lines 15 and 16 in using profanity and laughter to emphasize the absurdity of F’s characterization and to place the blame squarely back on Dan for moving way too fast on Liz, which by extension, justifies M’s upset with Dan.

In line 17, F then recycles the phrase “moved on” to emphasize that she hears and agrees with Dan’s behavior, but subtly reframes “Liz” to “his ex,” and notes that as an “ex,” Liz is not Dan’s “property.” Even F’s reframing of “ex” to “property” does important rhetorical work. It is designed as a tongue-in-cheek characterization of Liz meant to indirectly underscore how Liz is being portrayed in this story, i.e., the extended rights that M feels Jon has over Liz post-break up only make sense if we see Liz as a kind of property that Jon has rights to for a certain period of time post-break up. M receipt in line 18 is designed as a sarcastic agreement laced with laughter and exaggeration. In lines 19 and 20, F straightforwardly spells out how she hears the issue. She makes her reframing of the issue crystal clear. However, even before lines 19 and 20, M and F are disaffiliated, and F’s move here is not surprisingly flatly rejected by M in line 21 and the interaction from there only further crumbles. M asks that they just drop it (line 23), and he changes the topic.

Story-topping

This next excerpt is an example of one of the more common discursive methods for displaying active listening. Listeners would often springboard off a speaker’s story into their own similar story. In this next excerpt, M is talking about being distracted in class by fellow classmates and how this perhaps accounts for why he is starting to struggle in his courses. Note how and when F engages and how that engagement shifts the conversation.

(7) (AS)

- 1 M: she was explaining the hierarchy of needs n’t his girl next
 2 to me’s phone keeps making this sound n’I’m like what (.)
 3 like looking around n’shit n’ others are too (.) right (.)
 4 n’even the teacher is you can tell kinda hearing it too (.)
 5 n’I can’t focus worth shit as it is (.) n’old boy next to me
 6 is playing a video game on his open screen (.) it’s just a
 7 nightmare n’ I’m like where’s my fucki(hh)ng Adderall(hha)=
 8 F: =oh(hha) my god that’s the worst.
 9 M: n’ I’m like no wonder I’m starting to struggle some.
 10 F: yeah (.) that makes sense my god.
 11 M: like the prof[essor didn’t even do.
 12 F: [I was in my bio class and there’s these 2 guys
 13 who literally sit in the front and never stop talkin (.)
 14 nobody else gets a word in and the professor never finishes
 15 the lecture half the time cause he gets sidetracked n’ like
 16 um:: HELLO some of us have questions and aren’t learning.
 17 M: in our [so t(hh).
 18 F: n’I’m f[ailing in there (.) very bad (.) and in management
 19 class there’s way too many people and she is the worst at
 20 managing discussion leaders and we learn absolutely nothing.
 21 ((3.0))
 22 F: hey we are stopping here to eat or what?

From lines 1–11, M sets the stage by sharing his story and contextualizing it as a reason for why he is starting to struggle in his classes. F’s active listening (lines 8 and 10) is prototypical, as she agrees in both affect (she laughs with him, agrees, and amplifies his emotional position with phrases like “that’s the worst” and “my god”). But then, in line 12, she interrupts his elaboration and launches her own story that parallels his story but ups the ante in a significant way. Not only is her story about being distracted by other students, but also she notes that she is “failing” “very bad” and learning “absolutely nothing,” formulations that essentially top the gravity of M’s story and make her’s seem worse and, by extension, potentially weaken his attempt to account for his struggles by blaming it on other distracting students. She even cuts him off at lines 17 and 18 and turns to press this point across. To be fair, it would be an interpretive overreach to call this an intentional act of sabotage by F, since it is so

common in the corpus and seemingly innocuous in its design, but it is nevertheless prevalent, and its effect is quite predictable in the way it stymies both elaboration and accountability. In this excerpt, a noticeable 3-second pause follows F's story-topping. Rather than trying to pick his own story back up or ask F for details (since she has just derailed his own), M says nothing. F then shifts the conversation in line 22. Her story topping move has failed to solicit elaboration or affiliation from M.

Minimal recycles followed by full stops

This last method for attempts at active listening is interesting because on the surface, it most closely resembles the kind of prototypical repeating back or paraphrasing of the speaker's feelings or message that often signals alignment and encourages topic expansion. However, as is clear in the excerpt below, the paralinguistic cues that accompany such recycles matter enormously, as does the environment in which it occurs. Simple repeats or paraphrases of the speaker's position may work to help facilitate the building of the speaker's position. However, a simple one-off recycling by the listener of something the speaker said can seem incomplete, dismissive, or rejecting, especially if it is said in a certain way. In the next excerpt, F and M are driving in M's car. F is upset with M because M will not allow her to roll down her window nor will he turn on the air conditioning. As the argument escalates, notice the way M takes up F's position beginning in 15.

(8) (BD)

- 1 M: can you STOP (.) STAAHH:P doing that to the windows.
 2 F: then STOP locking them it's so fucking patronizing and
 3 I'm hot as shit in here and you won't turn the air on=
 4 M: you wanna pay for the gas you can turn it on.
 5 F: I told you we could take my car n'then I wouldn't have
 6 had to hear this (.) I said I would but NOOO::: you had
 7 to be the driver (.) so unfair.
 8 M: no it isn't.
 9 F: yeah actually it is (.) it's literally the definition of
 10 it (.) I want something and offer to provide it by offering
 11 my car (.) n'you refuse it (.) say no we take mine (.)
 12 n'then refuse me the very thing I wanted that my car had.
 13 M: anyway.
 14 F: like literally you want your cake and eat it too thing.
 15 M: >ye:p< I want it all.
 16 F: hhhhhugh (.) it's selfish (.) can you not see that?
 17 M: oh I can (.) very selfish.
 18 F: see now you're just ((exhales)).
 19 M: I am selfish.
 20 ((5.0 just car noises then F makes phone call))

M's first 3 turns (lines 4, 8, and 13) at orienting to F's position are all challenges, direct rebuffs, or flatly dismissive. As a result, the tension escalates, as there are no clear signs of any attempts by M to actively listen to F's feelings. F is making the case that M is being wholly unfair about denying her both the ability to roll down the window and turn the AC on. At a pivotal moment in line 14, she uses the idiomatic phrase "wanting your cake and eating it too" to describe M's desire to both drive and control the comfort level. M's next three methods of take-up are unique and telling.

In line 15, M agrees with F in what appears to be the beginning of active listening and then paraphrases the exact meaning of the idiomatic phrase she has just used. Yet, if we look at her receipt of this, she does not treat it as simple agreement from M. She exhales in an exasperated way, then re-emphasizes his selfishness, and queries "can you not see that?," a move that indicate that she does not interpret what he did in line 15 as straightforward active listening via-a-vis simple agreement. Instead, M's move in line 15 is more complicated. His ">ye:p<" is delivered in a rapid way with slight emphasis,

signaling flippant agreement. Paralinguistic cues matter. His “I want it all,” although technically an accurate interpretation of the idiomatic phrase F uses in line 14, is hearable as over-the-top since it concedes more than is perhaps expected given the argumentative context and thus appears sarcastic. In line 17, M again agrees, but does so with an emphasis on the “oh” change of state marker (Heritage, 1998), which is often used by a listener in postexpansion as sequence-closing move (see Schegloff, 2007). M then recycles “selfish” but adds “very” to exaggerate it and thus signals potential sarcasm, which is how F interprets it in line 18. M then again (line 19) verbatim recycles “I am selfish” but with no extra attempt to appreciate or validate F’s feelings. His flat agreement is designedly tongue-in-cheek. As expected, it does not solicit affiliation or topic expansion from F.

Discussion

The broad aim of this article has been to discursively analyze how young adult romantic couples actively listen to their partners feelings or thoughts during arguments in naturally occurring spontaneous conversations. There are several key points worth highlighting. First, the couples do regularly attempt to actively listen to their partners. However, they do not consistently display the types of scripted active listening recommended by educators and therapists. More often, and especially during troubles talk, their attempts at active listening are accompanied by a range of various methods of uptake illustrated above, such as the use of psychological attributions, judgmental questions, subtle reframes, story-topping, and minimal recycles. These methods reveal that they are not *simply* and/or *only* listening to their partners in order to encourage topic expansion and convey unilateral acceptance and openness. Far more is happening.

Gottman and Silver (1999) emphasized a very similar idea, noting that most couples rarely if ever listen to one another by using straightforward active listening techniques. Listening is a self-implicating experience. The listener is not just taking in what the other is saying but is also making quick inferences on the fly about how they are implicated and how their partner is making critiques or suggestions. As a result, active listening becomes far more anticipatory, participatory, and rhetorically responsive in its design than what is recommended by therapists or educators. In actual conversations, particularly when there is conflict *between* the speakers, listening to one another is rarely if ever an unguarded exercise. There are often issues of accountability and attribution to manage.

Showing exactly how this more complex view of active listening occurs in real time is one of the key contributions of this study. It also highlights one of the strengths of using a discursive psychological approach that is finely tuned to the turn-by-turn exigencies of conversational interaction. As noted, a DP approach is useful for showing that interaction is about far more than simply conveying information back and forth. It is also about managing accountability, blame/attribution, identities, and perceived relational symmetries/asymmetries. A conversation between intimates is only partially about the topic they are talking about; it is also (as the data here show) mostly about the relationship and the vagaries involved in managing that relationship. As such, when we look closely at the five methods for engaging in active listening analyzed above, we see far more than speakers simply reflecting what they are hearing in neutral, open, and nonjudgmental ways. We see speakers engaging in active forms of listening in order to rhetorically (both offensively and defensively) manage accountability. They are working the relationship, so to speak, and not just the surface content of what their partner is saying or feeling. This offers a brand new and exciting perspective for researchers interested in understanding how active listening works and what people are doing when they use it in everyday natural relational contexts.

These findings also suggest exciting future research opportunities related to this line of inquiry. First, it encourages research into conversational/listening phenomena as they occur naturalistically rather than through experimental design or self-report. Second, since naturalistic contexts reveal the complexity and nuance of conversational phenomena in unique ways, it would be helpful to explore active listening as it occurs across a variety of natural contexts, such as institutional contexts (e.g., doctor/patient, teacher/student, etc.) and relational contexts (familial,

dating, etc.). It would also be helpful to examine listening practices across sociocultural and racial/ethnic contexts. Practices like active listening are likely to vary in interesting ways as researchers interrogate them more widely.

Finally, one of the obvious questions that remains is that if managing accountability is a driving force that shapes the ways that active listening appears and is used in natural conversations between intimates, is that a good thing? Is it healthy? Or should educators and therapists still try to encourage couples to forgo the press to manage accountability during conflict and instead use active listening to simply remain open, nonjudgmental, and accepting? This is a complicated question. Clean moments of synchronous affiliation on the heels of attempts at active listening are rare in this data corpus. While the present data do show that active attempts at listening rarely if ever promote affiliation in the moment, the data do not confirm or deny that these moments of disaffiliation do any long-term damage to their relationships. That question is beyond the scope of the present data.

What the data do reveal quite consistently are that attempts at active listening are almost always freighted with a lot extra interactional baggage that is worth examining. That extra interactional baggage has to do with managing accountability and blame and attributional work. Managing these concerns is not only important but also tricky and delicate. The present findings thus help shift the focus away from wondering if active listening is healthy or not for enhancing intimacy and toward deeper inquiries into the nuances of *how* it is important, that is, how various forms of active listening are constructed and managed and how they function as useful components in the process of negotiating intimacy.

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Appendix 1

Transcription Conventions

(.)	Short pause of less than 1 second
(1.5)	Timed pause in seconds
[overlap]	Overlapping speech
LOUD	Talk that is louder than the surrounding talk
Bold	Words emphasized by the transcriber for analytic purposes
<u>Underlined</u>	Emphasis
>faster<	Encloses talk that is faster than the surrounding talk
<slower>	Encloses talk that is slower than the surrounding talk
rea:::ly	Elongation of the prior sound
.	Stop in intonation
=	Immediate latching of successive talk

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