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Listening Exchanges

CLIMATE DISAGREEMENT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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Outline

1. Context
2. High-quality listening
3. Listening Exchanges pilot study
4. Current and future work

Context

- Sustainability transitions and transition pain
- Affective polarisation: the social and emotional dimensions of political division
- Dislike, distrust and prejudice towards those perceived to be on ‘the other side’
- Damages social cohesion, disrupts sustainability transition
- Few places exist where people who disagree can hear each other: need opportunities for more and better listening

High-quality listening

Characterised by

- attention
- empathy
- non-judgement

Involves behaviours such as

- avoiding interruptions
- expressing curiosity
- paraphrasing
- asking open-ended questions

High-quality listening can affect:

- Autonomy
- Defensiveness
- Self-insight
- Intellectual/epistemic humility
- Attitude extremity
- Social distance
- Relatedness

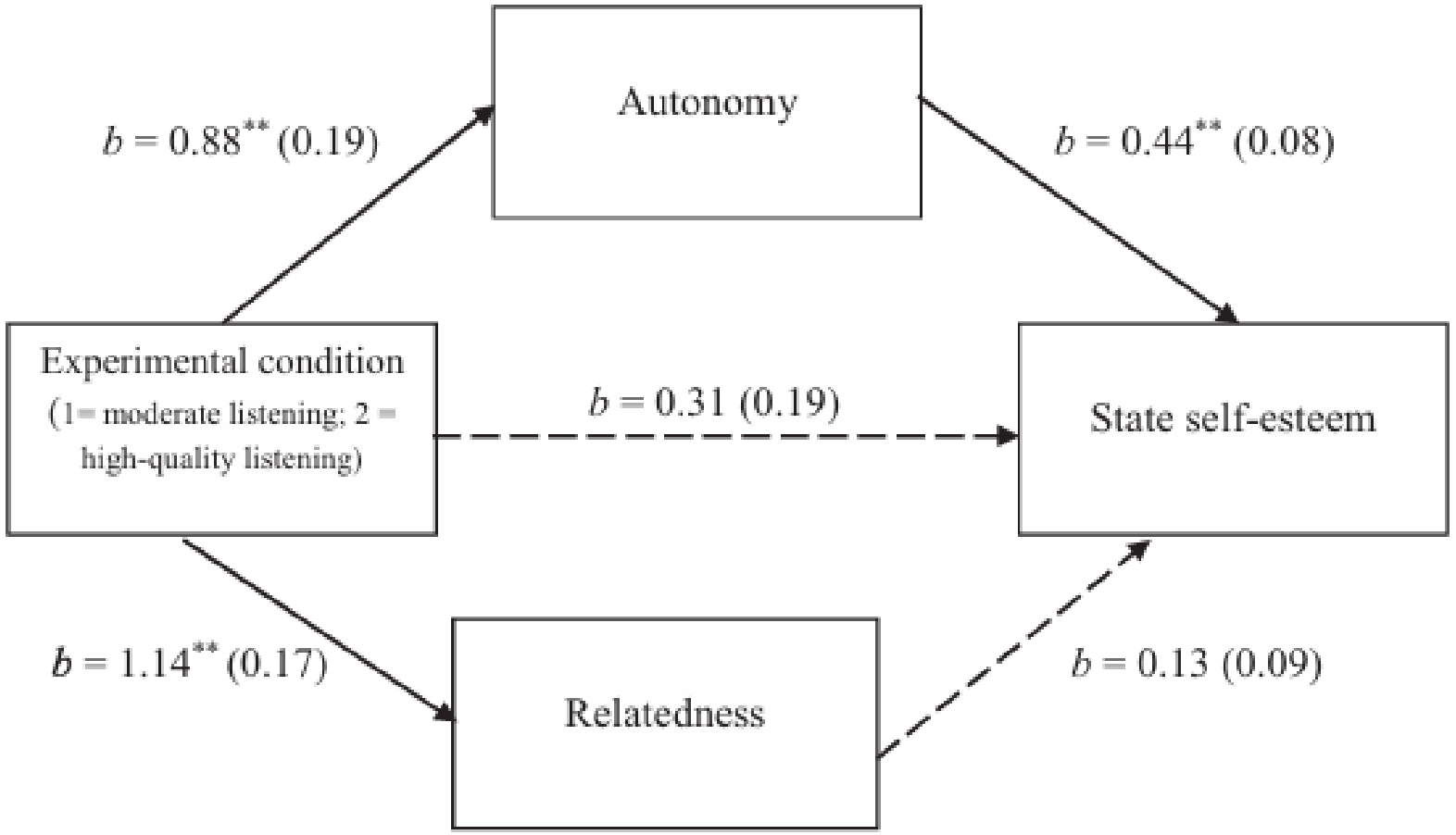


Figure 3 Study 1: Parallel mediation analysis of the effect of the listening manipulation on self-esteem via autonomy and relatedness; standard errors in parentheses; $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

Itzchakov, G., & Weinstein, N. (2021). High-Quality Listening Supports Speakers' Autonomy and Self-Esteem when Discussing Prejudice. Human Communication Research. https://doi.org/10.1093/HCR/HQAB003

Listening Exchanges pilot project

- Small-scale feasibility study: 10 pairs
- Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) in East Oxford
- Novelty: Mediated high-quality listening in “real world” community contexts where participants do not have ongoing relationships

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What are Listening Exchanges?

- A facilitated, structured exchange based on high-quality listening
- Two participants who disagree on any topic and are willing to listen to one another
- A form of deliberation based on lived experience
- Aim to shift the dynamic from blame and contested evidence to building connection and empathy

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Listening Exchange method

- In-person process between two participants who disagree strongly
- Facilitator asks questions relating to the disputed issue
- One participant responds, speaking for limited time, and other repeats back what they have heard
- 60-90 mins
- Structured process, but format loosens as participants build confidence in the respectful exchange
- Based on lived experience, priorities and values

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Recruitment

- Challenging and time-consuming
- Identifying and reaching potential participants with strong views
- Winning their trust and persuading them to take part
- Keeping the project ‘under the radar’



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Findings from initial pilot

1. Intervention was feasible, even in a context where policy was settled and no changes would result
2. Created a psychologically safe space in which participants could express their views without interruption.
3. Participants felt heard and better understood the lived experiences of those holding opposing positions.
4. Reduced interpersonal defensiveness, challenged negative assumptions about opponents and increased openness to respectful disagreement and future interactions

Participant interview quotes

It's definitely changed my outlook..... I'm far less likely to add fuel and to collude with moaning, but much more.. 'What do you think could be put in place, that would make this work?'

(LE1 – Opposed)

It hasn't resolved anything, but [we] found those bits of common ground, which is lovely.

(LE4 - Supportive)

At one point, it's almost as if we swapped roles, where she was saying some of the stuff that I might have been saying, and I was saying some of the stuff that she might have been saying. So it did lead to a kind of deeper understanding.

(LE5 – Supportive)

Participant interview quotes

In terms of the community, I think if I was speaking to people who were very pro LTNs, I think I'd put forward the alternative perspective in a discussion and try to give, you know, the point of view of people like [name], who are, let's say, experiencing some of the downsides of LTNs.

(LE2 – Supportive)

I think just having the conversation does give you the appreciation that there's a variety of perspectives. And therefore, rather than just being like, unhappy that the community was broken, it kind of gives that sense of, there are possibilities.

(LE6 - Opposed)

Maybe my listening of them has [changed] … My opinion won't have changed of their opinion. But you know, it was a very human experience. So it's about relating to somebody like that.

(LE1 – Opposed)

[participant's emphasis underlined]

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Questions for future research ….

Does mediated high-quality listening has potential to alleviate aspects of transition pain by supporting core psychological needs to connect and to act in accordance with one's values, decreasing defensiveness and creating conditions for more constructive engagement across social divides?

At scale can they reduce affective polarisation, and support policy implementation and social cohesion?

Can Listening Exchanges complement (not substitute for), transparent and procedurally just policymaking?

Can incorporating listening-based dialogue alongside public engagement processes help reduce polarisation and create more constructive conditions for implementing controversial climate policies?

Current and future work

Projects

1. British Academy and Oxfordshire County Council funded 14-16 LEs on new housing developments and community cohesion

2. With Antitheses – 12 LEs on Botley solar farm, West Oxfordshire – Europe's largest proposed solar farm

Scaling impact

- Targeting LEs at particular people eg those with influence
- Recording and sharing online or by radio
- Developing innovative media content for dissemination
- Build capacity by training facilitators
- Relatedly: train groups in deep listening

Apply and different points in policy process

- "Deep dive" focused consultation tool before policy implementation to pre-empt backlash/polarisation
- During policy process to influence policy
- At the end of the policy-making process to reduce conflict to build bridges when resentment and stereotypes have built up
- Supporting existing processes eg organisations engaging communities on contentious issues – doing LEs with those who are struggling to be in the room together

Apply on different topics

For example:

- AI/data centres
- New energy infrastructure
- Assisted dying
- Immigration
- Childbirth (“natural” vs medicalized)
- Gender identity

Evaluation

- Robust psychometric measurement of impacts on participants
- What are the impacts of repeat interactions?
- How long do the effects last?
- Are there measurable changes in behaviour?

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Key references

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For discussion

- Ideas about assessing the impacts of an intervention in a complex social and political context?
- It seems that the process is powerful and has something to offer, but how can it practically be delivered and scaled?

Thank you for listening ☺