Communication Research Reports

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Published online: 13 Apr 2016.

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Supportive Communication and the Adequate Paraphrase

Graham D. Bodie, Kaitlin E. Cannava, & Andrea J. Vickery

The active listening paradigm recommends that helpers paraphrase the thoughts and feelings of support seekers. But how? This study compared evaluations of four types of paraphrase messages derived from the work of Polanyi. Results showed that certain forms of paraphrasing are evaluated as more helpful, sensitive, and supportive than others, though differences were not in full alignment with theoretical predictions, and results were dependent on narrative prompt. Our study provides initial empirical data that question the practical advice given to informal help providers found in our academic scholarship and textbooks. Formal and informal helping relationships have many similarities and differences that should be acknowledged and tested with a variety of methods and populations.

Keywords: Carl Rogers; Comforting; Empathy; Formulation; Therapeutic Listening; Unconditional Positive Regard

A long line of work on *enacted support*—what people say and do when providing assistance to stressed others—has documented the importance of talking through troubles with an available and attentive listener (Goldsmith, 2004). To date, the leading framework for deriving practical advice for supportive listeners is the *active listening paradigm*. A key active listening behavior is the formulation, a

behavior most often accomplished by paraphrasing, or restating what another has said with a focus on the meaning of the statement (its content) and concomitant feelings (Heritage & Watson, 1979). While the benefits of paraphrasing are well documented in formal helping settings, these results are readily generalized and applied to how lay helpers should enact informal support with little empirical scrutiny (for review see Weger, Castle, & Emmett, 2010). Our research proposes a heuristic model of paraphrasing and an empirical test of its basic tenets within the context of everyday enacted support.

The Role of Paraphrasing in Supportive Conversations

According to Carl Rogers, an adequate paraphrase will attempt to integrate the "total meaning" of another person's message by including not only a restatement of the associated feelings and emotions but also the narrative content (Rogers & Farson, 1957/1987). One way to operationalize this notion of "total meaning" comes from the work of Polanyi (1981), who claimed: "Storytellers always include three types of information in their stories: events, durative-descriptive information and evaluative meta-information" (p. 60). An *event* is the something that happened, the driving force behind a story, and the crucial reference point to which the rest of the story orients itself. The second element, the *durative descriptive* information, typically consists of the background information of a story (e.g., setting, characters, past history of the actors) (Polanyi, 1981) that contextualizes the event, in contrast to past behaviors, which allows the listener to construct a model of the storyteller's world. The final element, the *evaluative information*, serves as meta-information about the story. Storytellers rely on evaluations such as the expression of feelings to cue listeners as to which parts of the story are most imperative. Together, the event, durative descriptive, and evaluative information contain the "total meaning" of a story, with each element variably helping to accomplish supportive goals.

The functionality of responding to *the event*, something the discloser already knows, does little to accomplish supportive goals, at least in isolation. An event-only paraphrase merely communicates comprehension, not understanding or empathy, and is thus unlikely to assist a distressed other to think or feel differently about his or her situation. By paraphrasing the *durative descriptive information*, listeners demonstrate cohesion and attempt to create a common framework with a listener. The contextual meaning of the story involves a larger understanding of the discloser and his or her idiosyncratic life experience that informed the story up to the point of its telling. Because paraphrasing durative descriptive information acknowledges why this story matters in relation to the discloser's life and surrounding personal life events, this type of paraphrase should be viewed as more helpful, sensitive, and supportive than an event-only paraphrase. A paraphrase focused on *the evaluation* of a story requires emphasizing the discloser's feelings, articulating back specifically stated emotions. Recognizing expressed feelings is a hallmark characteristic of quality support (MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011)

and is thus likely to be viewed as more helpful, sensitive, and supportive compared to event and durative descriptive paraphrase statements. Because the combination and inclusion of more story information should signal that the listener is attending to the "total meaning" of the story (i.e., its content and expressed feeling), an adequate paraphrase (a message containing all three elements) should be viewed as the most helpful, sensitive, and supportive.

> H1: *Evaluations of message helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness are linear functions of paraphrasing from event to durative descriptive to evaluative to adequate.*

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 215 U.S. undergraduate students (130 females, 82 males, three did not report biological sex) who ranged in age from 18 to 60 (M = 20.7, Mdn = 20, $Mode$ = 19, SD = 4.33, one missing) and most frequently identified as Caucasian (n = 157; 72.4%, four missing). Although students were recruited from the Communication Studies subject pool, only a small proportion were majors (n = 23; 10.7%) or minors (n = 15, 7.0%).

Procedure

Participants reported to an on-campus computer laboratory and were greeted by a research assistant who seated participants at one of 10 computers. After giving informed consent, the participants read a written transcript of one of three problem disclosures (ns = 72, 78, 66) that were randomly assigned (see the example in Table 1; all other materials available upon request). They were then asked to rate the paraphrase messages, which were programmed to appear in a random order.

Message construction

The second author created four paraphrase messages for each narrative prompt using steps outlined by Polanyi (1985), including (a) dividing the text into independent utterances that were (b) then listed as a Story *Event* Clause, a *Durative-Descriptive* Clause, or a *Non-Storyworld* Clause. Next, (c) evaluative information was identified using cues like repetition. After messages were constructed, they were checked for compliance with Polanyi's framework by the first author and slightly modified to ensure they ranged between 42 and 45 words in length and were of equal readability. The combination of the three elements (event, durative descriptive information, evaluation) was used as the operationalization of an adequate paraphrase (see Table 1).

Table 1 Example Paraphrase Messages Used for First of Three Narrative Prompts

Narrative Prompt

Okay so, my debate was I had an exam like two days ago. And, well, I don't think I did as well as I would have liked. The reason I didn't do as well was, well, I waited until like the weekend to study for it, and I guess by the end of those two days, I guess I didn't feel like I was ready for it. And also another thing was, the professor he was like in like fruit and nut production which is my area of interest. So like if I go to grad school he would be my supervisor, I guess you could call it. So I really wanted to do well on the exam. So it was kind of stressful for me because I was like I really wanted to do well on it. So I got to the exam and at first I thought I was doing well. I was going through it, and I was like 'I know this I know this!' And then on each page when I wasn't sure about something I would leave it blank. For some reason, I wasn't able to get all of them; but I went back and, you know, it was one of those tests where some of the answers to some questions were in the exam. And, that was nice, but you know I wasn't able to do as well as I had hoped; it was just frustrating. And then I go to class today, and I can sense from the way he looked at me today during class that like I, like that I disappointed him.

Paraphrase on Event (44 words): So, like, after you studied over the weekend, you took a test and felt unprepared. You left some questions blank, but once you looked back over your work you were like able to look back through the test and find some of the answers.

Paraphrase on Durative Descriptive Information (44 words): So, like, you had a test that you studied for but maybe not too far in advance. You wanted to do well but you felt unprepared. And, the professor was like someone who you might work with in the future and is important to impress.

Paraphrase on Evaluative Information (44 words): It's like you didn't do as well as you would have liked on your test. You didn't feel as if you were ready to take the test, but you definitely wanted to do well, and you thought you knew the material during the test.

Adequate Paraphrase (44 words): So it's like you had a test and you wanted to do well, but you felt you didn't study as much as you should've. Then, while you're taking it you had to leave some blanks, but then you were able to find answers later.

Measures

Participants rated messages on twelve (5-point) bipolar adjectives assessing three facets of message evaluation (Goldsmith, McDermott, & Alexander, 2000): problem-solving utility (*helpfulness*; e.g., helpful-hurtful), relational assurance (*supportiveness*; e.g., supportive-unsupportive), and relational awareness (*sensitivity*; e.g., sensitive-insensitive). One adjective on the relational awareness scale (distressing) was inadvertently misspelled (digressing) and thus excluded from the final measure. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to test each measurement model (4 messages x 3 situations = 12 models), and the results were supportive of a three-factor solution (CFIs > .90, SRMRs < .08) without the need to correlate error terms or delete problematic items ($.68 \leq \alpha \leq .94$, $M_\alpha = .84$).

Table 2   Descriptive Statistics for Ratings of Paraphrase Messages

	Event		Durative descriptive		Evaluative		Adequate	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Helpful	3.01	0.78	3.20	0.66	3.08	0.79	3.19	0.79
Sensitive	3.06	0.75	3.39	0.78	3.33	0.91	3.38	0.84
Supportive	2.87	0.76	3.07	0.80	2.90	0.97	3.11	0.81

Results

H1 predicted that ratings of message helpfulness, sensitivity, and supportiveness are linear functions of paraphrasing from event to durative descriptive to evaluative to adequate. The interaction between the message factor and narrative prompt was significant for helpfulness, $F(6, 636) = 3.10$, $p = .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$; sensitivity, $F(6, 636) = 3.66$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$; and supportiveness, $F(6, 636) = 11.83$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Thus, separate analyses were conducted by condition.

Results were generally *not* supportive of H1. First, five out of the nine tests (55.6%; 3 conditions x 3 variables) showed statistically equivalent means for all paraphrase messages. No significant differences emerged in the first narrative prompt for any rating. For the second prompt, pairwise comparisons showed that the event paraphrase was the least supportive and equivalent to the evaluative, while the durative descriptive and adequate paraphrase messages were more supportive and statistically equivalent to each other (see Table 2). For the third prompt, the event paraphrase was viewed as the least sensitive, followed by the other three messages, which did not differ from each other; there were no significant differences among means for helpfulness or supportiveness.

Discussion

The active listening paradigm has been an influential framework for the study of supportive communication. Tenets of the paradigm have driven the conceptualization of much of the work on enacted support, suggesting that listeners who formulate the content and feelings of a support seeker's disclosure will better assist in the coping process. The purpose of this study was to introduce a framework for the theoretical derivation of a typology of content-based paraphrase messages and to explore potential variability in their evaluations.

The active listening paradigm suggests a distinct advantage for evaluative and adequate paraphrase messages compared to event and durative descriptive messages because evaluative and adequate paraphrase statements capture the "total meaning" of a stressful story. *Our data do not support this prediction.* When differences did emerge among the different forms of paraphrasing, event- and evaluative-based messages

were rated as less helpful, sensitive, and supportive than durative descriptive and the adequate paraphrases. It makes sense that the adequate paraphrase messages would be rated higher than the other paraphrase messages, as they contain all elements necessary for understanding a story, but why do durative descriptive messages produce higher ratings than expected?

According to Polanyi, durative descriptive information helps to establish common knowledge between the storyteller and listener. Perhaps when messages contain crucial contextualizing information they create a sense of understanding or empathy even without mention of feelings; durative descriptive information may help establish common ground as this information is the background to the story, why it is told or why it was important for the teller to tell the story (and subsequently why the listener should listen to the story). Repeating reasons for telling the story and other durative descriptive information may thus operate to cue the teller that the listener is attending to important and idiosyncratic contextual information and not just the plot or time sequence of the events. In other words, part of genuine listening may be "listening between the lines" or otherwise attending to more than simple statements of fact. Establishing common knowledge is an important part of being a good listener (Planalp & Benson, 1992), and creating common ground is a vital element in good conversation (Clark, 1996). Future work should systematically explore how establishing common ground among interlocutors in supportive conversations contributes to the coping process.

Another reason for our lack of statistically significant findings is that perhaps paraphrase messages do something different than help people cope with a current problem or stressor. For instance, these messages might provide needed relational work, the building of common ground, and establishing rapport with another person; these outcomes are quite different functions compared to the outcomes assessed in this study (helpful, sensitive, supportive). Thus, listeners might check understanding and thereby signal they are paying attention, behaviors that may open up a space for other types of responses (e.g., highly person-centered enacted support) that lead to greater emotional improvement and stressor reappraisal. In other words, support is an ongoing process with many components that work together toward accomplishing multiple conversational goals (Goldsmith, 2004).

As our results show, there are some qualifications based on the event being disclosed. In our data, narrative prompt moderated the impact of message characteristics on outcomes. For the most part, messages were seen as generally similar in some situations but distinct in others. For whatever reason, the first condition produced no significant results. Our study is one among relatively few that tested for differences in the impact of supportive message content as a function of the situation. Studies like ours that explore hypothetical messages tend to utilize either only one situation (e.g., Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012; Study 2) or collapse across situations (e.g., Jones & Burleson, 1997). Future research should focus more on how different elements of the situation might influence the impact of supportive messages.

In a more general sense, our results cast doubt on the wholesale adoption of the active listening paradigm in the context of informal helping situations. At the very

least, our study suggests a need for more-sophisticated guidelines for helpers, guidelines that go beyond "paraphrase what someone says" or "reflect feelings" and that try to get at ways in which these important elements of supportive talk can be enacted. It is perhaps the case that individuals have different expectations for the support they receive in everyday conversations compared to those more-formal helping situations engaged in with a counselor. More generally, this study provided initial empirical data toward casting a skeptical eye at the practical advice given to putative help providers found in scholarship and textbooks, advice that is wholly extrapolated from the therapeutic literature without question or qualification.

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