

Article

What It Means to Be Heard: Listening and Power in Israeli Communication Contexts

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Abstract

What does it mean to listen, and how is listening experienced within culturally specific interactional contexts? In this preregistered qualitative study, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Israeli participants, primarily reflecting Jewish-Israeli Hebrew-speaking communicative contexts. Interviews were designed to better understand the culturally situated meanings, conditions, expressions, and consequences of listening. A reflexive thematic analysis yielded five interrelated themes: the relational conditions that enable listening, the motivational pull to listen, how listening is expressed and experienced, how it transforms individuals and relationships, and how it operates under strain. The participants described listening as an episodic, effortful, and relationally contingent process rather than a stable interpersonal skill. Listening was especially consequential in moments of disagreement, emotional intensity, and power asymmetry, where relational stakes are heightened. Findings suggested that listening results from a specific interactional tension where expressive involvement coexists with heightened social monitoring. These intrapersonal processes shape how listening cues are interpreted and negotiated in everyday interactions. A culturally embedded relational model of listening is put forward that distinguishes between core relational mechanisms and their culturally structured enactment and interpretation. The discussion argues that listening training in hierarchical or high-conflict environments should move beyond technique-based models to address cultural norms, emotional regulation, and power dynamics.

Keywords: listening perception; Israeli culture; reflexive thematic analysis; interpersonal communication; hierarchical relationships; cultural norms

JEL: Z13, D83, D23, M12

1. Introduction

High-quality listening, namely, listening that promotes perceptions that the speaker is being ‘listened to’, has been increasingly recognized as foundational for conversations that can lead to greater well-being, support connections, and bridge divides. To convey quality, listening must communicate three interrelated qualities: attention, comprehension, and positive intention (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). Attention refers to the listener’s capacity to remain focused and avoid internal or external distractions, and is often manifested through backchannel behaviors such as eye contact, nodding, and verbal affirmations (Bavelas et al., 2000; Quaglia et al., 2016). Comprehension involves efforts to understand the speaker’s message, and is typically conveyed through comments and open-ended questions that invite elaboration (Van Quaquebeke and Felps, 2018). Positive intention reflects a non-judgmental stance and psychological safety, and is often signaled through validation and low-key framing, such as offering advice or asking a question (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022).

This contemporary interpretation of listening builds directly on the humanistic tradition articulated by Carl Rogers and colleagues. In Rogers’ theory of therapeutic

personality change, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard are the core relational conditions that enable individuals to feel psychologically safe to explore their inner experiences (Rogers, 1957). Within this framework, listening is conceptualized as an underlying relational orientation characterized by non-judgment, acceptance, and a genuine effort to understand the speaker’s subjective world. Early formulations of active listening emphasized that when individuals are listened to in this way, they are better able to understand themselves, including greater clarity concerning their thoughts and emotions (Rogers and Farson, 1957).

Although these dimensions can be observed to some extent in individuals’ verbal and nonverbal behavior, growing evidence suggests that listening is ultimately a subjective experience (Bodie et al., 2012). What best predicts outcomes such as psychological safety, openness, well-being, and emotional clarity is the speaker’s perception of being listened to (Itzchakov et al., 2017; Weinstein and Itzchakov, 2025). High-quality listening can create an emergent sense of “togetherness”, characterized by mutual engagement, shared attention, and positive emotional resonance between speaker and listener (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022; Reis et

al., 2022). These moments often feel immersive and emotionally significant, especially in challenging or emotionally charged conversations.

Thus, listening, which was once viewed as a passive act of receiving information, is now seen as an active, co-constructed process that engages both cognitive and affective resources (Bavelas et al., 2000; Worthington and Bodie, 2017). Bodie (2011) highlighted the role of active-empathic listening. His definition of listener involvement as a form of sensing, processing, and responding that is both observable and subjectively perceived laid the conceptual foundation for examining its relational effects. This reconceptualization positioned listening as a relational behavior that can influence speaker clarity, emotional regulation, identity, conflict resolution, and the negotiation of meaning (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022).

More recent studies have put forward empirically tractable models that emphasize attentional presence, comprehension, and benevolent or positive intention as core components of high-quality listening (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). In these models, listening is seen as an episodic, co-constructed process, as defined in Episodic Listening Theory, which conceptualizes listening as an interactional event that emerges in specific conversational encounters rather than being a stable individual trait (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). Evidence has consistently shown that speakers' perceptions of being listened to, rather than the mere display of specific listening behaviors, are key to outcomes such as trust, psychological safety, emotional regulation, and relational closeness (Itzhakov et al., 2017; Weinstein and Itzhakov, 2025).

Contemporary studies have formalized this distinction by applying a Rogerian listening schema to conceptualize learning. This schema reflects a set of beliefs about the value of listening, the speaker's capacity for self-directed growth, and the listener's role in creating non-instrumental psychological safety, rather than viewing listening as a collection of discrete behaviors (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). In this sense, modern listening research extends Rogers' theoretical contribution beyond therapeutic settings to everyday interpersonal, organizational, and culturally situated interactions while preserving its core emphasis on empathy, acceptance, and relational presence.

This interactional framing also aligns with Social Constructionist approaches to leadership that conceptualize leadership as a relational reality co-created through shared meaning-making processes. In these approaches, the capacity to be heard is inseparable from the multidimensional nature of managerial power, including its functional, socio-political, and interpretive-discursive and socio-cultural dimensions that determine whose voice is granted legitimacy. Listening thus operates at the intersection of relational engagement and institutionalized power structures.

1.1 Listening in Organizational Settings

In hierarchical conditions, the experience of being listened to is not only relational but also impacted by power and legitimacy. Research on the hierarchy of voice has shown that speaking up is evaluated through the prism of status, role, and legitimacy, such that identical contributions are not equally recognized across organizational positions (Pfrombeck et al., 2022). From this standpoint, 'listening upward' is a form of strategic self-monitoring in which employees regulate tone, timing, deference, and emotional display while assessing whether candor will be received as constructive input or as disloyalty, naivety, or threat (Premeaux and Bedeian, 2003). This also helps clarify how listening in hierarchical settings can affect leader-member exchanges (LMX; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). When employees feel that upward expression is risky, authenticity in the exchange may be constrained by caution, dependence, and ongoing judgments about whether one's input is legitimate, safe, and consequential.

Higher-quality LMX listening may lessen the perceived risk of speaking up, even though openness remains conditioned by managerial authority (Urbach and Fay, 2021). Broader debates on participation, industrial democracy, and the quality of working life suggest that the significance of employee input does not only depend on opportunities to speak, but also on whether organizational arrangements render voice legitimate, protected, and consequential (Hauff and Rastetter, 2021; Torka et al., 2011).

The management literature has documented the ways in which perceived high-quality listening can lead to reduced defensiveness (Itzhakov et al., 2017), stronger commitment and coordination, and increased psychological safety (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). Recent work suggests that perceived listening quality, rather than objectively rated behavior, best predicts emotional connection, mutual understanding, and relational closeness between speakers and listeners (Saluk et al., 2025). The speaker's subjective experiences of feeling heard, validated, and understood also impact downstream effects such as self-insight, authenticity, emotional relief, and openness to feedback (Reis and Clark, 2013).

Theoretical and empirical work using dyadic analytic frameworks such as the Social Relations Model (Kenny, 1988) and the Common Fate Model (Ledermann and Kenny, 2012) also demonstrates that perceived listening varies substantially at the dyadic level, which also aligns with an interactional perspective on listening (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). More than 50% of the variance in perceived listening has been attributed to dyadic-level differences such as mutual history and role dynamics, including asymmetries in authority, status, and control over conversational space (Kluger et al., 2021). These asymmetries not only affect access to speaking turns but also affect whose contributions are acknowledged, validated, or treated as worthy of attention. These findings underscore the inter-

actional and relational nature of listening, particularly in contexts marked by asymmetry and disagreement. They become particularly consequential in moments of disagreement, where differences in power or status can amplify vulnerability and defensiveness (Itzhakov et al., 2017) and increase the risk of feeling unheard (Ren and Schaumberg, 2024).

Organizational studies further highlight the relational power of listening (Kluger et al., 2024). Listening has been shown to reduce affective job insecurity by increasing perceived situational control during periods of organizational uncertainty (Kriz et al., 2021). Beyond these relational outcomes, listening also functions as a structural condition for the quality of working life, especially in terms of participatory practices and employee voice (Hauff and Rastetter, 2021; Torka et al., 2011). Sustainable human resource management research has found that employees across contract types and hierarchical positions all have a fundamental desire to be heard, which links voice, fairness, and participatory practices to long-term organizational sustainability (Paulet et al., 2021).

Listening has also been shown to strengthen leader-member exchange relationships by promoting open, symmetrical communication (Glaser et al., 2015; Jiang and Men, 2017). Leadership behaviors that involve soliciting and listening to employee input, central to ethical leadership, have also been linked to stronger group voice and improved team functioning (Walumbwa et al., 2012). More broadly, listening behaviors such as attentiveness, responsiveness, and appropriate verbal cues help form impressions of listener competence and support mutual expectations in early interactions, key ingredients in building relational trust (Reis and Clark, 2013). Conceptual work further suggests that listening may promote shared understanding and emotional clarity by enabling a co-created state of interpersonal devotion and vulnerability (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). These patterns mirror findings from personal relationships, where listening fosters intimacy, belonging, and emotional safety (Reis and Clark, 2013).

1.2 Disagreement and Listening

Disagreements constitute a revealing lens for understanding listening. In conversations involving political, moral, or identity-based conflict, the emotional and cognitive demands of listening intensify. High-quality listening in such settings has been shown to reduce attitude extremity, increase openness to disconfirming information, and foster perspective-taking effects that parallel findings from the broader attitude literature, which emphasizes the power of perceived receptivity and non-judgmental presence (Baron, 2019; Cialdini, 2001; Itzhakov et al., 2017; Itzhakov et al., 2024). Disagreement introduces emotional risk, identity threat, and heightened sensitivity to cues of respect or dismissal, making the experience of being listened to particularly fragile in such interactions (Itzhakov et al., 2017; Ren and Schaumberg, 2024). Recent research on lis-

tening in disagreements shows that high-quality listening in such moments can reduce defensiveness, lower polarization, and promote openness, highlighting that listening may be particularly impactful when conversational stakes are high (Itzhakov et al., 2024). At the same time, listening in emotionally charged interactions can elicit intense relational emotions, such as feelings of being deeply moved or emotionally touched, reflecting sudden moments of connection and shared meaning between speakers and listeners (Saluk et al., 2025).

In interactions marked by power or status asymmetries, such as those involving authority figures, institutional roles, or group hierarchies, the consequences of perceived non-listening are further intensified. Differences in who controls speaking turns, frames topics, or validates contributions shape not only participation but also whose perspectives are experienced as legitimate or worthy of attention (Bekerman and Horenczyk, 2004; Kenny, 1988; Maoz, 2004). Cultural norms shape how such asymmetries are enacted and interpreted, influencing whether interruptions, directness, or emotional intensity are experienced as engagement or as domination, dismissal, or disrespect (Katriel, 2004). As a result, moments of disagreement within culturally and structurally asymmetric interactions are especially likely to produce feelings of being unheard, misunderstood, or emotionally dismissed, even in the absence of overt hostility (Collins et al., 2024; Itzhakov et al., 2017). In these contexts, listening becomes deeply entangled with values, identity, and emotional risk. Feeling heard involves more than the opportunity to express a position; it also depends on receiving attention, empathy, respect, and a sense of common ground (Roos et al., 2023). These dynamics are especially pronounced in disagreement, where felt respect is tied to core interpersonal motives, including esteem, fairness, autonomy, relatedness, and knowledge (Rothers and Cohrs, 2023). Disagreement therefore provides a particularly revealing context for examining when listening succeeds, fails, or is experienced as conditional, because arguments that touch social identities can evoke threat and motivated reasoning rather than openness (Wright, 2022).

Episodic moments of listening during disagreement can promote depolarization and reduce psychological reactance (Itzhakov et al., 2017; Tormala and Rucker, 2007). Yet, when perceived listening is absent in these contexts, emotional disengagement and relational breakdown become more likely, heightened polarization (Ren and Schaumberg, 2024). Recent work also shows that perceived disagreement can impair evaluations of listening quality, even when behavioral attentiveness is present. This conflation of agreement with listening highlights the primacy of speaker judgment over objective behavior (Collins et al., 2024; Ren and Schaumberg, 2024; Yip and Fisher, 2022). Such findings underscore the emotional and interpretive complexity of listening, especially in charged interactions.

Most empirical work on listening has been conducted in Western, individualistic societies using survey or experimental methods, often emphasizing individual cognition and behavior (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022; Yip and Fisher, 2022). This emphasis provides few insights into how listening is practiced, perceived, negotiated, and experienced across culturally distinct interactional contexts. Cross-cultural research that directly examines interpersonal listening has shown systematic cultural variation in listening preferences and evaluative criteria during conversation (Kiewitz et al., 1997).

Local emotional norms denote culturally patterned expectations regarding the expression, regulation, and visibility of emotion during interaction, such as when emotional intensity signals engagement rather than impropriety (Gelfand et al., 2011; Katriel, 2004). Verbal immediacy refers to interactional styles characterized by directness, overlap, rapid turn-taking, and expressive verbal feedback. Listening is deeply embedded in culturally shared expectations regarding emotional expression, verbal involvement, and interactional legitimacy.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017) positions listening as a key behavior that fulfills basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When people feel heard, they often experience greater authenticity and motivational clarity, with some research suggesting that these effects may be particularly meaningful in emotionally charged or vulnerable conversations (Ryan et al., 2021). These dynamics are echoed in qualitative accounts, including those from the present study, where Israeli participants described listening as a pathway to emotional release, self-reflection, and a sense of being recognized and emotionally held in moments of intensity.

In many Western communication models, attentive listening is implicitly associated with silence, minimal interruption, and restrained verbal response. Cross-cultural scholarship, however, has long demonstrated that silence itself functions as a culturally meaningful communicative act whose interpretation varies across social contexts, relational hierarchies, and cultural norms (Bruneau, 1973).

Conversational differences are best understood as culturally patterned systems rather than as individual deficits. Maltz and Borker (2018) argued that members of different cultural groups develop distinct interpretive frameworks for talk, including expectations regarding interruption, overlap, pacing, and emotional expressiveness. Similarly, Tannen (2005) distinguished between high-involvement and high-considerateness conversational styles, showing that behaviors such as rapid turn-taking or overlap may function as solidarity and engagement within one system, while being interpreted as dominance or interruption in another. These perspectives suggest that listening cues cannot be evaluated independently of the cultural norms that organize participation, emotional display, and turn-taking. Listening, there-

fore, is not simply enacted through behaviors but recognized through culturally shared systems of meaning.

In high-involvement or emotionally expressive cultures, listening may be signaled through active verbal engagement, emotional responsiveness, overlap, and rapid turn-taking rather than through silence or minimal feedback. In these contexts, expressive participation can function as an indicator of attentiveness, understanding, and relational involvement (Katriel, 2004). When evaluated through cultural frameworks that equate good listening with restraint or silence, such expressive behaviors may be misinterpreted as rudeness, impatience, or disengagement by observers operating under different cultural expectations, despite serving a listening function within their native interactional context (Bruneau, 1973; Collins et al., 2024). Empirical research on listening preferences further supports this distinction by showing that individuals from different cultural backgrounds rely on different evaluative criteria when judging listening quality, such as analytical content, emotional responsiveness, or relational attunement (Brown et al., 2011; Suszczyńska, 2008). As a result, whether a speaker feels listened to depends not only on the listener's intentions or behaviors but also on the cultural framework through which those behaviors are interpreted.

1.3 Listening in the Israeli Context

Israeli communication has been described as highly participatory and emotionally expressive, with involvement often conveyed through verbal intensity, overlap, and rapid turn-taking rather than silence or restraint. Ethnographic and cross-cultural research suggests that listening in Israel often unfolds within emotionally charged, fast-paced interactions, shaped by shared norms of involvement and immediacy (Bekerman and Horenczyk, 2004; Katriel, 2004; Maoz, 2004; Smooha, 2013). Prior research suggests that some Israeli listeners may favor a more content-oriented listening style, emphasizing the evaluation of information and arguments (Katriel, 2017). This emotional expressiveness also draws from longstanding cultural traditions in Israel, such as early "soul talks", where intimate group dialogues emphasized emotional openness, personal reflection, and shared understanding, as well as in modern settings like Israeli radio programs that blend personal narratives with public conversation (Katriel, 2004). This divergence from Western conversational norms challenges dominant models of listening that equate silence or minimal response with attentiveness, as Israeli communication culture tends to prioritize expressive, participatory, and verbally intense styles of engagement (Katriel, 2004). At the same time, cross-cultural research on listening style preferences has shown that Israeli young adults tend to favor a content-oriented listening style, marked by a strong focus on analytical thinking and careful evaluation of information, in contrast to U.S. students who prioritize relational and time-sensitive listening (Kiewitz et al., 1997).

Cultural Tightness in the Israeli Context

Recent work on cultural tightness-looseness identifies Israel as a relatively “tight culture” characterized by strong social norms and heightened monitoring of deviance, which shapes interpersonal interactions by promoting situational control, caution, and high self-monitoring (Gelfand et al., 2011). This cultural context gives rise to a recurring tension in Israeli interactions, in which expressive involvement coexists with heightened sensitivity to situational norms. Recent qualitative research in Israeli teams shows that leader listening behaviors, especially those that involve withholding interruptions and allowing longer speaking turns, are essential for cultivating team climates of psychological safety and deeper, more authentic dialogue (Bouskila-Yam and Zaidman, 2025).

Although expressive speech and emotional directness are common (Katriel, 2004), interactions are also shaped by heightened social monitoring and sensitivity to situational appropriateness. This combination does not define listening styles per se but creates an interactional environment in which expressive involvement and restraint are continuously interpreted and negotiated by participants (Bruneau, 1973). As Gelfand et al. (2011) noted, tight cultures like Israel tend to emphasize both emotional involvement and careful boundary management. This duality suggests that expressive behaviors may serve both as authentic signals of engagement and as socially adaptive performances shaped by external expectations.

Thus, cultural tightness informs the interpretive environment in which listening occurs, rather than functioning as a distal causal explanation for listening outcomes. These dynamics shape how communicative cues like turn-taking, eye contact, and emotional tone are interpreted, and therefore how listening itself is signaled and evaluated. Crucially, such evaluations concern the meaning attributed to communicative cues, rather than determining whether listening is ultimately experienced as supportive, effective, or high in quality. Within this frame, listening is not a culturally neutral skill but a culturally situated practice. Accordingly, behaviors that signal attentiveness and respect in one cultural context may be interpreted quite differently in another, particularly with respect to silence, restraint, and verbal involvement during conversation. This has implications for how listening is both enacted and perceived within Israeli society (Graham and Weiner, 1996; Katriel, 2004). These patterns challenge Western assumptions that equate minimal verbal response or silence with good listening. In expressive cultures like Israel, involvement may be demonstrated through emotional intensity, verbal feedback, or overlapping speech and interruptions. Such behaviors might be misinterpreted as disengagement through a different cultural lens (Collins et al., 2024; Katriel, 2004). These interpretive challenges become especially consequential in situations of disagreement, where conversational stakes are heightened, and the risk of misunderstanding is amplified.

Within the Israeli context, listening frequently unfolds within interactions marked by enduring social asymmetries, where differences in group affiliation, institutional role, or symbolic authority shape who is heard, how speech is received, and whose perspectives are granted legitimacy (Bar-Tal, 2007; Bekerman and Horenczyk, 2004; Maoz, 2004; Smooha, 2013). Listening in Israel is often embedded within broader sociopolitical narratives of collective memory and national identity that shape interactional expectations and moral evaluations of voice and recognition (Bar-Tal, 2007, 2013; Katriel, 2004). In such contexts, the experience of being listened to or not often reflects deeper social hierarchies, group affiliations, or political power, particularly in Jewish-Arab relations (Gelfand et al., 2011; Maoz, 2004; Smooha, 2013).

Intergroup dialogue research in Israel further highlights how listening can reproduce social power dynamics even in spaces designed to promote equality. Maoz (2004) showed that Jewish-Arab intercultural programs often struggle with asymmetries in facilitation and participation, where structural power differences manifest through who speaks, who is heard, and how dialogue unfolds. Similarly, Bekerman and Horenczyk (2004) documented how bilingual educational settings, despite their focus on coexistence, frequently reflect broader societal inequalities that influence conversational dynamics. These dynamics suggest that listening within Israeli society is not merely an interpersonal process but also a reflection of broader political structures and group-based inequalities.

Understanding how listening is signaled and evaluated within this cultural framework invites the development of more nuanced, context-sensitive models. In Israeli communication, behaviors such as interrupting, speaking loudly, or engaging in fast-paced exchanges are often interpreted as signs of emotional involvement and relational engagement, rather than rudeness or disengagement. Katriel (2004) highlighted how such expressive forms of speech reflect culturally valued norms of participation and sincerity, while Krauss and Chiu (1998) emphasize that these behaviors function as culturally accepted signals of attentiveness and solidarity in high-context interaction.

These cultural patterns also highlight the need to move beyond universal listening models and develop frameworks that account for how listening is embedded within specific social structures, group identities, and collective narratives within Israeli society (Bekerman and Horenczyk, 2004; Smooha, 2013). These patterns are also consistent with broader cultural analyses showing that Israeli communication tends to favor directness, pragmatic clarity, and deliberation over emotional or relational considerations (Hofstede, 2001; Katriel, 2004). Together, these findings emphasize that listening in Israel reflects not only emotional expressiveness but also culturally shaped expectations for analytical processing, offering a uniquely dual-layered perspective that is rarely addressed in existing listening models.

Such insights can inform more culturally attuned approaches to listening in personal relationships, workplaces, and intercultural contexts, highlighting the need for communication strategies that recognize emotional expressiveness, pragmatic information-seeking, and social dynamics as integral to effective listening. Together, these findings emphasize that listening in Israel reflects not only emotional intensity but also culturally shaped expectations for analytical processing, offering a uniquely dual-layered perspective that challenges existing listening models (Hofstede, 2001). Listening patterns can also vary across settings and generations, with younger speakers and informal contexts often allowing greater emotional expressiveness than formal or intergenerational interactions (Katriel, 2004).

2. Method

This study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/47ZKJ>). The research questions, methodology, and analytic strategy were specified before the data analysis. This preregistration reflects our commitment to transparency and rigor in qualitative research.

Participants

The sample was composed of 20 Israeli participants, purposively sampled to reflect diversity in age, gender, region, ethnicity, life stage, and professional background. The sample included 14 women and 6 men. They ranged in age from 19 to 87 ($M = 36.95$, $SD = 17.48$). The sample was composed of 10 married individuals, nine single participants, and one widowed participant. Nine participants were young adults (ages 18–30), seven were midlife adults (ages 31–50), and four were older adults (ages 51–87), of whom two were retired. Eighteen participants identified as Jews and two as Arabs. Regional representation included participants from both central Israel ($n = 11$) and the north ($n = 9$).

3. Procedure

The participants were recruited through social and professional networks and interviewed using a standardized semi-structured protocol developed for the international Many Labs Listening Project. All interviews were conducted in Hebrew to ensure linguistic and cultural accessibility and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews explored participants' experiences of being listened to in everyday life, with a particular focus on emotionally meaningful or socially impactful moments within their relational and cultural contexts.

The interview guide included open-ended prompts designed to elicit concrete and emotionally grounded listening experiences. For example, the participants were asked: "Can you describe a recent situation in which you felt truly listened to?" Follow-up questions included: "What specifically did the other person do?" "How did that affect you?",

and "What made that experience meaningful?" Additional probes invited the participants to reflect on moments when listening was difficult, emotionally strained, or shaped by disagreement or power differences.

Thematic Analysis

To explore the culturally embedded dynamics of listening, a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) based on the principles described by Braun and Clarke (2021) was implemented. RTA treats themes as interpretive patterns identified by the researcher through active meaning-making and researcher reflexivity. This approach emphasizes subjectivity, theoretical coherence, and transparency in analytic decision-making. We took an epistemological stance, consistent with our preregistered design. We viewed meaning as socially produced and contextually embedded, where the participants' accounts referred to real relational and cultural experiences. The interview data were approached as co-constructed between participants and researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

The first author led the analysis, which began by familiarization through repeated transcript readings and holistic engagement with the participants' narratives. Initial observations and reflections were recorded in analytic memos. Coding was conducted inductively and reflexively to identify both semantic and latent meanings, defined respectively as explicit surface meanings and underlying assumptions or contextual frames. Codes were developed iteratively with close attention to emotional nuances, social dynamics, and culturally situated interpretations. In what follows, terms such as collective norms, local emotional norms, and verbal immediacy are used descriptively rather than as abstract cultural values. Collective norms refer to shared, often implicit expectations about appropriate participation, respect, and involvement in conversation, including who may speak, interrupt, or challenge whom in what settings (Bruneau, 1973; Katriel, 2004).

The initial codes were clustered into candidate themes reflecting shared meaning across the dataset. The analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti Web (version 9.26.1; ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany) to support systematic coding, color-coded thematic grouping, memo writing, and iterative revision of thematic maps. The codes were reorganized, collapsed, and refined through repeated cycles of review and conceptual clarification. This process emphasized thematic coherence, internal diversity within themes, and resonance with the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Reflexive practices were ongoing throughout the analysis and included memo writing, collaborative dialogue among the research team, and critical examination of our own assumptions and values. The aim was not data saturation but rather the development of rich, conceptually coherent themes that would shed light on the cultural and relational meanings of listening (Braun and Clarke, 2021,

2023). Coding was not treated as a reliability-seeking exercise but as an interpretive engagement shaped by researcher subjectivity. International co-authors from the United Kingdom contributed an additional reflexive perspective, supporting transparent analytic dialogue and critical examination of culturally embedded assumptions.

Interpretive claims were only retained when supported by patterned meaning across multiple participants rather than isolated excerpts. We repeatedly returned to the full transcripts to test thematic coherence and refined or discarded interpretations that did not adequately capture the participants' accounts. In this sense, resonance referred to the conceptual alignment between emergent themes and the broader corpus of interviews rather than to consensus or frequency metrics.

The Jewish-Israeli researchers who conducted interviews in Hebrew and analyzed the accounts situated in Israeli culture acknowledged that their positionality could impact the data generation and analytic interpretation. Shared cultural membership facilitated rapport and enabled recognition of subtle linguistic nuances, irony, and culturally embedded assumptions. Familiarity with local interactional norms such as rapid turn-taking, emotional intensity, and direct disagreement sensitized these authors to particular aspects of the data. In Israeli conversational culture, such behaviors are often experienced as involvement rather than interruption. During the early coding, the authors were aware that they might normalize these patterns as indicators of engagement rather than potential sources of tension. As a countermeasure, listening behaviors were coded as such only when participants themselves framed them as attentive, respectful, meaningful, or dismissive. The interpretations were anchored in participants' evaluative language rather than in our own cultural intuitions.

The Israeli authors' lived experience in Israeli educational and organizational systems also shaped their sensitivity to power and hierarchy in participants' narratives. Authority in Israeli contexts is often informal yet consequential. To avoid projecting their own experiences onto participants' accounts, interpretations were grounded in repeated cross-participant patterns and explicit descriptions. Reflexive memos were written particularly when interpretations felt culturally intuitive, prompting deliberate reconsideration of coding decisions and theme boundaries.

The analytic structure evolved through this reflexive engagement. An initial model consisted of seven themes and was organized in a process-based structure that included conditions for listening, expressions of listening, listening outcomes, costs, barriers, signs of disengagement, and poor outcomes. This early structure organized the data descriptively and mirrored stages or components of listening rather than articulating central organizing meanings. The seven-theme model primarily mapped structural elements of listening in accordance with the questionnaire rather than capturing broader patterns of shared meaning across participants.

Through repeated engagement with the dataset, color-coded regrouping, revision of thematic maps, and reflexive diary documentation, codes were collapsed and conceptually reframed to identify broader organizing ideas that cut across conditions, behaviors, and consequences. This iterative refinement resulted in a five-theme model that reflects deeper interpretative integration, developed through active researcher engagement with the data. Rather than mapping structural elements of listening, the final themes articulate patterned meanings concerning how listening is enacted, evaluated, constrained, and experienced within Israeli cultural contexts.

This analytic evolution reflects good practice in reflexive thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke (2023), themes were treated as constructed interpretative accounts rather than pre-existing categories to be discovered. The researchers' subjectivity was engaged as an analytic resource, and theme development was understood as iterative, theory-informed, and reflexively grounded. By linking positionality, analytic decisions, and theme refinement transparently, the analysis sought to ensure methodological coherence and conceptual depth. As part of the analytic process, we examined whether themes or codes were patterned differently across participant subgroups, including age group (18–30, 31–50, 51–87), region (north vs. center), relationship status (single vs. married), and ethnicity (Jewish vs. Arab). This involved reviewing coded excerpts and their distribution across subgroups to assess whether divergent patterns of meaning emerged, rather than to conduct comparative or frequency-based analyses. Subgroup patterns are discussed in the Results section.

4. Results

Five themes were identified through reflexive thematic analysis. Together, these themes captured how the participants described the experience, enactment, and meaning of listening within their everyday interpersonal contexts. Fig. 1 provides a thematic map of the interrelations among these five themes. Each theme is presented below with illustrative quotations that reflect patterns of meaning across the dataset.

4.1 Theme 1: Relational Conditions That Make Listening Possible

The participants consistently described how listening flourished or faltered as a function of three interrelated conditions: relational closeness, environmental context, and perceived power dynamics. A sense of psychological safety, trust, and mutual familiarity was considered to lay the relational foundation for meaningful listening. “When there’s a deep bond, it’s easier to really listen. You’re not defending yourself all the time. You just... open up” (P14).

Environmental context also mattered. Quietness, privacy, and uninterrupted time were described as basic but

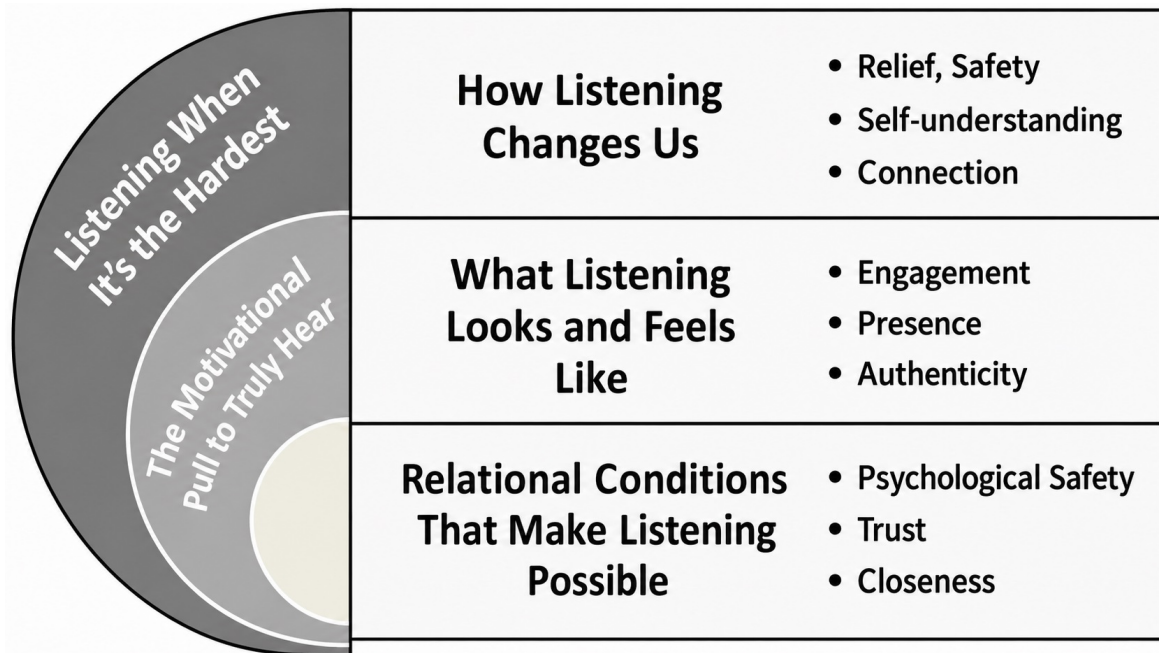


Fig. 1. Thematic map of participants' experiences and meanings of listening. The figure presents representative examples of the content associated with each theme rather than the full coding structure.

powerful enablers. “When we sat in the garden, without phones, without noise that’s when I felt truly heard” (P16).

Attentional capacity and emotional bandwidth also shaped the participants’ experiences. “Sometimes it’s not that they don’t want to listen, they just have too much going on. I get that” (P5). These situational and emotional variables formed the background for power differences to emerge. Several participants described how power influenced their listening experiences, particularly in workplace or hierarchical settings. “Relationships between spouses, friends... if you feel someone has more power, it affects whether you’ll really listen or whether they’ll listen to you” (P2). Another added: “The manager whom I felt was so distant. You could tell he was there to hear what he needed, but nothing more” (P3).

Across these accounts, listening emerged as contingent, in the sense of being made possible when relational closeness, situational calm, and attentional readiness aligned.

4.2 Theme 2: The Motivational Pull to Truly Hear

Beyond external conditions, the participants emphasized that listening required an internal orientation, an intentional blend of curiosity, emotional connection, and value-based commitment. This motivational pull toward the speaker was described as dynamic and layered, and determined by both immediate interest and deeper relational intentions. A common entry point to listening was curiosity. Several participants described how a genuine interest in the other person stimulated their attention and willingness to listen. “When I’m curious about someone, I automati-

cally listen more. It’s like something in me leans forward” (P9). Curiosity was repeatedly cited as the motivational spark that initiated deeper engagement.

This initial interest was often strengthened by emotional closeness. “When you love someone, you want to hear their side even when it’s hard. That’s what kept me in the conversation” (P14). For many, listening was an extension of emotional care beyond familiarity. An emotional connection appeared to create a strong incentive to remain present, even in difficult conversations.

The participants also reflected on how power and status differences could alter their motivational stance. Even in close relationships, subtle hierarchies could affect both the ability and willingness to hear the other truly. “I think that where there is love, it is less difficult, but in other situations, when there is less trust or emotional distance, power always plays a role in whether listening really happens” (P1). Another participant added: “I had a conversation, a video call with a family member, and you could feel there was a kind of status barrier. It affects how much you open up or how you listen to them” (P14). These reflections suggest that internal motivation was not simply individual; it was entangled with relational dynamics and perceived power.

The participants described drawing on personal values to sustain their listening when there was not a strong emotional connection or curiosity flagged. In these accounts, listening was framed as something worth upholding even when effortful, thus reflecting a personally meaningful relational commitment rather than a spontaneous reaction. The participants considered that these motivations

laid the groundwork for how listening was expressed verbally, physically, and emotionally in the flow of interaction. *"I had to force myself to stay present, but I did because it mattered. Not for me, for her"* (P7). Others echoed this sense of duty. *"It wasn't easy, but I kept asking myself: What is she really saying? Why is this important to her?"* (P2). These comments may indicate that the participants saw listening as an enacted commitment to something actively chosen and consciously maintained.

Across these accounts, listening emerged as a relational stance fueled by internal motivations. The participants described how curiosity, emotional bonds, power dynamics, and personal values converged and affected their willingness to hear the other truly. These internal forces animated their listening, especially when the context was emotionally demanding or socially complex.

4.3 Theme 3: What Listening Looks and Feels Like

The participants described a range of verbal and non-verbal behavioral cues that they used to signal active listening. These were seen as essential for conveying attentiveness, care, and relational commitment. Listening was described as something seen and felt in the moment, and not only something heard. Listening came alive through expressive cues such as eye contact, body posture, verbal affirmations, and emotional presence. The participants considered that these behaviors allowed the speakers to feel validated and supported, so that speaker and listener actively co-constructed the listening experience.

The participants evaluated listening by whether attentiveness and care were made interactionally visible through recognizable relational signals. One participant mentioned nonverbal presence: *"She looked straight at me, didn't interrupt, just nodded with this quiet presence. I felt held"* (P11). Another participant said, *"When someone says, 'Tell me more', or repeats back what you said, that's when you know they're with you"* (P5).

Verbal markers such as invitations, paraphrasing, and responsive acknowledgments were not described as techniques, but as evidence of psychological availability, signaling that the speaker's experience mattered. More broadly, the participants distinguished between the outward performance of listening behaviors and the felt quality of genuine emotional presence. However, the participants emphasized that emotional sincerity was also crucial. *"He said all the right things, but it felt 'off', like he was performing listening, not actually with me"* (P16). In contrast, genuine presence was felt bodily: *"When she was really there with me... my body relaxed. It felt safe to speak"* (P12). The absence of such cues was equally revealing. *"He looked at his phone, nodded at the wrong time... I stopped talking"* (P17).

Taken together, these accounts indicate that listening was evaluated as an embodied and emotionally attuned relational practice, sensed through affective and bodily cues as much as through verbal content.

4.4 Theme 4: How Listening Changes Us

The participants did not describe listening as a transient act. Instead, they portrayed it as a relational experience that left a lasting emotional and interpersonal imprint. When they felt truly heard, the effects extended beyond the moment and influenced how they felt about themselves, their relationships, and their capacity to move forward.

Several participants spoke of emotional relief: a sense of unburdening that came from being met with a quiet, non-judgmental presence. *"After I finally let it out and she just sat with me [and expressed] no judgment, no advice, I felt like I could breathe again"* (P9). During these exchanges, listening appeared to function as a container for vulnerability that allowed emotional intensity to be held rather than managed or redirected.

Listening also shifted the participants' sense of self. For some, being listened to brought clarity because the act of being heard allowed them to hear themselves better. *"She listened in a way that made me hear myself differently. Like I understood what I was saying more just by being heard"* (P3). In this sense, listening emerged not only as relational but reflective: it enabled the participants to process their own meaning more deeply.

At the interpersonal level, listening was described as a trust-building force, especially when it occurred in exchanges where there had been boundaries in the past. *"We weren't close before, but after that talk, when he really listened, something shifted. I trusted him more"* (P18). These experiences are suggestive of the ways in which high-quality listening can reconfigure relational dynamics, even in longstanding or distant connections. Just as certain participants recalled moments of transformation, they also remembered the hollow echo left by its absence. *"I left feeling smaller, like what I said didn't matter. It's that he wasn't even trying to understand"* (P7). When the participants felt that high-quality listening had not taken place, or where listening was replaced with distraction or disinterest, it did not merely fall flat. It seemed to create a relational wound.

These reflections suggest that listening does not only operate as a communicative act but as an emotional and ethical presence. It appeared to impact the ways in which the participants felt about their values, voice, and place in a relationship. For the participants, being listened to was not a neutral experience; it was perceived as changing them for better or for worse.

4.5 Theme 5: Listening When It's the Hardest

Although many participants emphasized the positive outcomes of listening, they also described certain emotional costs and personal strain involved in listening in difficult conditions. This theme captured moments when listening was the most effortful: during disagreements, in cases of emotional intensity, or when hierarchical power dynamics made the interaction feel asymmetrical. In these contexts, listening was not only relational but also influenced by questions of position, legitimacy, and risk.

The participants described these situations as relational pressure points. Listening at these times was not automatic. It required deliberate self-regulation, emotional discipline, and conscious restraint. As one participant stated, *“I was angry, but I told myself, just listen. Don’t interrupt. And it took everything I had not to react”* (P11).

In conflictual exchanges, the participants framed listening as an intentional act of character. Even when agreement seemed unlikely, some participants chose to listen as an expression of relational commitment: *“I knew we wouldn’t agree, but I wanted to hear where she was coming from. That’s what made the conversation worthwhile”* (P16). *“I kept listening because I knew it mattered. Not because I agreed, but because the relationship was more important than the point I was trying to make”* (P19). *“It’s about who you want to be, not just what you want to say”* (P10).

However, the participants noted that the strain of listening could intensify in contexts dictated by power and hierarchy. They frequently described listening as asymmetrical when authority, status, or institutional roles structured the interaction. In these situations, listening upward often involved heightened caution, suppressed disagreement, and ongoing monitoring of how one’s voice would be received, reflecting a strategic sensitivity to how one’s engagement would be evaluated within the interaction. In their view, hierarchical settings not only affected who was heard, but also how freely they could remain present. The participants’ accounts further indicated that this involved adjustments in tone, timing, and degree of candor. For example: *“When the CEO speaks, everyone is silent, even if I had already started talking”* (P15).

These accounts suggest that power structures influenced both the distribution of voice and the perceived openness of listening. Listening in hierarchical situations was described as constrained, monitored, and sometimes performative, reflecting a tension between relational presence and strategic self-regulation. Even when participants attempted to remain engaged, their listening was modulated by the need to balance authenticity with relational preservation.

For some participants, the emotional and structural strain led to withdrawal: *“When it got heated, I just couldn’t stay in it. I zoned out”* (P13). Others described strategic or instrumental listening in high-pressure contexts: *“Yes, yes, yes... it’s really like when you don’t really listen to understand but to get some advantage. You nod, but you’re just waiting to get what you need”* (P15).

Taken together, these reflections suggest that listening under strain was rarely a neutral experience. When disagreement, emotional intensity, and power asymmetry converged, listening could become a morally and relationally loaded act. It could function as emotional courage, relational preservation, identity expression, or strategic adaptation. In hierarchical contexts, the findings suggest that this also depended on whether one’s expression was experienced as legitimate, safe, and consequential within the interaction.

Rather than a stable interpersonal skill, listening in these contexts emerged as a fragile relational stance negotiated in real time, shaped by values, relational stakes, and structural conditions of voice and authority. The participants’ accounts indicate that such listening involved managing internal reactions while maintaining outward relational presence. In conflict-laden exchanges, listening appeared to function as a stabilizing mechanism, preserving relational connection despite identity threat or evaluative tension. This positions listening under strain as a boundary condition for relational models of listening, where its core mechanisms become most visible yet most fragile, and where listening shifts from a default relational process to an actively regulated and negotiated achievement.

Table 1 summarizes the five themes.

Table 1 reframes listening as a dynamic system shaped by readiness, effort, expression, and relational impact. It illustrates the dynamic interplay between conditions, motivation, expression, impact, and strain, with “Listening When It’s the Hardest” intersecting all other themes, thus highlighting its role as a boundary-testing and revealing context for relational listening. Taken together, these five themes depict listening as a multifaceted, relational, and effortful phenomenon. Rather than unfolding passively or automatically, listening emerged in the participants’ accounts as co-constructed, shaped by internal motivation, environmental cues, relational dynamics, and the emotional climate of the moment. It was described as both seen and felt, expressed behaviorally yet grounded in intention. Its impact extended beyond individual conversations, influencing emotional relief, relational trust, and at times, identity. Listening was perceived as being under strain when tensions, vulnerability, or disagreement required presence despite discomfort.

4.6 Subgroup Differences in Listening Experiences

Analysis of the subgroup dynamics indicated that the core thematic structure was found across participants, but that there were meaningful differences in emphasis and experiential framing. Gender, age group, and relationship status differentially affected how listening was interpreted and evaluated. Importantly, these subgroup variations did not introduce new themes; they reflected differences in how the same five core themes were experienced, prioritized, and enacted across social positions. Given the small number of participants within each subgroup, these observations should be interpreted as exploratory and descriptive rather than as evidence of systematic subgroup differences.

4.6.1 Gender

Gender comparisons revealed differences in emphasis. Women more frequently referenced care, sympathy, emotional safety, and relational validation, whereas several male participants framed listening in instrumental or outcome-oriented terms. For example, one female partic-

Table 1. Themes in Israeli participants' listening experiences.

Themes	Description	Codes
1. Relational Conditions That Make Listening Possible	Conditions that create emotional and interpersonal space for listening to occur, including trust, closeness, and psychological safety.	Relational Closeness, Environmental Support, Attentional Capacity, Readiness to Engage
2. The Motivational Pull to Truly Hear	Internal motivators such as care, interest, and effortful attunement fuel the listener's intention to engage.	Curiosity and Interest, Emotional Resonance and Care, Openness to New Perspectives, Purposeful Attention
3. What Listening Looks and Feels Like	Verbal and nonverbal cues, felt presence, and authenticity signal to the speaker that they are being heard.	Verbal Markers of Engagement, Congruent Signals, Disengagement Cues, and Authenticity in Listening
4. How Listening Changes Us	Emotional and relational effects of being listened to, including relief, safety, deeper self-understanding, and connection.	Emotional Relief, Psychological Safety, Increased Self-Expression, Relationship Strengthening, Listening as a Transformative Force
5. Listening When It's the Hardest	The emotional, relational, and ethical challenges of listening in disagreement, conflict, or high-stakes moments.	Listening Fatigue, Power and Hierarchy, Empathic Strain, Listening as Emotional Labor, Emotional Overload, Containment and Fatigue, Withdrawal and Avoidance, Listening With a Goal, Collapse Without Purpose, Curiosity (in conflict), Conditional Openness, Willingness, Relational Tone and Respect, Trust as a Buffer, Rules and Boundaries

ipant described listening as grounded in felt care: *"Feelings, it's my feeling that the person in front of me cares, so it makes me feel like she's good"* (P3). She further emphasized validation, stating, *"I feel as if I'm being listened to, as if the very thought means that I'm interesting to the other person"* (P3). Similarly, an older female participant linked listening to sympathy and relational connection: *"There is a connection when we look at each other. And it also has to do with sympathy, in my opinion. You listen to someone you have sympathy for... If you don't appreciate someone and you don't have sympathy for them, then they will talk, and you won't listen to them as much"* (P20).

By contrast, male participants more often linked listening to observable action or practical importance. One participant reflected, *"I told a friend about a problem at work, and he listened to me and also took steps to try to help"* (P2), equating listening with behavioral follow-through. Another explained, *"If it's not something that's going to be important to them in some way or another, then they won't listen to me... We listen when it's important to us"* (P4), thus framing listening as driven by relevance and utility.

4.6.2 Age Groups

Age-group comparisons revealed differences in emphasis and experiential framing. All five core listening themes appeared across age groups. However, developmental variation emerged in how listening was interpreted, valued, and integrated into relational life. Participants aged 18–30 frequently described listening as energizing, reciprocal, and expanding. Listening was framed as an active dialogic process in which responsiveness and mutual engage-

ment invited continued sharing. One participant emphasized the conversational nature of being heard: *"It wasn't just listening but also conversation... you see that the person is really listening to you"* (P18). Another highlighted how perceived attentiveness motivates openness: *"When people listen to me, it gives me a feeling of okay, there's a person who is interested in this, so I want to share more"* (P13).

Participants aged 31–50 more often described listening as dependent on cognitive and emotional resources. Listening was framed as requiring deliberate focus, effort, and the management of competing demands. One participant reflected on the mental effort involved: *"It takes resources from me. You need to be attentive... you need to be focused... You need a moment to put your thoughts aside because you want to listen"* (P19). Similarly, another participant emphasized single-task presence as essential to listening quality: *"You don't need to be busy with anything else, just with what you're doing now, here and now"* (P10).

Participants aged 51–87 emphasized listening as grounded in empathy, reciprocity, and sustained relational closeness. Listening was framed less as activation and more as sympathy and enduring connection, while also acknowledging its emotional labor. One participant described listening as fundamentally empathic and morally grounded: *"A true desire for empathy, kindness... a soft heart that truly wants first to understand... it's not always about solving, it's about simply listening"* (P16). She also acknowledged the strain involved in sustained listening: *"It's so exhausting... I really, really understand that she needs it at that moment"* (P16). A second participant emphasized reciprocity and shared emotional exchange: *"Every morning we pour*

out the previous day... we really enjoy it... we ask questions and consult, not just tell" (P20). She further linked listening to sympathy and closeness: "You listen to someone you have sympathy for... everything breaks down into sympathy... into love, into closeness" (P20).

4.6.3 Relationship Status Differences

Relationship status further shaped listening experiences, revealing differences in emphasis rather than different thematic structures. Single participants more frequently described listening as affirming, empowering, and motivational. By contrast, married participants more often framed listening as an ongoing relational practice embedded in long-term dynamics, requiring effort, negotiation, and sustained attention. For example, a single participant stated, "Being listened to makes you feel important" (P18). Another single participant reflected on the confidence-enhancing effect of being heard: "Seeing that there's a person who sees what... hearing what I'm saying... it raises self-confidence" (P11), whereas a married participant noted, "Very close relationships actually make listening harder" (P1). Similarly, another married participant described listening as requiring deliberate effort and focus: "It takes resources from me. You need to be attentive... you need to be focused" (P19).

4.6.4 Ethnicity

Note that only 2 out of the 20 participants in our sample identified as Arab, which likely explains why no ethnic differences emerged in the analyses. Further studies with a greater numerical balance between Arab and Jewish-Israeli participants would contribute to identifying potential differences.

5. General Discussion

This study explored core experiences of listening in Israeli culture based on a thematic analysis of participants' everyday narratives, with findings primarily reflecting Jewish-Israeli Hebrew-speaking communicative contexts. The five themes suggested that listening was a relational, emotional, and culturally-situated phenomenon rather than a discrete skill or linear process. Listening was deeply intertwined with trust, emotional presence, relational history, and mutual effort that was shaped by shared Israeli norms, emotional expectations, and relational dynamics. Rather than portraying listening as a stable ability, the participants described being listened to as a convergence of attentional presence, emotional responsiveness, and social alignment. These findings extend the literature on relational models of listening, including Episodic Listening Theory and perceived partner responsiveness, by documenting culturally situated insights into how listening is experienced and evaluated in everyday Israeli life.

This study makes two theoretical contributions. In terms of relational architecture, the five-theme model points

to structural components of listening that are theoretically plausible beyond the Israeli context, while requiring further cross-cultural examination, such as attentional presence, emotional responsiveness, motivational willingness, signal authenticity, and psychological safety as found in Episodic Listening Theory and perceived partner responsiveness. In this sense, the model is best understood as a theoretically plausible framework for examining listening beyond the Israeli context, rather than as evidence of cross-cultural generalizability, in that it articulates core relational processes through which listening is experienced as meaningful.

At the level of enactment and interpretation, the findings suggest that these relational mechanisms were expressed, signaled, and evaluated through culturally structured communicative norms. In the Israeli context, listening emerged as enacted within an interactional environment characterized by verbal immediacy, emotional intensity, analytical engagement, and heightened social monitoring. These features were perceived as impacting how attentiveness, respect, and authenticity were interpreted and suggest that what may vary across cultures is not the relational need for listening, but the communicative cues and evaluative frameworks through which it becomes visible and recognizable. In this sense, the present model advances a culturally embedded relational account of listening, suggesting that these structural relational mechanisms may capture broader listening functions, while leaving their cross-cultural scope as a question for future research. This distinction helps reposition listening theory by treating cross-context generalization as an empirical question and by foregrounding culture as a constitutive rather than peripheral dimension of relational listening.

The participants described listening as embodied and affectively charged, and as often being intertwined with experiences of connection, recognition, or their absence. These accounts emphasized the felt quality of being heard and pointed to the ways in which attentional presence and emotional responsiveness were experienced as relational signals, not techniques. These characterizations align with theoretical work positioning listening as grounded in attentional presence, emotional investment, and the experience of being genuinely understood (Bodie, 2012; Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022; Reis and Clark, 2013; Reis et al., 2017).

5.1 Subgroup Differences

Gender, age group, and relationship status did not yield specific thematic structures; the same five core themes appeared across participants. However, meaningful differences emerged in emphasis and experiential framing, suggesting that listening in Israeli culture may be structurally coherent yet socially modulated. Gender differences were evaluative rather than structural. Women more frequently emphasized emotional attunement, sympathy, and relational validation, whereas several men foregrounded ac-

tion, relevance, and outcome orientation. Both are consistent with established components of high-quality listening, including attentional presence, benevolent intention, and responsiveness (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). The age-related differences similarly reflected shifts in experiential emphasis rather than thematic divergence. Younger adults more often described listening as energizing, reciprocal, and relationally expanding, consistent with dyadic models that conceptualize responsiveness as mutually reinforcing (Reis et al., 2004). This relational activation is also congruent with emerging evidence that high-quality listening can elicit *kama muta*, a feeling of being moved through intensified communal sharing (Saluk et al., 2025). Midlife participants more frequently described listening as contingent on cognitive and emotional resources, and as influenced by competing demands. Older adults emphasized patience, empathy, and sustained commitment, echoing Rogeian conceptions of empathic understanding (Rogers, 1957; Rogers and Farson, 1957) while also underscoring the emotional labor involved in maintaining presence. Relationship status was also affected by experiential meaning. Single participants often framed being listened to as affirming and identity-strengthening, consistent with research linking perceived listening to authenticity and self-esteem (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). Married participants more frequently described listening as an ongoing relational practice requiring effort and negotiation. In a cultural context where close relationships are marked by high emotional intensity and direct exchanges (Katriel, 2004), listening within enduring bonds may thus function as relational maintenance under conditions of expressive involvement and accumulated history. In contrast, in less stable relationships, listening may more readily amplify affirmation and connection.

5.2 Affective Components of Listening in the Israeli Context

Listening in the Israeli context was primarily defined by its contingency on relational closeness and psychological safety. The participants repeatedly described how listening flourished when interactions were grounded in emotional security and mutual respect. This emphasis on relational safety mirrors the broader cultural dynamics in Israeli communication, where emotional expressiveness coexists with strong social monitoring and situational caution that can create complex tradeoffs between openness and boundary management (Gelfand et al., 2011; Katriel, 2004). This finding resonates with theories of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) and with the Israeli cultural emphasis on directness, emotional immediacy, and social connectedness (Berkovich and Eyal, 2018b; Katriel, 2004).

In Israeli communication, high involvement and verbal expressiveness are often understood as markers of care rather than interruption (Katriel, 2004). The participants reflected this dynamic: listening was possible when relational trust allowed for openness even amid emotional in-

tensity. Recent research on Israeli team contexts has similarly demonstrated that when leaders intentionally create conversational spaces that minimize interruptions and authorize longer speaking turns, team members experience heightened psychological safety and a stronger sense of being heard (Bouskila-Yam and Zaidman, 2025).

Beyond these relational conditions, listening was portrayed as a deliberate, motivational act requiring openness, curiosity, and engagement. This motivational aspect of listening also resonates with Israeli cultural tendencies toward pragmatic, information-focused communication, where active listening often reflects a deliberate focus on clarity, analysis, and cognitive engagement alongside emotional involvement (Hofstede, 2001; Katriel, 2004; Kiewitz et al., 1997). Participants spoke about their internal drive to listen, rooted in empathy, interest, and relational commitment. These narratives align with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), which emphasizes the need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence in building meaningful engagement. The participants' emphasis on emotional connection, autonomy, and care reflects how listening can fulfill basic psychological needs not only for the speaker but also for the listener as an intentional relational act.

Equally central was the visibility and felt presence of listening. The participants emphasized that listening was not simply an internal state, but something made tangible through behavior, tone, and emotional attunement. Their sensitivity to the authenticity of listening signals such as eye contact, nodding, and congruent verbal responses mirrors global findings on nonverbal immediacy and perceived authenticity in listening (Bodie, 2011; Collins et al., 2024; Weger et al., 2014). However, the participants also described a uniquely heightened awareness of whether such cues were genuine or merely performative. This cultural sensitivity may stem from Israeli norms that prioritize honesty, immediacy, and emotional directness over politeness or deference (Berkovich and Eyal, 2018a; Katriel, 2004). In this sense, listening was judged not only by outward signals but by their emotional congruence; i.e., whether the listener was truly present or simply enacting a socially expected role.

Listening also emerged as transformational, both emotionally and relationally. Participants described high-quality listening as providing psychological relief, self-understanding, and encouraging interpersonal trust. These outcomes align with research showing that listening supports emotional regulation, self-reflection, and relational well-being (Weinstein and Itzchakov, 2025). Elsewhere, meta-analytic work has shown that perceived high-quality listening promotes resilience, self-insight, and interpersonal trust across relational contexts (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022). Notably, the participants framed these effects as central rather than incidental to why listening matters, especially in Israeli settings where emotional resilience and

interpersonal solidarity are highly valued social resources (Bleich, 2017; Gelfand et al., 2011; Shapira et al., 2025). Here, listening functioned as a relational currency, offering not only immediate comfort but also long-term shifts in how individuals relate to themselves and others. This relational impact of listening has also been observed in Israeli team environments, where participants described how extended, uninterrupted listening created lasting shifts in trust and collaborative openness within groups (Bouskila-Yam and Zaidman, 2025).

Although many of the outcomes described by the participants resonate with core Rogerian ideas, including emotional relief, self-clarification, and the experience of being deeply understood, the present findings also qualify and extend this tradition in important ways. Rogers conceptualized listening as a relatively stable relational orientation that facilitates growth when empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard are consistently present (Rogers, 1957; Rogers and Farson, 1957). In contrast, the participants in this study described listening as episodic. Experiences of being truly listened to were depicted as emerging transiently, particularly under emotional strain, disagreement, or relational asymmetry, rather than as an enduring interpersonal climate. The participants consistently distinguished between observable listening behaviors and the felt authenticity of emotional presence, and emphasized that techniques such as paraphrasing or probing were only meaningful insofar as they conveyed genuine care, openness, and benevolent intention.

This distinction is consistent with contemporary listening research showing that speakers' perceptions of being listened to are more predictive of relational and emotional outcomes than listeners' behaviors per se (Itzhakov et al., 2017; Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022; Weinstein and Itzhakov, 2025), as well as with recent conceptualizations of a Rogerian listening schema that emphasize relational stance and underlying beliefs rather than technique. Together, these findings suggest that while Rogers' humanistic insights capture the relational essence of listening, the lived experience of being heard is impacted by situational demands, emotional risk, and relational context in ways that were not considered as central to early therapeutic formulations. Finally, the participants consistently described listening as most revealing and effortful under conditions of emotional strain or disagreement. These difficult listening conditions may reflect broader societal dynamics in Israel, where communication often mirrors underlying power hierarchies, political tensions, and group-based inequalities, particularly in intergroup settings (Bekerman and Horenczyk, 2004; Maoz, 2004).

The theme of 'Listening When It's the Hardest' captured the ethical and relational stakes of listening during conflicts, a familiar experience in a society marked by enduring political tensions and cultural divisions (Ren and Schaumberg, 2024). The participants described listening as

a deliberate choice to remain engaged despite discomfort or disagreement. At the same time, some accounts indicated that listening under strain could take on a strategic or transactional quality, in which people engaged in surface-level listening to achieve personal goals or navigate high-pressure situations. These accounts align closely with theories of emotional labor that distinguish between surface regulation and deeper emotional alignment in interpersonal roles, participants' descriptions of "holding back", "forcing themselves", or remaining present despite anger reflect the regulation of emotional expression in service of relational goals (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015).

The participants' views of listening during disagreements also resonate with conflict communication research, which emphasizes how identity threat, perceived disrespect, and evaluative defensiveness shape conversational breakdown (Itzhakov et al., 2017; Ren and Schaumberg, 2024). The participants' narratives indicated that when disagreement heightened vulnerability, listening required deliberate regulation of ego involvement and the restraint of reactive impulses. Comparable dynamics have been identified in Israeli team settings, where high-stakes conversations required emotional restraint and sustained listening effort to maintain group cohesion and navigate disagreement productively (Bouskila-Yam and Zaidman, 2025). In Israeli interpersonal life, such moments were described as tests of relational character: they not only demanded patience but also emotional fortitude and purpose. When enacted with attention, comprehension, and benevolent intent (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022), listening can buffer identity threat and sustain psychological safety even amid disagreement. Conversely, when listening is perceived as performative or inattentive, it amplifies vulnerability and reinforces silence. This pattern is consistent with research linking employee voice and silence to work-related rumination, turnover intention, job satisfaction, and broader well-being outcomes (Du Plessis and De Beer, 2022).

In the Israeli context, these mechanisms unfold within an interactional environment marked by directness, rapid turn-taking, and strong normative evaluation. Emotional intensity and open disagreement increase the relational stakes of listening, while tight social expectations heighten sensitivity to authenticity and power asymmetry. Thus, remaining present during conflict represents a broadly human challenge that is inflected and intensified by the communicative norms of Israeli society.

5.3 Implications for Management and Policymaking

From an organizational perspective, these dynamics parallel research on hierarchical voice and managerial evaluations of employee input. Voice behavior is inherently discretionary and shaped by employees' expectations that their contributions will be taken seriously and acted upon (Morrison, 2014). Research shows that managers not only evaluate employee voice by its content but also by its commu-

nicative manner and perceived legitimacy within hierarchical contexts (Stumpf, 2023). When hierarchical structures signal responsiveness, employees are more likely to interpret listening as credible; when leaders fail to act, the perception of being heard deteriorates (Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). The hierarchy of the voice framework also suggests that power asymmetries condition when and how speaking up is perceived as legitimate (Pfrombeck et al., 2022). The present findings extend these insights by showing that listening under strain functions as a relational regulator of hierarchy.

The present findings extend this line of inquiry by showing that similar evaluative processes operate at the interactional level, where attentional presence and relational authenticity shape whether listening is experienced as legitimate or dismissive.

These findings have practical significance in professional and hierarchical contexts. Although this study was not limited to organizational settings, many of the dynamics described, such as listening under power asymmetries, emotional strain, or goal conflict, echo hurdles faced by managers and teams (Bouskila-Yam and Zaidman, 2025; Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). The findings suggest that listening in such environments requires more than cognitive attentiveness: it involves emotional regulation, ethical intention, and relational commitment. Managers should be aware that listening is perceived not only through actions but through emotional congruence and authenticity, all of which are key factors in building responsive, inclusive, and resilient teams (Brunell et al., 2010; Collins et al., 2024; Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022).

In hierarchical and high-involvement communicative environments, promoting genuine listening may require deliberate structural practices. Managers can create listening-supportive climates by establishing interruption norms that distinguish engagement from dominance, encouraging extended speaking turns during high-stakes discussions, and modeling reflective pauses before responding. Explicitly signaling appreciation for dissenting or vulnerable contributions may help counteract the silence effects of power asymmetries. In expressive cultures where overlap and rapid turn-taking may signal involvement, leaders can clarify conversational expectations; for example, by designating moments for uninterrupted elaboration or structured rounds of response. Such practices do not suppress directness or emotional intensity but channel them in ways that preserve attentional presence, authenticity, and psychological safety.

The current findings also contribute to discussions of participation, industrial democracy, and the quality of working life by suggesting that listening under hierarchy is not only an interpersonal process, but also a condition that shapes whether employee voice is recognized, protected, and acted upon (Hauff and Rastetter, 2021; Torka et al., 2011).

5.4 Cross-Cultural Implications

From a cross-cultural management perspective, the findings suggest that managers should not aim to suppress high-involvement communication styles, but to structure them in ways that preserve inclusive and legitimate participation, particularly in multicultural or hierarchical teams where opportunities to contribute are not equally distributed. This reflects longstanding industrial democracy arguments that equitable participation requires both structural support and recognition of voice legitimacy (Hauff and Rastetter, 2021; Torka et al., 2011). In practice, this requires distinguishing between overlap that communicates engagement and interruption that restricts others' ability to contribute, while making explicit that discussion is intended to build cumulatively on prior contributions rather than reward conversational control. Managers can support this process by establishing interactional norms that encourage participants to acknowledge preceding contributions before advancing their own, which would help orient high-involvement styles toward solidarity and joint meaning-making rather than dominance. This type of approach is consistent with research showing that listening quality not only depends on observable behavior, but also on how that behavior is interpreted within relational and cultural contexts (Collins et al., 2024; Kluger and Itzhakov, 2022). These findings also resonate with intercultural communication scholarship by showing that conversational strategies such as overlap, directness, or indirectness cannot be interpreted independently of cultural expectations (Maltz and Borker, 2018; Tannen, 2005): what is heard as an interruption in one communicative system may function as solidarity or involvement in another, and what appears restrained or respectful in one context may be experienced as disengaged in another. By illustrating how listening cues are interpreted within an expressive, high-immediacy communicative culture, the present findings extend this intercultural insight to relational listening. In multicultural teams and global organizations, misjudgments about listening quality may therefore arise not from lack of care, but from divergent interpretive frameworks regarding engagement, emotional display, and turn-taking norms.

Taken together, the results suggest that listening is not a singular practice but a flexible, context-dependent relational process that can shift between care, emotional self-regulation, and strategic self-interest. This multidimensionality invites future research to examine how listening motives emerge in response to cultural expectations, emotional strain, and power dynamics. This study also invites reflection on the cultural and epistemological assumptions often embedded in dominant listening theories. Many widely accepted models of listening emphasize individual attentiveness, cognitive processing, or active feedback, which may not fully capture the emotional intensity, relational interdependence, and situational expressiveness that emerged in this Israeli context.

More broadly, the five-theme model not only reflects psychological mechanisms but also culturally situated expectations concerning authenticity, emotional courage, and relational accountability. By situating listening within Israeli communicative culture, the findings chart how attentional presence, psychological safety, motivational willingness, and perceived authenticity are co-shaped by broader social norms. Listening emerged in participants' accounts as a relational need enacted through culturally structured forms of immediacy, expressiveness, and social monitoring.

5.5 Limitations and Implications

Although this study presented a richly contextualized account of how listening is experienced in Israeli interpersonal life, several limitations must be considered. First, the data were based on retrospective self-reports, which may have been influenced by memory bias, emotional framing, or social desirability. Despite the fact that the sample was purposively diverse in terms of age, gender, region, and life experience, including some participants from non-Jewish and non-Hebrew-speaking backgrounds, these groups were not sufficiently represented to allow for meaningful cultural comparison. As a result, the findings primarily reflect Jewish-Israeli communicative norms and may not capture important variations in how listening is experienced in other cultural communities within Israel.

Future research could extend this work by examining how listening is experienced in other cultural and linguistic communities in Israel, including Muslim citizens, Russian-speaking immigrants, or religious and ethnic minorities such as Druze, Christians, and Bedouins. These groups may differ in norms of emotional expressiveness, conversational restraint, deference to authority, and interpretations of interruption or silence. Cross-cultural studies comparing expressive and more restrained communication styles could further clarify how listening is interpreted in relation to local norms and expectations. This would help inform the development of more inclusive listening frameworks that account for sociocultural variation in verbal intensity, emotional signaling, and relational expectations. Dialogue-based interventions, such as intergroup dialogue programs, conflict mediation initiatives, or inclusive workplace practices, could benefit from integrating listening models that are sensitive not only to individual skills but also to the emotional, cultural, and power-related dynamics that shape how listening is enacted and perceived in diverse societies.

Future research could also examine how listening and voice are enacted in flexible, hybrid, and digitally mediated work arrangements, where opportunities to speak, be heard, and interpret responsiveness may depend on technological affordances and work design (Knoll et al., 2022).

Conceptualizing listening as a relational, emotional, and context-sensitive process, rather than as a fixed skill

or technique, invites new approaches to listening training, assessment, and intervention. In Israeli and in similarly expressive cultures, efforts to enhance listening must not only address behavioral practices but also the need for emotional safety, self-regulation, and relational motivation. Interventions should aim to build environments that support emotional resilience, curiosity, and sustain trust, particularly during high-stakes or emotionally charged conversations. This underscores the importance of cultivating listening environments where leaders actively address relational asymmetries, support psychological safety, and model humility. For leadership development and cross-cultural management, the findings point to the need to move beyond technical listening skills and focus instead on fostering climates of emotional safety, dignity, and relational reciprocity across power gradients.

Overall, listening emerged as a dynamic and co-constructed process that is continually inflexed by cultural expectations, emotional climates, and relational histories. Within the Jewish-Israeli Hebrew-speaking contexts primarily represented in this study, supporting listening requires cultivating relational conditions that enable presence, emotional regulation, and meaningful connection, even in moments of disagreement or discomfort; a key need in interpersonal life where emotional expressiveness and deep-seated cultural tensions intersect (Katriel, 2004; Maoz, 2004).

Availability of Data and Materials

This study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/47ZKJ>), where the research questions, methodology, and analytic strategy were specified prior to data analysis. Due to the sensitive nature of the qualitative interview data, which include personal and potentially identifiable information, the full raw dataset is not publicly available. However, de-identified materials and data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding authors upon reasonable request, in accordance with ethical and privacy considerations.

Author Contributions

RR, GI, NW, and FKTM designed the research study. RR conducted the research and collected the data. RR and FKTM analyzed the data. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the data. RR wrote the original draft of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. GI and NW provided supervision throughout the research process. All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The research protocol was approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Partici-

pants at the University of Haifa (Ethics Approval Number: 282/24). All procedures were conducted in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines and regulations. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI-based language tools (e.g., ChatGPT) to assist with minor language editing and clarity. These tools were not used to generate data, conduct analyses, or develop the scientific content of the study. All outputs were carefully reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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