

Article type:
Original Research

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Development of a Grounded Theory-Based Model of Relational Listening in Couples

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Article history:

Received 21 Feb 2025

Revised 14 May 2025

Accepted 24 June 2025

Published online 01 Dec 2025

How to cite this article:

Gilak Hakimabadi, M., & Fazeli Mehrabadi, A. (2025). Development of a Grounded Theory Based Model of Relational Listening in Couples. International Journal of Body, Mind and Culture, 12(9), 31-42.



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to present a model of relational listening in couples that outlines the structure of relational listening.

Methods and Materials: The present study is a grounded theory of qualitative research design within its constructivist methodology. The research population includes specialists in the fields of psychology and counseling, as well as married men and women. For sampling, purposive sampling method was used. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation of the data was achieved, and ultimately, 21 participants (7 specialists in the field of psychology and counseling and 14 married men and women) were selected as the sample. The research tool was a semi-structured interview. Data coding for the analysis of the conducted interviews was performed using MAXQDA software in three stages: 1. Open coding, 2. Axial coding, and 3. Selective coding.

Findings: The results of the study indicate that the relational listening model derived from grounded theory comprises six main components, with the core category being listening wholeheartedly. The causal conditions identified in the model include cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (verbal and non-verbal) dimensions. The key contextual factor influencing the process is interest in the partner. Intervening conditions such as distractions, lack of emotional control, and interruptions can affect the effectiveness of listening. Strategies used to facilitate wholehearted listening are categorized into internal and external approaches. The outcomes of this model encompass communicative, cognitive, and mental health benefits, demonstrating the multifaceted impact of relational listening.

Conclusion: Ultimately, it can be said that being an active listener involves understanding the other person and then being understood. Until conversation partners feel acknowledged, they are less likely to resolve their conflicts.

Keywords: Relational listening, interpersonal dynamics, constructivist methodology, grounded theory, qualitative coding.

Introduction

In communication studies and psychoeducational therapeutic contexts, effective listening has long received widespread attention and is widely lauded as a valuable relational skill (Korobov, 2023). High-quality listening was first conceptualized in the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers. Rogers described optimal listening as attending to the other's needs, creating unconditional positive regard and a nonjudgmental atmosphere, and responding to feelings conveyed through the speaker's verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Weinstein et al., 2023).

In fact, listening is a multifaceted yet ultimately holistic process that encompasses attention, comprehension, and benevolent intention. Attention involves focusing on the speaker's message while minimizing external and internal distractions, as evidenced by behaviors such as nodding and maintaining eye contact (Itzchakov et al., 2022). Comprehension refers to accurately grasping the speaker's cognitive and emotional states, as evidenced by interpreting messages and posing open-ended questions (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Benevolent intention includes listening with positive attention, validation, and a non-judgmental attitude, which supports psychological security (Yeomans et al., 2020). Together, these components promote effective and empathetic listening.

In this study, we examine relational listening, also known as reciprocal listening (Valikoski et al., 2023). This listening style fosters and sustains a confidential relationship between people, thereby increasing their interactional engagement. Therefore, we define relational listening as the awareness of others' feelings and emotions (Keaton et al., 2015).

According to Burleson & Goldsmith (1996), "calm is not a substance that one person gives to another. However, it helps 'anxious others in developing new appraisals of the stressful situation'. In other words, the role of a supportive listener is to assist a stressed other in revealing ways that create new methods of thinking and feeling about a problem (Keaton et al., 2015). Studies (Keaton et al., 2015; Lepore & Smyth, 2002) have shown that mental and physical health improve when individuals write or talk about stressful experiences in narrative form. In fact, both the support provider's soothing efforts and the supporter's approach to

discussing a problem can influence the process of feeling better, which is often observed in couples' relationships. Therefore, examining relational listening in couples and identifying indicators of this listening is highly effective, as numerous studies have shown that inadequate listening contributes to marital distress and other problems. For example, Kuhn et al. (2018) examined the Power of Listening: Lending an Ear to the Partner During Dyadic Coping Conversations, and the results showed that attentive listening while the other partner expressed stress was significantly associated with better dyadic coping behaviors and greater relationship satisfaction. Lachica et al. (2023) also examined the effects of individualized behavior skills training for listening behaviors of adult participants in romantic relationships. The results revealed that behavioral skills training, including minimal encouragers, supportive statements, and paraphrasing, was effective for four participant couples in improving their listening behaviors.

Thus, identifying specific listening behaviors that elicit perceived attention and responsiveness is valuable; even techniques commonly used in marital therapy explicitly acknowledge the importance of high-quality listening in fostering perceived responsiveness and positive relationship outcomes. The speaker-listener technique is a structured method in which partners take turns speaking (pauses are prohibited; partners may only speak when indicated, for example, by a signal light), and instead of interpreting their partner's statements, they only listen to paraphrase what they heard from their partner (to enhance accurate comprehension as well as the speaker's sense of understanding) (Itzchakov et al., 2022). Many marital therapies employ similar techniques, thereby confirming the basic assumption that listening behavior is effective only when partners feel they are being responded to. When conversational partners do not feel understood, they are less likely to resolve their differences and conflicts (Livingstone et al., 2020). Other empirical findings also highlight the positive effects of listening, including a study by Keaton et al. (2015) titled "Relational listening goals influence how people report talking about problems," which demonstrates that relational listening goals enhance the likelihood of interpersonal communicative responses. Tustonja et al.'s (2024) study showed that active listening plays a key

role in fostering meaningful communication and promoting positive interactions. Active listening requires full participation and empathetic understanding, and in interactions with young people, it creates a safe environment that fosters trust, self-esteem, and emotional growth (Roos et al., 2023). Operationalizing a Key Concept for Social Relations found that feeling heard comprises five components at both the interpersonal and collective levels. At the interpersonal level, individuals feel listened to when they have 1) voice, 2) receive attention, 3) empathy, and 4) respect. At the collective level, people need to experience 5) common ground.

This study addresses the critical importance of relational listening in fostering connection and mutual understanding within couples, particularly in contemporary society, where "You're not listening!" is a typical relational complaint. Couples desire their needs, preferences, and perspectives to be acknowledged and validated. When they feel unheard, they may become resentful, angry, defensive, and socially excluded. Listening and feeling heard are fundamental elements of social life and, indeed, the cornerstones of close relationships, which are essential for healthy self-development. Therefore, despite recognizing listening as a vital component of relational development, there remains no comprehensive theoretical framework that systematically explains the processes of relational listening in couples. Existing research has primarily focused on general communication skills, leaving the specific dynamics and dimensions of relational listening underexplored. This lack of a comprehensive model hinders a nuanced understanding of the intricate mechanisms through which couples actively listen, accurately interpret, and appropriately respond to each other's communication. Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing theoretical insights and practical interventions to strengthen relational bonds. Consequently, the primary research question guiding this study is: What does a grounded theory model of communicative listening in couples look like? And what are its key components?

Methods and Materials

Participants

The research population comprises psychologists and counselors, as well as married men and women. A total of 21 participants (7 specialists in psychology and counseling, and 14 married men and women) were selected as the sample.

First, the sex distribution was five male participants (36%) and nine female participants (64%). The participants' education levels included PhD 4 (%28.5), Master's 3 (%21.5), Bachelor's 4 (%28.5), Associate 2 (%14.5), Diploma 1 (%7). Years of marriage included under 10 years 7(%50), 10-20 years 3 (%21.5), more than 20 years 4 (%28.5).

The participants, who specialized in psychology and counseling, included one male participant (14%) and six female participants (86%). Participants' marital status included single (1; 14%) and married (6; 86%). Work experience included 5-3 years 2 (%28.5), 7-5 years 2 (%28.5), 9-7 years 1 (%14.5), more than 9 years 2 (%28.5).

Procedure

The present study employs a grounded theory of qualitative research design (Corbin, 2021), within its constructivist methodology. A common feature of various grounded theory approaches is that data collection, analysis, and theorizing occur simultaneously. Grounded theorists do not start their work with a preconceived theory; instead, they concentrate on a specific domain and allow the theory to emerge and evolve from the data within that domain (Safaei Movahed, 2021; Corbin, 2021; Afshar & Asakereh, 2016).

The research population comprises psychologists and counselors, as well as married men and women. For sampling, purposive sampling was employed. In purposive sampling, the main criterion is the selection of environments, times, and individuals who can provide the necessary information to answer the research questions (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Therefore, to select the sample of specialists, information was collected from counseling and psychology specialists in clinics in Tehran. To gather information from married women and men with Master's and Doctoral degrees, the National Library of Tehran was visited, and interviews were conducted with selected participants. For other married participants with a diploma or Bachelor's degree, this was achieved by informing participants about the study's purpose and participation through the Ponak Neighborhood House website and virtual channels. As a

result, individuals volunteered to participate in the research. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation of the data was achieved; ultimately, 21 participants (7 specialists in psychology and counseling and 14 married men and women) were selected for the sample. This range allows for a thorough exploration of shared experiences while avoiding redundancy. Previous grounded Theory studies on listening and relationship dynamics have similarly demonstrated that a sample size in this range is adequate to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. Data saturation was monitored throughout the study to ensure that no new themes emerged, confirming the sufficiency of the sample size. Inclusion Criteria for the Sample, for specialists in the fields of psychology and counseling: 1) Age between 30 and 60 years. 2) PhD in counseling or psychology. 3) A minimum of 3 years of professional experience. The exclusion criterion for specialists was: 1) Incomplete responses. For married men and women, the inclusion criteria were: 1) Age between 18 and 60 years, 2) Education ranging from high school diploma to higher degrees, and 3) At least 3 years of marriage. The exclusion criterion for married participants was: 1) Incomplete responses.

The research tool was a semi-structured interview. The interviews were recorded in person by the researcher and subsequently transcribed. Subsequently, the transcribed texts were prepared in Word format and analyzed. The interview questions were designed based on the study's theoretical and empirical background. Before the interviews began, participants were informed of the research objectives and assured of confidentiality to protect their identity and personal information. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 50 minutes and was conducted between October and November 2024.

Materials

Some of the interview questions were: 1) What does "really listening" to your romantic partner (by the other partner) mean to you? How does it look in practice? (In other words, when a romantic partner is speaking, how does the other partner act if they genuinely want to listen?) 2) What consequences does "really listening" to your romantic partner have? Please explain. 3) What strategies would you suggest for "really listening" to your romantic partner? Please explain.

Analysis

In this research, data coding for the analysis of the conducted interviews was performed using MAXQDA software in three stages: 1. Open coding, 2. axial coding, and 3. Selective coding. Open coding involved breaking down the interview transcripts into initial categories by labeling and conceptualizing phenomena. In the axial coding phase, these categories were interconnected using a paradigm model that included components such as causal conditions, contextual conditions, the core category, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences, to develop more precise explanations of the phenomena. The final stage, selective coding, focused on integrating and refining categories around a central core, resulting in the formulation of a comprehensive analytical model (Afshar & Asakereh, 2016; Corbin, 2021).

One notable aspect of qualitative research is the study's accuracy, which can be assessed using various criteria. One of the most effective is the Guba-Lincoln criterion, which was used in this research. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the present study, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checks, and peer debriefing—elements of the "credibility" criterion in the (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) method—were employed. To verify the credibility of the "member checks method," the study results were presented to participants. This process serves both to validate the findings and to control or correct any subjective bias on the part of the researcher, ultimately securing their approval. Additionally, for peer debriefing, the results were submitted to a professor skilled in qualitative research methods for review and feedback. The criterion of confirmability, which assesses the alignment of the study's findings with empirical evidence, was also examined and validated in this research.

Findings and Results

In this study, the data were coded by separately coding all interviewees' responses to the interview questions, following the first step (open coding), and identifying the key points in each question's text. Finally, first the themes and then the categories were identified based on semantic similarities. Then, all categories identified in the open coding stage were recombined based on contextual, interactional, and consequential

aspects, and, finally, a more abstract and general model that expresses the main research question was derived.

In Table 1, the extracted themes and categories were combined with axial coding operations (to extract paradigm components, including: causal conditions, core category, intervening conditions, Contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences) and selective coding (to

refine categories and determine final categories) to elevate the research categories to a higher abstract level. This means that, because the categories exhibited significant semantic and conceptual similarities, we summarized them again into several more general, analytical, and abstract categories.

Table 1*Coding, Determination of Categories and Their Types*

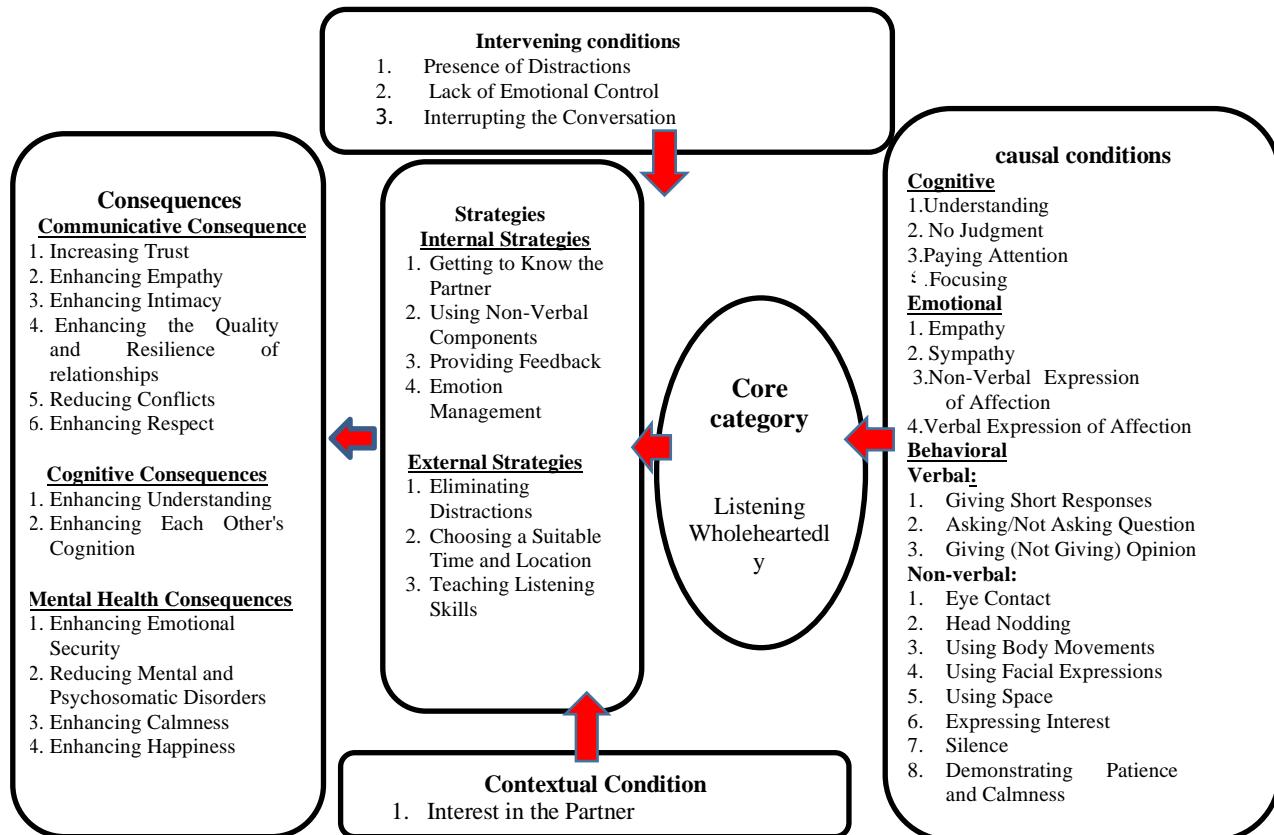
		Coding Themes and Categories		
Category Type	Final Categories	Categories	Themes	Examples of Participants' Quotes
causal conditions	Cognitive	Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the partner's perspective • Understanding the partner's behavior • Clarifying to enhance understanding of the topic • Comprehending the content of the partner's conversation • Understanding the underlying need in the partner's conversation • Understanding the partner's emotions 	We listen carefully to what she says and try to understand her feelings.
		No judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No judgment • Having correct judgment 	Looking without judgment and without us blocking the relationship so that it reaches a dead end.
		Paying Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying attention to the conversation • Simultaneously focusing on both the explicit and implicit content of speech • Paying attention to the partner 	Please pay close attention to your partner so that they feel supported.
		Focusing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on the partner's speech • Looking at the partner with focused attention • Not paying attention to other people and objects • Not paying attention to the phone • Not being distracted by the surroundings • Not engaging in other tasks • Not being mentally preoccupied with another critical issue 	She should not engage in any special activities while speaking.
	Emotional	Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having empathy • Understanding the partner's feelings • Putting oneself in the partner's position 	We can try to put ourselves in the other person's shoes when we listen.
		Sympathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing sympathy • Sympathizing with the partner 	Empathize with the other person's feelings.
		Non-Verbal Expression of Affection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging the sense of touch during conversation • Resting one's head on the partner's shoulder • Touching the partner's hand • proximity during conversation • Physical contact at the end of the partner's speech • Hugging • Kissing • Caressing the partner • Touching the partner • Smiling 	You can hug your partner.
		Verbal Expression of Affection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing emotions in speech • Using affectionate words 	If words like "darling, my love" are used between conversations, it means that we are simply arguing, not a war.
Behavioral	Verbal	Giving Short Responses		It would be great to add an 'Aha' moment.
		Asking/Not Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking about the partner's concerns • Not asking questions 	Shows interest by asking questions while talking
		Giving (Not Opinion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not giving an opinion • Giving an opinion • Expressing a relevant opinion 	He comments on time.
	Non-Verbal	Eye Contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prolonged gaze • Maintaining eye contact • Gazing into the partner's eyes 	In my opinion, listening to your partner means looking them straight in the eye.
		Head nodding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nodding the head • Gesturing with the head 	Can nod during conversation

<p>Strategies</p> <p>External Strategies</p> <p>Internal Strategies</p> <p>Consequences</p> <p>Communicative Consequences</p>	Using Body Movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaning the body towards the partner • Mirroring the partner's body posture • Affirming with body parts • Reacting with body parts • <u>Appropriate body language</u> 	If necessary, use your body language to signal to the person that you are being heard.
	Using Facial Expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye and eyebrow movements • Using a smile during conversation • Displaying surprise during conversation • Feedback through facial expressions 	If a smile is needed, give it whatever it takes to put a smile on your face, a frown, whatever it takes to make that person realize they are being heard.
	Using Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate distance • Talking face-to-face • Sitting across from each other 	When the partner is speaking, the other person should sit opposite the partner to show respect.
	Expressing Interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hugging • Affectionate gaze • Caressing the partner while listening • <u>Touching the partner's hand</u> 	You can also make your presence felt and provide a sense of security to the other person by touching and holding their hands.
	Silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining silence • Being silent 	Sometimes, it is essential to maintain silence.
	Demonstrating Patience and Calmness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being calm • Eliminating hasty behaviors • Not showing impatience 	Don't act in a way that shows your impatience.
	Eliminating Distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quieting the children • Putting away electronic devices • Setting aside other tasks • Putting aside the phone • Turning off the TV • Reducing distracting noises • <u>Eliminating distracting people</u> 	If they are engaged in an activity at that moment, they should stop.
	Choosing a Suitable Time and Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A quiet space • Choosing the right location • Setting aside time for conversation • Setting aside enough time 	Providing an appropriate location and a secure, calming environment.
	Teaching Listening Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating in couples' skill-building classes • Learning through Instagram videos • Training active listening techniques by professionals • <u>Training active listening techniques through books</u> 	Learn active listening techniques from experts.
	Getting to know the Partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding your partner's redlines • Recognizing your partner's strengths • Discovering your partner's interests • Learning about your partner's personality • Exploring your partner's morals 	We need to understand the other person's ethical framework to communicate effectively.
<p>Internal Strategies</p> <p>Emotion management</p> <p>Increasing trust</p> <p>Enhancing Empathy</p> <p>Enhancing Intimacy</p> <p>Enhancing the quality and resilience of relationships</p> <p>Reducing Conflicts</p> <p>Enhancing Respect</p>	Using Non-Verbal Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforcing non-verbal behaviors • Eye contact • Affectionate gaze • <u>Confirming speech with head nodding</u> 	Wherever necessary, she acknowledges what you say by nodding her head.
	Providing Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving appropriate feedback • <u>Verbal feedback during the partner's speech</u> 	Let's give her feedback.
	Emotion management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding negative emotional states • Managing anxiety • Efforts to increase psychological resilience • Avoiding fatigue and impatience • Giving each other positive feelings • Not shouting when mistakes are made • Speaking in a calm voice • Avoiding arguments 	Perhaps working on your mental capacity before entering into an emotional relationship is a prerequisite.
	Increasing trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building trust between partners • The partner's trust in expressing their problems 	Genuinely listening to your partner will foster trust and enable you to say to them things they cannot say to others.
	Enhancing Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing empathy with the partner • <u>Improving empathy</u> 	We can empathize better.
	Enhancing Intimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a closer connection • Fostering a sense of belonging • Increasing intimacy with each other • <u>Creating love and affection</u> 	We become friends, and our relationship becomes more intimate.
	Enhancing the quality and resilience of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the quality of the relationship • Building a strong relationship • Strengthening the relationship 	The most important consequence is the strengthening of relationships.
<p>Consequences</p> <p>Communicative Consequences</p>	Reducing Conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing tension between partners • Solving problems • <u>Reducing conflicts between partners</u> 	Many minor issues that cause arguments and fights will disappear.
	Enhancing Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing each other • Valuing the partner 	They respect each other more publicly and highly value one another.

Cognitive Consequences	Enhancing Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the partner's perspective Understanding the partner's behavior Understanding the partner's emotions and words 	To feel understood by someone who understands your feelings and words.	
	Enhancing Each Other's Cognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing mutual understanding between partners Understanding the partner and their way of thinking 	Listening to the other person can help you get to know them better, as well as their mindset and line of thought.	
Mental Health Consequences	Enhancing Emotional Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeing the partner as a haven Feeling secure Creating an emotional safe base 	She feels that she is in a safe place in this universe, where she can take refuge from wherever she is tired, and tell them.	
	Reducing Mental and Psychosomatic Disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The partner does not feel stressed when revealing their weaknesses Reducing anxiety Reducing depression Reducing psychosomatic illnesses 	It is also not far-fetched that it can reduce psychosomatic diseases.	
	Enhancing Calmness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding peace of mind The partner's comfort 	It provides individuals with a sense of peace.	
	Enhancing Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sense of joy Feeling of happiness 	Glad you were able to speak up.	
Contextual Condition	--	Interest in the Partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Love to the spouse Affection between partners Interest in conversing with the partner 	It is the love and affection between the parties.
Core Category	--	Listening wholeheartedly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening with all one's being Full physical and mental attention To listen with your heart 	Listen to everything she says with all your heart.
Intervening Conditions	--	Presence of Distractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noise from Television Other tasks of the partners Busy schedule Side tasks Phone calls Presence of a third person Presence of distracting noises during conversation Presence of a distracting person during conversation Looking at the clock during a conversation Home intercom People coming and going 	While listening to your partner, another person's phone may ring, and they may be occupied, interrupting the conversation.
	--	Lack of Emotional Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excessive fatigue Having anxiety Presence of emotions Anger from not being understood by the partner High emotions Aggression 	We may become overly emotional at times and say only what we want, which may make the other person angry.
	--	Interrupting the Conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interrupting the partner's speech Cutting off the partner's speech 	Jump into their conversation.

As shown in the table above, all themes and categories are grouped into six main components: core categories, contexts, consequences, intervening conditions, causal

conditions, and strategies. Finally, the final model was constructed around the core category, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

Relational listening model in couples

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined interviewees' perspectives on relational listening in couple relationships through a qualitative grounded theory approach. Using grounded theory, which posits that each model comprises six main components, the findings identified categories that significantly contribute to relational listening and, for each, themes reflecting its multifaceted nature, including its dimensions, challenges, strategies, and consequences.

Core Category

Listening Wholeheartedly: Participants indicated that wholehearted listening in a couple relationship is essential for intimacy and emotional understanding, and it strengthens trust and bonding. It also increases communication effectiveness and reduces conflict by ensuring that partners truly feel heard and valued. This finding echoes research by Halone & Pecchioni (2001),

which stated that each person is expected to listen with their heart.

Causal Conditions

Cognitive: Participants indicated that couples must cognitively pay attention to one another while listening. They need to understand what is happening. Furthermore, each partner should concentrate on the situation. They view the topic of conversation from their partner's perspective and want the other to grasp their meaning. Various studies are consistent with this conclusion; for example, [Roos et al. \(2023\)](#) showed that feeling heard includes receiving attention. When speakers look at their listeners and recognize that they have their attention, they gain psychological security, which allows them to introspect non-defensively ([Castro et al., 2018](#)). Additionally, [Yeomans et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrated that listening embodies a nonjudgmental attitude that fosters psychological security.

Emotionally, participants stated that we should listen to our partner with empathy and compassion to understand their perspective. Additionally, we should utilize both verbal and nonverbal expressions of affection. This listening enables shared feelings and mutual support, and strengthens emotional bonds between partners. The study by [Roos et al. \(2023\)](#), which showed that listening involves an empathetic component, is consistent with this finding. [Halone & Pecchioni \(2001\)](#) demonstrated that relational listening involves emotional components (e.g., empathy and sympathy), consistent with the findings of the present study.

Behavioral :Participants stated that couples who listen effectively know when to comment, ask questions, and seek clarification. Specifically, each partner should be able to nod in understanding, maintain eye contact during the conversation, and remain silent when appropriate. Consequently, each partner can support the other when necessary. Couples who practice relational listening well can demonstrate interest, compassion, and concern throughout every interaction. This finding aligns with existing literature, including [Itzchakov et al. \(2022\)](#), which showed that good listeners pay attention to speakers, and they convey these perceptions through observable behaviors such as eye contact, facial expressions, follow-up questions, and reflections. They show attention through effective behaviors such as nodding, maintaining continuous eye contact, and orienting their body posture toward the speaker. These findings are also consistent with those of studies by [Van Quaquebeke & Felps \(2018\)](#) and [Halone & Pecchioni \(2001\)](#).

Intervening Conditions

Presence of Distractions: Participants noted that distractions such as television, engaging in other activities by emotional partners, excessive workload, side tasks, the presence of a third person, disruptive noises, or mobile phone use can significantly hinder effective communication. These external interruptions reduce the listener's ability to focus, leading to misunderstandings and diminished emotional connection, and diverting attention from the dialogue.

Lack of Emotional Control: High levels of fatigue, anxiety, or intense emotions, such as anger, impair emotional regulation during conversations. Participants reported that elevated emotions, such as frustration,

aggression, or inappropriate outbursts, can escalate conflicts and prevent constructive dialogue. When emotional management is lacking, partners may react impulsively, which hampers mutual understanding and deepens emotional distance.

Interrupting the Conversation: Participants stated that interrupting or cutting off a partner while they are speaking disrupts the natural flow of communication and signals disrespect or impatience. This behavior prevents the listener from fully understanding the speaker's message and can lead to feelings of invalidation or frustration.

The results of [Itzchakov et al. \(2022; 2020\)](#) are also aligned with the present study's findings on intervening factors, which showed that good listeners demonstrate their perceptions by avoiding distractions that create external disturbances (e.g., contextual messages, other people in the room) and/or internal disturbances (e.g., irrelevant thoughts). In contrast, inattentive listeners can distract their speakers, thereby preventing self-affirmation, self-awareness, and introspection.

Contextual Condition

Interest in the Partner: Participants indicated that a genuine interest in one's romantic partner is a fundamental foundation for relational listening, as it enhances attentiveness and emotional engagement. This interest motivates active listening behaviors, such as empathetic responses and non-verbal cues, which strengthen relational bonds. Consequently, expressing interest in a partner's well-being fosters a deeper understanding and mutual support within the relationship.

Strategies

Internal Strategies: Participants indicated that getting to know the partner, using nonverbal cues, providing appropriate feedback, and managing one's emotions are essential internal strategies for enhancing listening. These practices cultivate empathy and create a supportive environment for open communication. Being attuned to your partner's feelings helps strengthen emotional connection and trust.

External Strategies: Minimizing distractions such as noise and interruptions, selecting a calm, private setting, and developing effective listening skills are external strategies. Participants noted that these measures help maintain focus and ensure that conversations are meaningful, respectful, and productive.

The current study's findings on strategies align with those of Lachica et al. (2023, who showed that behavioral skills training, including minimal encouragers, supportive statements, and paraphrasing, was effective for couples in improving their listening behaviors. The results also align with Itzchakov et al.'s (2020) study, which found that while some people are naturally good listeners, others can improve their listening skills through training.

Consequences

Communicative Consequences: Participants emphasized the importance of relational listening in couples, noting that it fosters greater trust, empathy, and intimacy, thereby strengthening the emotional bond. It also improves relationship quality and enhances stability. Over time, these positive communication patterns help establish healthy listening behaviors that promote respect and minimize conflicts, creating a more harmonious and resilient relationship.

Cognitive Consequences: Improved listening yields greater understanding between partners, thereby increasing mutual awareness and knowledge of each other's perspectives. Participants indicated that this heightened awareness not only reduces misinterpretations but also promotes a more accurate perception of one another's needs and intentions, thereby facilitating more adaptive and supportive interactions.

Mental Health Consequences: Participants reported that relational listening enhances emotional security, reduces psychological and psychosomatic symptoms, and promotes calm. Overall, it contributes to increased happiness and emotional well-being for both partners, supporting mental health.

The results of this study regarding the consequences of relational listening are also consistent with findings from many other studies, including research by Kuhn et al. (2018), which showed that attentive listening while a partner expresses stress was significantly associated with better dyadic coping behaviors and higher relationship satisfaction. Similarly, the results align with (Itzchakov et al., 2020), who found that listening (both verbal and non-verbal) and perceived responsiveness of the partner had impacts on the speaker in three domains: cognition (which includes open-mindedness, attitude change, awareness of contradictions, self-enhancement, and positivity resonance); affect (self-esteem, autonomy,

relatedness, relationship satisfaction, positive emotions, and well-being); and behavior (self-disclosure, interpersonal chemistry, efficient negotiations, helping behavior, effective feedback, and constructive disagreement). Additionally, these findings are consistent with studies by Castro et al. (2018), Kluger et al. (2021), Livingstone et al. (2020), Reis et al. (2017), and Tustonja et al. (2024).

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of relationship listening and the identification of its dimensions, intervening factors, strategies, and consequences in determining the success of couples' relationships. Listening is a multifaceted yet ultimately holistic process that involves attention, understanding, and positive intent. Good listeners pay attention to speakers, understand what they communicate, and do so with a benevolent intent toward the speaker (Itzchakov et al., 2022). Active listening requires the listener to try to understand the speaker's experience without the interference of interpretive frameworks. Since its introduction, active listening has become part of communication training programs in various contexts, both within and outside therapeutic environments. It has become an integral communication skill in everyday life (Tustonja et al., 2024). The primary goal of listening is to establish emotional connections with others and attempt to understand their feelings. This type of listening is called relational listening, which describes concern and awareness of others' emotions and feelings. Relational listening is associated with empathy and a relational communication style. People who report using this form of listening tend to be more extroverted and social (Keaton et al., 2015). These listeners actively focus on others' concerns without judgment and are generally perceived as likable. They also demonstrate optimism, honesty, attention, and understanding through both verbal and non-verbal immediacy. Overall, good supportive listeners respond to others' emotional needs with empathy (Bodie & Jones, 2012). Therefore, identifying specific listening behaviors that foster perceptions of attention and responsiveness is valuable. In fact, one common technique in marital therapy, the speaker-listener technique, explicitly highlights the importance of high-quality listening in fostering perceived responsiveness and positive relationship outcomes (Itzchakov et al., 2022). Many marital therapies employ similar techniques, thereby supporting

the fundamental assumption that listening behavior is effective only when partners feel they are being responded to. When conversation partners do not feel understood, they are less likely to resolve their differences and conflicts. Even in conversations about joyful events, a lack of enthusiastic support from romantic partners—such as indifference or reference to a negative event—is strongly associated with relationship distress (Livingstone et al., 2020). Ultimately, being an active listener does not mean being a "sponge" that passively absorbs information; instead, it involves actively engaging in the conversation with one's thoughts and feelings. In fact, active listening means understanding the other person and then being understood, a process that can be difficult for everyone to learn and apply (Tustonja et al., 2024).

The study on relational listening has several limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative research, a small sample size of 21 participants, and a limited demographic scope. The subjective nature of qualitative research may affect the generalizability and objectivity of the conclusions. The sample size is small and geographically restricted, limiting its diversity. Additionally, the study may be subject to social desirability bias, in which participants may provide responses perceived as socially acceptable or positive. Therefore, future research should address these limitations by using larger, more diverse samples and by exploring alternative data-collection methods.

Based on the study results, it is suggested that couples participate in training programs on active and relational listening, which are effective in fostering satisfying relationships. It is also recommended that mental health professionals organize workshops on relational listening for couples. Furthermore, couples should make efforts to manage their emotions while listening and conversing with their partner. This study examines the relational listening model with its dimensions, strategies, and consequences in couples and provides insights for psychologists, family counselors, and couples. It also suggests that family dynamics and the effective relational listening model in couples should be examined to help them build strong, high-quality relationships.

Future research could include quantitative validation of the relational listening model and dimensions to strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Intervention-based studies could also examine the

effectiveness of targeted interventions for couples, such as relational listening. In addition to developing intervention protocols to improve relational listening, longitudinal studies of couples could be designed to track how their relationships develop over time. These avenues could provide practical advice for couples and professionals and provide deeper insight into the complex dynamics of relational listening dimensions, strategies, and outcomes.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their gratitude and appreciation to all participants.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study included the fact that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was conducted independently, with personal funding and without financial support from any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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