

Listener Preferences and Empathic Response Styles

James B. Weaver, III  
and  
Michelle D. Kirtley  
Auburn University

Please address correspondence to:  
James Weaver, Director  
Behavioral Research Laboratory  
Department of Communication  
Auburn University  
Auburn, AL 36849-5211  
(205) 844-2756  
INTERNET: Jim.Weaver@mail.auburn.edu

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Abstract

Linkages between four listener preferences (people-, action-, content-, and time-oriented) and three empathic response styles (empathetic responsiveness, perspective taking, and sympathetic responsiveness) were examined. Data from an extensive survey reveal that those scoring high on people-oriented listening have a tendency to be sympathetic but not empathetic with regard to another in an aversive situation. Conversely, individuals scoring high on both the action-oriented and time-oriented listener preference exhibit a tendency to feel little concern or pity for others in need, which is possibly due to their own emotional vulnerability. And, those scoring high on content-oriented listening exhibit the ability to interact with emotionally upset others without experiencing a congruent affective response. Taken together, these findings provide a strong foundation for further research into the links between individual differences in listening and empathic response styles.

## Listener Preferences and Empathic Response Styles

What are the social and emotional components that underlie individual differences in listening? It has long been argued that an effective listener must be appreciative of, discriminative toward, and responsive to the thoughts, feelings and emotions of others (Bostrom, 1990; Rhodes, 1989 ; Watson and Barker, 1984; Wolvin, 1990; Wolvin & Coakley, 1992). The ability to respond to others empathically, in particular, has been proposed as the crucial emotive dimension of effective communication (Floyd, 1985; Gompertz, 1960; Redmond, 1985), in general, and listening (Arnett & Nakagawa, 1983; Stewart, 1983), in particular.

### Empathic Response Styles

Despite its apparent centrality and importance to listening, the concept of empathy has often proven problematic for communication scholars. One reason for this situation appears to be the wide range of conceptualizations offered for "empathy." Varied definitions for empathy--including caring and feeling for, being sensitive to, and/or sympathizing with another (cf. Bruneau, 1989)--have rendered what, at first glance, appears to be a poorly articulated multidimensional concept. However, a recent synthesis of the broad, interdisciplinary literature on empathy has offered clarification of the predominant constructs underlying the concept. Specifically, building on previous theory and research, three empathic response styles--empathetic

responsiveness, perspective taking, and sympathetic responsiveness--were isolated (Richendoller & Weaver, in press).

Empathetic responsiveness is the construct of empathy most related to the original conceptualization of Einfuhlung or "feeling into" (Lipps, 1907). Empathic response style has carried various labels. For some, it is simply "empathy" per se (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987); others have termed it either "emotional empathy" (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) or "emotional contagion" (Stiff et al., 1988; Tamborini & Mettler, 1990). Common among these differing viewpoints is the idea that this is "an explicitly affective aspect of empathy, which occurs when one person experiences an emotional response parallel to, and as a result of, observing another person's actual or anticipated display of emotion" (Stiff et al., 1988, p. 199). Empathetic responsiveness is, in other words, a congruent affective response to overt or covert cues of another's affective state that can be experienced in both joyful and sad situations.

Perspective taking is, both conceptually and semantically, the most widely agreed upon empathic response style. For example, Mead's (1934) description of someone putting "himself in the place of the other individuals implicated with him in a social situation" (p. 218) is, over fifty years later, similarly defined as "the ability of an individual to adopt the viewpoint of another" (Stiff et al., 1988, p. 199). Researchers recognize perspective taking as a process that broadly involves imagining oneself in the place of another (Davis, 1980, 1983a, 1983b; Tamborini & Mettler, 1990; Zillmann, 1991).

Sympathetic responsiveness, on the other hand, is the newest and least clearly developed empathic response style. It comprises feelings of sorrow, compassion, or concern for another resulting from consideration of their plight (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Wispé, 1986). This construct emerges from between the concepts, originally derived from German, of Einführung--feeling into someone--and Mitführung--feeling with or for someone (Strayer, 1987). The juxtaposition of these concepts creates a hybrid construct referred to as "emotional concern" by some (Davis, 1980, 1983a, 1983b; Stiff et al., 1988) and simply "sympathy" by others (Batson et al., 1987; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Hoffman, 1977, 1990). The essence of the construct is this: when you feel sympathy for another with a problem, you do not actually experience emotions parallel to theirs'; instead, you experience different emotions that are associated with concern or sorrow for another.

Research has shown considerable individual differences in empathic response styles across different personality types. Richendoller and Weaver (in press) found, for example, that highly sociable individuals expressed considerable concern for the welfare of others (i.e., sympathetic responsiveness). These individuals also endorsed the idea of perspective taking. At the same time, however, the highly sociable individuals did not appear to experience empathetic responsiveness in that they did not report experiencing emotions congruent with those of another. On the other hand, highly egocentric individuals exhibited a distinct lack of both empathetic and sympathetic responsiveness.

These findings highlight the utility of the multidimensional conceptualization of empathy and suggest that a unique pattern of empathic response styles might underlie individual differences in listening styles.

### Individual Differences in Listening Styles

Listening has also long been recognized as a multidimensional concept (cf. Bostrom, 1990; Rhodes, 1989 ; Watson and Barker, 1984; Wolvin, 1990; Wolvin & Coakley, 1992). Only recently, however, research has highlighted the fact that there is considerable variation in how individuals perceive, process, remember, and understand oral messages. Most people, it appears, listen more as a function of habit than conscious choice relying primarily on a single, predominant listening style (Aaronson & Scarborough, 1977; Langer, 1980; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). Further, most listeners appear hesitant to switch from their predominant, preferred listening style (Langer, 1980) even when use of an alternative approach could enhance their ability to receive and recall information (Barker, 1971; Bostrom, 1990; Mandler, 1987; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Nichols & Stevens, 1957; Roach & Wyatt, 1988; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Wolvin & Coakley, 1992).

A recently developed technique for assessing an individual's predominant listening style is the Listener Preference Profile (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1992, 1994). Conceptualizing listening preferences as attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of information reception and encoding, Watson, Barker, and Weaver, (1994)

identified four distinct listening styles: people-, action-, content-, and time-oriented. People-oriented listening emerged as a preference where concern for others' feelings and emotions appear paramount. People-oriented listeners are viewed as trying to find areas of common interest with others and responsive to the emotions of others. Action-oriented listeners prefer to receive concise, error-free presentations. Individuals endorsing the action-oriented listener preference appear to be particularly impatient and easily frustrated when listening to a disorganized presentation. Content-oriented listeners reflect a preference for receiving complex and challenging information. They tend to carefully evaluate facts and details before forming judgments and opinions. Time-oriented listeners, on the other hand, demonstrate a preference for brief or hurried interactions with others. They tend to let others know how much time they have to listen or they have a tendency to tell others how long they have to meet.

How are listening preferences and empathic response styles linked? Given the unique patterns evident for different personality types (cf. Richendoller & Weaver, in press), it seems that significant differences in empathic response styles should also be expected across the four listener preferences. Specifically, we expect the people-oriented listener preference, because of the interpersonal nature of this concept, will be positively linked to all of the empathic response styles. The action-oriented listener preference, because it emphasizes a task completion approach, is expected to be negatively linked to all

three empathic response styles. The content-oriented listener preference poses a more complex situation. Does this preference reflect a genuine interest in others, suggesting a positive link to the empathic styles, or are content-oriented listeners just extremely pensive listeners? Finally, it is expected that the time-oriented listener preference, because it reflects an impatient nature, will be negatively linked to each empathic response style.

In order to test these considerations, this study examines the links between the four dimensions of the Listener Preference Profile (people, action, content, and time) and the three empathic response styles. Specifically, over an extended period of time a large sample of college undergraduates completed the LPP-16 and a combination of several inventories measuring empathic response styles. Stepwise linear regression was then used to uncover patterns of associations within these data.

#### Method

##### Respondents

Female ( $n = 555$ ) and male ( $n = 721$ ) undergraduates at a large state university participated in the study. The respondents were enrolled in an introductory professional communication class that is a curriculum requirement for most university majors. Although the respondents did not receive course credit for their voluntary participation, they were told that completion of the self-administered questionnaire was a prerequisite for other extra-credit awarding research. Data were collected during the initial weeks of the Spring 1992 and Spring

1993 academic quarters before listening preferences and related concepts were discussed in the course.

### Listener Preference Orientations

Respondents completed the sixteen item Listener Preference Profile (LPP16; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1994) as part of a self-administered questionnaire that also incorporated several other communication related inventories. Respondents were asked to indicate how well each of 16 statements applied to them using a five point scale. The scale included the levels "Always" (4), "Frequently" (3), "Sometimes" (2), "Infrequently" (1), and "Never" (0). As outlined in previous research (Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1994), item responses were summed to form four measures: people- (PLP;  $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ,  $\alpha = 0.61$ ), action- (ALP;  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $\alpha = 0.64$ ), content- (CLP;  $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ,  $\alpha = 0.58$ ), and time- (TLP;  $M = 1.85$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ,  $\alpha = 0.65$ ) oriented listening preference.

Correlations computed across the four listening preference measures revealed a weak, negative link between PLP and TLP ( $r = -0.12$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). A weak, positive association between CLP and TLP was also evident ( $r = 0.08$ ,  $p < .003$ ). Moderate links were evident between the ALP and both the CLP ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) and TLP ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < .0001$ ) measures.

### Empathic Response Measures

A 34 item inventory was developed to measure empathic response styles. These items were adapted from several inventories including the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980), the Questionnaire Method of Emotional Empathy (Mehrabian

and Epstein, 1972) and those used by Stiff et al. (1988) and Tamborini and Mettler (1990).

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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With several items included as fillers, only the 20 statements that conformed to the rigid definitions of empathetic responsiveness (ER), perspective taking (PT), and sympathetic responsiveness (SR) were included in the study. Specifically, seven items were used to operationalize empathetic responsiveness (see Table 1). These included, for example, "I don't get upset just because a friend is acting upset" (ER1) and other statements that tapped (both positively and negatively) the respondent's tendency to affectively experience an emotion congruent with another's emotion. Perspective taking was operationalized by the five items in Table 2--including "Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place" (PT1)--that assessed the tendency to imagine oneself in the place of another. And, sympathetic responsiveness, defined as the feeling of pity, sorrow or concern for another, was operationalized using the eight items detailed in Table 3. "I am the type of person who is concerned when others are unhappy" (SR1) is an example.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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The 34 items were presented in a random order. Respondents were asked to rate the applicability of each statement to

themselves on a scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (0) to "strongly agree" (4).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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## Results

Stepwise regression analyses were used to explore the links between the four listener preference orientations (people, action, content, and time) and the twenty empathic response measures. Specifically, for each listener preference index the eight empathetic responsiveness (ER1-8), five perspective taking (PT1-5), and seven sympathetic responsiveness (SR1-7) items, and respondent gender were entered individually into a linear regression equation in a stepwise manner. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a conservative level ( $p < .05$ ) of assessment of each variable's contribution to the model was used prior to their entry into the equation. The same criterion was also used for variable retention. For ease of explication, the results pertaining to each of the listener preference orientations are presented separately.

### People-Oriented Listening

The results for the people-oriented listener preference (PLP) measure can be seen in Table 4. The regression model for the PLP yielded nine regressor variables which explained almost a third of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.32$ ;  $F(9, 1266) = 66.74$ ;  $p < .0001$ ;  $C(p) = 6.35$ ). As expected, the associations between the PLP index and empathic response measures tended to focus primarily on

sympathetic responsiveness. Specifically, a positive trend was found for all but one of the five SR variables that entered the equation. "I am the type of person who is concerned when others are unhappy" (SR1), for example, yielded a positive ( $b = 0.11$ ) relationship. Similarly, "I sometimes don't feel very sorry for people when they are having problems" (SR3) emerged in a negative ( $b = -0.04$ ) relationship.

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 Insert Table 4 about here  
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The two empathetic responsiveness regressor variables included in the model indicated a lack of empathy for others. For example, "When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces" (ER7) yielded a negative relationship ( $b = -0.07$ ) while "I am able to remain calm even though those around me worry" (ER5) was positive ( $b = 0.05$ ).

One relationship with a perspective taking item was included in the model. This indicated a positive relationship with "I sometimes try to understand how people feel by looking at things from their perspective" (PT2;  $b = 0.05$ ).

The significant gender effect ( $b = -0.06$ ) revealed that females ( $M = 3.28$ ) scored higher on this listener preference orientation than did males ( $M = 2.99$ ).

#### Action-Oriented Listening

The regression model for the action-oriented listener preference (ALP) measure, presented in Table 5, involved five predictor variables which explained 6% of the variance ( $R^2 =$

0.06;  $F(5, 1270) = 17.00$ ;  $p < .0001$ ;  $C(p) = 4.31$ ). As can be seen, a tendency towards a lack of sympathetic responsiveness was evident across the three SR variables that entered the equation. "I sometimes don't feel very sorry for people when they are having problems" (SR3;  $b = 0.08$ ) was positively linked to ALP while "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" (SR7;  $b = -0.07$ ) and "Hearing about someone else's misfortune makes me feel sad" (SR8;  $b = -0.06$ ) were negatively related.

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 Insert Table 5 about here  
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The regression model also included a single empathetic responsiveness item. "I become nervous if others around me seem nervous" (ER3;  $b = 0.06$ ) was positively related to ALP. One perspective taking item also entered the equation. A positive relationship was evident between ALP and "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other person's point of view" (PT3;  $b = 0.05$ ).

#### Content-Oriented Listening

The regression model for the content-oriented listener preference (ALP) measure is detailed in Table 6. Five predictor variables were included in the equation explaining 10% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.10$ ;  $F(5, 1270) = 28.08$ ;  $p < .0001$ ;  $C(p) = 7.54$ ).

As can be seen, respondent gender was the first variable to enter the model. The significant gender effect ( $b = 0.01$ )

revealed that males ( $M = 2.43$ ) scored higher on this listener preference orientation than did females ( $M = 2.19$ ).

Three of the empathetic responsiveness items also entered the model for content-oriented listening. One item was positively related: "I don't get upset just because a friend is acting upset" (ER1;  $b = 0.05$ ). The other two--"The people around me have a great influence on my moods" (ER4;  $b = -0.04$ ) and "When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces" (ER7;  $b = -0.10$ )--were negatively linked.

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Insert Table 6 about here  
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A single perspective taking item--"I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision" (PT4;  $b = 0.08$ )--was included in the equation for CLP.

#### Time-Oriented Listening

The results for the time-oriented listener preference (TLP) measure can be seen in Table 7. The regression model for the TLP involved five regressor variables ( $R^2 = 0.06$ ;  $F(5, 1270) = 15.81$ ;  $p < .0001$ ;  $C(p) = 22.54$ ).

First to enter the model was the sympathetic responsiveness item "I sometimes don't feel very sorry for people when they are having problems" (SR3;  $b = 0.07$ ). In the same vein, "When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them" (SR2;  $b = 0.06$ ) was also included in the equation.

Two perspective taking items that entered the model were both negatively related to TLP. They were "I try to look at

everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision" (PT4;  $b = -0.07$ ) and "Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place" (PT1;  $b = -0.04$ ).

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Insert Table 7 about here  
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A single empathetic responsiveness item--"The people around me have a great influence on my moods" (ER4;  $b = 0.05$ )--was also incorporated into the stepwise regression model for time-oriented listening preference.

#### Discussion

The findings at hand, as expected, highlight distinct empathic response styles within each of the four listener preference orientations. The model for the people-oriented listening (PLP) measure was the most revealing and highlighted a strong relationship with sympathetic responsiveness. Specifically, this finding shows that individuals scoring high on the people-oriented listening preference are likely to express considerable concern for the welfare of others. This may be partially due to the fact that individuals likely to score high on PLP perceive themselves as better equipped with interpersonal communication skills which aid sympathetic helping and thus are more likely to be concerned about others (cf. Bandura, 1986). Further, the weak but significant association between PLP and the empathic response style item "I sometimes try to understand how other people feel by looking at things from their perspective"

(PT2) suggests that perspective taking may be linked with social functioning (cf. Davis, 1983a; Dymond, 1950; Hogan, 1969).

At the same time, however, the findings indicate that high PLP scorers are not likely to be empathetically responsive. That is to say, those individuals scoring high on the people-oriented listening preference exhibited considerable concern for the plight of others, without experiencing congruent emotions. Perhaps, given that PLP is the most socially-oriented listening preference, high PLP scorers manage to somehow override certain affective reactions so as to keep control of the situation and be ready to offer assistance. Interestingly, this pattern of empathic response styles is very similar to that reported by individuals scoring high on the personality dimension of extraversion (Richendoller & Weaver, in press). Clearly, further research exploring possible factors behind this unique pattern of empathic response styles is warranted.

The other three regression models, although explaining only a small proportion of the variance involved, provide interesting insights into some of the social and emotional factors that underly action-, content-, and time-oriented listening preferences. The models for the action(ALP)- and time(TLP)-oriented listening preferences, for example, both suggest that individuals scoring high on these measures are unsympathetic toward, if not uncaring about, others. It should not be concluded, however, that the action- and time-oriented listeners are unemotional since they admit that they respond to the nervousness (ER3) and moodiness (ER4) of others. Instead, it

appears that those scoring high on ALP and TLP, perhaps because they recognize their vulnerability to empathetic responsiveness, prefer to communicate and listen in a strictly business, "stick to the facts please" fashion.

The model for the content-oriented listening preference (CLP) measure is distinctively different from the other three. In particular, those scoring high on content-oriented listening exhibit the ability to interact with emotionally upset others without experiencing a congruent affective response. The portrait of individuals scoring high on CLP suggested by this pattern of findings is one of listeners who, presumably because of their emotional stability, are able to evaluate the broad range of information present during interpersonal communication (i.e., verbal, nonverbal, cognitive, affective) in an objective manner. Is it possible that this empathic response style tendency provides the content-oriented listener a unique advantage when interacting with others? Clearly, further research examining this proposition seems justified.

In summary, the results of this investigation highlight the different empathic response styles typical of people-, action-, content-, and time-oriented listening preferences. Specifically, the data at hand show that those scoring high on people-oriented listening have a tendency to be sympathetic but not empathetic with regard to another in an aversive situation. Conversely, individuals scoring high on both the action-oriented and time-oriented listener preference exhibit a tendency to feel little concern or pity for others in need, which is possibly due to

their own emotional vulnerability. And, those scoring high on content-oriented listening exhibit the ability to interact with emotionally upset others without experiencing a congruent affective response. Taken together, these findings provide a strong foundation for further research into the links between individual differences in listening and empathic response styles.

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Table 1

Empathetic Responsiveness: Statements, Means, and Standard Deviations

Statement	M	SD
ER 1 I don't get upset just because a friend is acting upset.	2.55	0.84
ER 2 I cannot continue to feel OK if people around me are depressed.	2.03	0.93
ER 3 I become nervous if others around me seem nervous.	1.73	0.87
ER 4 The people around me have a great influence on my moods.	2.52	0.92
ER 5 I am able to remain calm even though those around me worry.	2.46	0.90
ER 6 When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm.	2.45	0.93
ER 7 When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.	1.00	0.74

Table 2

Perspective Taking: Statements, Means, and Standard Deviations

Statement	M	SD
PT 1 Before criticizing someone, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.	2.45	0.90
PT 2 I sometimes try to understand how other people feel by looking at things from their perspective.	2.80	0.72
PT 3 I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the other person's point of view.	1.64	1.01
PT 4 I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.	2.77	0.75
PT 5 When I'm upset at someone I usually try to "put myself in his or her shoes" for a while.	2.07	0.89

Table 3

Sympathetic Responsiveness: Statements, Means, and Standard Deviations

Statement	M	SD
SR 1 I am the type of person who is concerned when others are unhappy.	3.06	0.75
SR 2 When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.	1.02	0.78
SR 3 I sometimes don't feel very sorry for people when they are having problems.	1.60	0.98
SR 4 When someone else is upset, I almost always try to console them.	2.85	0.78
SR 5 Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.	1.52	0.88
SR 6 I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend's problems.	2.42	0.99
SR 7 I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.	2.90	0.83
SR 8 Hearing about someone else's misfortune makes me feel sad.	2.62	0.78

Table 4

People-Oriented Listener Preference and Empathic Response Style:  
Linear Equation Following Stepwise Regression

Item	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	Model R <sup>2</sup>	F
SR 1	0.11	0.02	0.19	36.33**
SR 6	0.09	0.01	0.25	45.91**
SR 4	0.08	0.02	0.27	22.27**
ER 7	-0.07	0.02	0.28	18.34**
GENDER	-0.06	0.01	0.30	22.26**
ER 5	0.05	0.01	0.31	16.02**
SR 3	-0.04	0.01	0.31	9.55**
PT 2	0.05	0.02	0.32	7.78**
SR 7	0.04	0.02	0.32	6.57*
Intercept	2.07	0.09		538.55**

Note. All variables are presented in the order they entered the model.

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01

Table 5

Action-Oriented Listener Preference and Empathic Response Style:  
Linear Equation Following Stepwise Regression

Item	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	Model $R^2$	F
SR 3	0.08	0.02	0.04	16.57**
SR 7	-0.07	0.02	0.05	7.82**
ER 3	0.06	0.02	0.05	8.32**
PT 3	0.05	0.02	0.06	6.72**
SR 8	-0.06	0.03	0.06	5.05*
Intercept	2.12	0.10		475.63

Note. All variables are presented in the order they entered the model.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Table 6

Content-Oriented Listener Preference and Empathic Response Style:  
Linear Equation Following Stepwise Regression

Item	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	Model $R^2$	F
GENDER	0.01	0.02	0.04	36.64**
ER 7	-0.10	0.02	0.07	23.51**
PT 4	0.08	0.02	0.08	15.81**
ER 1	0.05	0.02	0.09	8.21**
ER 4	-0.04	0.02	0.10	4.35**
Intercept	2.14	0.10		493.35

Note. All variables are presented in the order they entered the model.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Table 7

Time-Oriented Listener Preference and Empathic Response Style:  
Linear Equation Following Stepwise Regression

Item	Parameter Estimate	Standard Error	Model R <sup>2</sup>	F
SR 3	0.07	0.02	0.03	14.22**
PT 4	-0.08	0.03	0.04	10.05**
SR 2	0.07	0.02	0.05	7.79**
ER 4	0.05	0.02	0.05	8.75**
PT 1	-0.04	0.02	0.06	4.32*
Intercept	1.84	0.10		113.49**

Note. All variables are presented in the order they entered the model.

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01