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Deep Listening Training to Bridge Divides: Fostering Attitudinal Change through Intimacy and Self-Insight

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ABSTRACT

Deep, high-quality listening that offers a nonjudgmental approach, understanding, and careful attention when speakers share disparate views can have the power to bridge divides and change speakers' attitudes. However, can people be trained to provide such listening while disagreeing with what they hear, and if so, are the effects of the listening training sufficient for creating perceptible change during disagreements? This study, conducted with delegates ($N = 320$) representing 86 countries experimentally tested a "deep" (otherwise termed "high quality") listening training against a randomly assigned subgroup of attendees who served as a "waitlist" control. During a conversation with another participant on a subject about which they strongly disagreed, participants who had completed a 6-h training over 3 weeks in high-quality listening demonstrated improvements in their observed listening behaviors, reported higher levels of interactional intimacy with conversation partners, appeared to increase their self-insight and subsequently, showed evidence of attitude change. Among the first studies to test semi-causal outcomes of high-quality listening training between attendees with diverse and contrary attitudes in a real-world, cross-national setting; we discuss the potential and limitations for listening training to support positive relations and an open mind in the context of discourse, disagreement and polarization.

Most people are born with the ability to *hear*, but developing the ability to *listen* to people may not come naturally. Listening is an important and active social behavior that conveys attention, comprehension, and personal valuing of speakers (Kluger and Itzchakov 2022). Listening quality varies from person to person across contexts, relationships and it depends on the topic and qualities of the conversation partner (Itzchakov, Castro, and Kluger 2016; Kluger et al. 2021). For example, the way people listen during a conversation with a family member as they drive their car might be quite different from how they listen to a friend in need, and even more so, when listening to a stranger expressing an opinion they sharply disagree with. Indeed, in contexts where contested topics are being discussed–it is quite difficult to provide high-quality listening (Creasey, Kershaw, and Boston 1999; Moin, Weinstein, and Itzchakov 2024a). Even if a person signals that they are listening, the very act of disagreeing can lead to a perception of poor listening by the speaker (Ren and Schaumberg 2023).

The primary goal of this project was to examine the effects of listening training purposefully designed to boost participants' listening to conversation partners holding opposing views to their own. We predicted that engaging in behaviors encouraged by the training, namely high-quality listening, not only leads to a more positive intrapersonal (i.e., lower defensiveness) and relational (i.e., interactional intimacy) experience but also raises

self-insight, resulting in downstream benefits including changing one's attitude.

By doing so, the study aimed at advancing the literature in three ways. First, it relied on an experimental design that compared the effects of listening training with a "waitlist" control, testing a fit-for-purpose listening training designed specifically for situations where a listener disagrees with a speaker's perspective. Second, it explored the use of observer ratings during naturalistic conversations. Third, it tested listening training effects in a diverse cross-national context with data collected from 320 participants representing 86 of 119 (72%) countries in attendance during the training.

1 | Can Listening Serve to Depolarize?

Listening and feeling listened to well can benefit conversants as they disagree. In conversations more broadly, the speaker, as the recipient of high-quality listening is likely to experience increases in well-being (Kluger and Itzchakov 2022; Lloyd et al. 2015; Weinstein and Itzchakov 2025), a sense of deep connection to their conversation partner (Reis and Shaver 1988; Zhou and Fredrickson 2023), and a willingness to continue sharing (Marcus and Swett 2002; Weinstein, Huo, and Itzchakov 2021).

Listening may be especially important, but also challenging, in the context of polarizing conversations, ones where individuals disagree on issues about which they feel strongly (Baumann et al. 2021; Petty and Krosnick 2014). These conversations are difficult because interlocutors feel threatened and protective of their core beliefs (Albarracín and Mitchell 2004; Minson and Dorison 2022). Such perceptions are barriers to individuals' willingness and effort to understand others (Hart et al. 2009; Nickerson 1998), and result in avoiding conversations to prevent discomfort and anxiety (Minson and Chen 2022) or even defensively bolstering initial attitudes (Heller, Pallak, and Picek 1973; Itzchakov and Kluger 2018). As a result of these experiences, listening may come less naturally to conversation partners who disagree than to partners who agree (Cohen et al. 2020), and disparate worldviews have the potential to be affirmed rather than aligned (Bail et al. 2018; Eveland, Henry, and Appiah 2023; Lin et al. 2023).

But if listening can be encouraged, it may prove to be particularly helpful in shifting the trajectory of such conversations from a destructive discord to a constructive open exchange of ideas, enabling conversation partners to engage across their differences. This idea is not new. Listening has been long believed to build bridges and increase understanding when the listener provides empathy, asks clarifying questions, and summarizes or paraphrases the speaker's words (Rogers and Farson 1957). Rogers also emphasised the importance of the listener's openness to expressed content, no matter their own position, which is likely to be reciprocated by the speaker (Rogers 1980). Supporting this view, recent research suggests that high-quality listening fosters the speaker's interest in learning more about their attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2018; Itzchakov and Reis 2021), for re-examining prejudices (Itzchakov et al. 2020), and increases listeners' and speakers' propensity for humility (Lehmann, Kluger, and Van Tongeren 2023). Ultimately, these processes reflect a move towards depolarization; Holding more moderate views and seeing the views of one's conversation partner as being more similar to oneself (Itzchakov et al. 2023a).

Research findings have shed some light on the reasons that high-quality listening fosters such openness to one's attitudes and willingness to reconsider them. High-quality listening can lead speakers to increase self-insight, a curiosity about how oneself is in relation to one's attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2018, 2020; Itzchakov and Weinstein 2021). Self-insight is important as it is believed to play a central role in attitude and behavioral change, often the intended outcomes of therapeutic and coaching interventions (Bozer and Jones 2018; Jennissen et al. 2018).

Alongside fostering self-insight to help individuals constructively *approach* conversations that may give voice to opposing views, listening can also mitigate concerns that lead individuals to *avoid* constructive engagement–such as feelings of self-protective tension and defensiveness (Weinstein, Itzchakov, and Legate 2022). Specifically, interacting with people from opposing social groups to one's own can lead to anxiety and avoidance and lead one to make assumptions about the existence of differences in the other group (Stephan 2014). In earlier research, high-quality listening conditions are thought to reduce defensiveness by providing social validation of the speaker's intrinsic self (Schimel et al. 2001).

The listener and speaker both stand to benefit because the positive relational climate brought on by listening feeds back to increased intimacy (Prager and Buhrmester 1998) and a more connecting (Broome et al. 2019) and psychologically safe (Castro, Kluger, and Itzchakov 2016, 2018) environment. Based on the interactional intimacy model put forth by Reis and Shaver (1988), when a speaker discusses a strong, and especially a polarizing opinion, with a conversation partner who responds to the disclosure by listening deeply, the experience should not only facilitate a positive relational experience but it should also result in the speaker feeling genuinely understood. In other words, the speaker's disclosure, in combination with the partners' responsive behaviors, facilitates *interactional intimacy*, intimacy specific to the conversation (Reis and Shaver 1988). Indeed, necessary and sufficient conditions for intimacy have been described as disclosing personal information about oneself, positive involvement, and a shared understanding (Prager and Roberts 2004, p. 46), conditions that a good listening partner can facilitate. Such intimacy mediates the relationship between self-disclosure and relationship-wide satisfaction (Lee, Gillath, and Miller 2019), and may give rise to self-insight and lower defensiveness, ultimately fostering a conscious sense of openness towards one's attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2023a).

1.1 | Can Individuals Be Trained to Become High-Quality Listeners?

Although not applied to polarized attitudes, listening training approaches have been used to help encourage more positive environments with teachers (Itzchakov et al. 2023b), employees in organizations (Itzchakov 2020; Itzchakov, Weinstein, and

Cheshin 2022), marital relationships (Garland 1981) and parent-child interactions (Graybill 1986; Gregson et al. 2016). These approaches promote high-quality listening by instructing attendees on the qualities of high-quality listening, giving opportunities for practicing listening in observed sessions, and then offering conversation circles that provide time to reflect, practice, and further develop listening mindsets and skills (Itzchakov and Kluger 2017). These interventions can help trainees to feel closer and more connected over time (Kluger et al. 2021), report more job satisfaction and less burnout (Itzchakov, Weinstein, and Cheshin 2022), and feel more psychological safety and autonomy at work (Itzchakov et al. 2023b).

A few real-world, experimental listening training studies that address broader conversations have measured effects in relation to a control group that received no training (Itzchakov 2020; Itzchakov, Weinstein, and Cheshin 2022, 2025; Itzchakov and Kluger 2017). However, the literature on listening training in the context where people significantly disagree is only emerging (Itzchakov et al. 2023a). It has rarely been tested experimentally against a comparison condition that allows researchers to measure causal or quasi-causal effects on outcomes under study, particularly outside of a lab setting. In addition, training that targets building core listening skills has not been applied to build individuals' openness to engaging with individuals with different perspectives. This is important because listening training not fit-for-purpose may focus on different qualities and outcomes, for example, in the different domains of sales and persuasion (Itani, Goad, and Jaramillo 2019), career development and reputation enhancement (Andersen 2008), or even (servant) leadership (Greenleaf 2002). It is yet unclear whether their training impacts would translate to these more challenging conversations.

Finally, more broadly, listening training and its effects have rarely been studied outside individualistic Western cultures. A recent meta-analysis (Kluger et al. 2023) reports most studies (exploring listening in work contexts) have been conducted on people from the USA (46%), Israel (15%), Germany (7%), and the United Kingdom (5%). Apart from those studies, research shows that people perceive themselves to be good at listening in Iran (Zohoori 2013), Asia (including Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia; Abe et al. 2013), Ireland and Australia (McDevitt et al. 1994). Listening competence is perceived differently across ethnicity (Dillon and McKenzie 1998) and there are differences in listening style preference between countries (e.g. Germany, Israel, and the United States; Kiewitz et al. 1997). Thus, a global perspective is essential because listening is understood to have the potential to enhance peacekeeping efforts (Beyene 2020; Cumberland, Deckard, and Ellinger 2021; Kasriel 2023).

2 | The Present Research

We tested the effects of a fit-for-purpose listening training program which aimed to develop listening skills in a cross-national setting specifically for the context of polarizing conversations, provided through the "Crossing Divides–Deep Listening project"–a joint initiative between the British Council and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as part of the BBC's centenary celebrations. The Crossing Divides project aimed to develop individuals' confidence in holding conversations with people who hold opposing views to their own by developing "deep" (hereafter termed "high-quality" because it was operationalized in a way consistent with this widespread term in the literature; Kluger and Itzchakov 2022) listening skills that conveyed attention, caring and understanding. As the listener is likely to experience tensions while listening to someone with an opposing view (Moin, Weinstein, and Itzchakov 2024a), the training included content to address challenges with the three core components of listening - such as mindfulness (Jones, Bodie, and Hughes 2019) to support *attention*; the use of language and judgments to support *understanding* (Rogers and Farson 1957); and finally addressing unconscious parts of the personality (known as "shadows"; Jung 1954) and self-compassion (Neff 2023) to overcome internal biases and address *caring*.

This field study compared the experiences of interlocutors who conversed about a socially divisive topic (more detail presented below under procedure) after having received the high-quality listening training with interlocutors from a randomly assigned "waitlist" control group who had not yet received the training. In line with the literature reviewed above, we predicted that the fit-for-purpose listening training would induce self-insight and lead to more open-mindedness in the experimental group, expressed as a change in attitude. We sought to test whether the main outcomes of speakers' self-insight and attitude change from the listening training were more affected by interactional intimacy (as an approach-oriented relational mediator) or by the alleviation of defensiveness (as an avoidant-oriented relational mediator).

We set out to test three hypotheses (H), graphically presented in Figure 1. Specifically, we anticipated that:

Hypothesis 1. *Listening training (as compared to the waitlist control) will predict interlocutors' (a) perceived change in attitude, (b) lower feelings of defensiveness, (c) greater interactional intimacy, and (d) greater self-insight.*

Hypothesis 2. *Downstream effects of the training on increased self-insight and attitude change will occur through reducing avoidance; lowering a person's feelings of defensiveness. Listening training (as compared to the waitlist control) will improve a person's propensity for attitude change, serially mediated by lower defensiveness and increased self-insight.*

Hypothesis 3. *Downstream effects of the training on increased self-insight and attitude change will occur by increasing a person's experience of interactional intimacy. Listening training (as compared to the waitlist control) will improve a person's propensity for attitude change, serially mediated by interactional intimacy and increased self-insight.*

2.1 | Listening Quality Observations

Independent observers (course facilitators) measured observable listening behaviors to determine listening quality during the conversations, as has been done in previous studies, and to overcome the limitations of self-reported listening ability

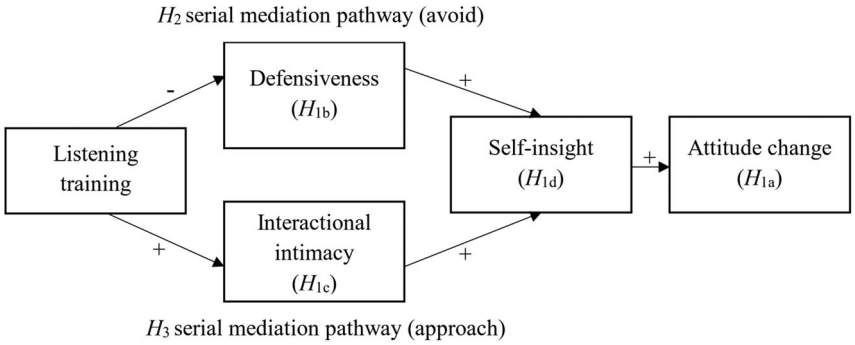

FIGURE 1 | Experimental hypotheses depicting dependent variables and serial mediation models from listening training.

(Garland 1981; Graybill 1986; Kluger and Bouskila-Yam 2017; Trahan and Rockwell 1999). Observers rated overt listening behaviors and nonverbal listening cues in situ (present in the virtual room with camera and microphone turned off) rather than via video recording for ethical reasons given the sensitive nature of conversations. This was also intended to minimize confounding effects such as hesitancy to speak openly because of the recording (Moin and Van Nieuwerburgh 2021; Speer and Hutchby 2003). Due to the number of resources, observers were present in a random portion of the experimental discussions that were held (see further details below in the *Participants* section).

2.1.1 | Tests for Consistency

Whereas most materials tested our dependent variables in the study, 10 items from a brief measure of personality were randomly inserted into the questionnaires to evaluate the integrity and consistency of participant responses (Tellegen 1988). As a relatively stable construct, we expected no statistically significant difference in personality scores between conditions, allowing us to check for attention and social desirability.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Participants

Following ethical approval complying with the British Psychological Society standards granted by the University of Reading, a global group of participants were recruited and selected by the BBC and British Council to participate in their Crossing Divides Deep Listening Project. A total of 870 adults from 119 countries participated in the training program overall. Our study participants comprised a subset of the total trainees in attendance ($N = 320$); namely, those who responded to an invitation to participate in the study as part of the training and further, those who completed study activities fully and according to their assigned condition. Of these, $n = 157$ were in the control (i.e., waitlist) group and $n = 163$ were in the experimental (i.e., training) group. Sensitivity analysis indicated that the smallest effect size that this sample ($N = 320$) can detect with 80% is Cohen's $d = 0.31$ in a two-tailed test for a between-participant design with two groups (Faul et al. 2007), which is considered small-to-moderate (Funder and Ozer 2019).

The study participants represented 75 countries and 80 nationalities including the United Kingdom, Malaysia, New Zealand, Iran, Philippines, India, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Netherlands, Spain, Barbados, and Libya (see supplementary material S1 for further detail). Furthermore, 68.4% were female, 30.6% were male and 0.9% identified another way.

British Council volunteers ($n = 78$) who were providing facilitation to support the training acted as observers in a portion of the virtual rooms (Control: $n = 41$, Experimental: $n = 57$). Observers were trained facilitators, however, due to limitations in the number of observers they were unable to observe every experimental and control conversation (missing completely at random; Newman 2014). Furthermore, observations of conversations where participants did not have cameras on due to technical difficulties or failed to choose a topic they disagreed about were excluded from the data (control, $n = 14$; experiment, $n = 6$).

3.1.1 | Participant Selection and Assignment

The Crossing Divides program was advertised through newsletters, the BBC, and outreach to educational establishments, inviting participants to learn about deep listening and have conversations across divides. A total of 1363 individuals applied to join the training program, of which 870 successful applicants were chosen to be trainees in the program. Roughly 75% of the participants came from the British Council network, while others were recruited from among BBC audiences and other methods. The following selection criteria were applied: (i) age (18–34 years), (ii) level of English-language speaking ability (Level 6; *International English Language Testing System* 2025), (iii) technical means (internet access with camera), (iii) motivation (commitment to attend all sessions and use a camera) and (iv) representation across a range of countries/nationalities. Rejected applicants included $n = 201$ for not meeting the above criteria, $n = 172$ because their country was overrepresented, and a further $n = 144$ for providing incomplete answers (note: some participants met more than one rejection criteria).

Trainees who agreed to participate in the study were randomly assigned at the outset to (1) participate in a waitlist control group, or (2) participate in the experimental group. All participants, regardless of condition, were asked by email to complete questionnaires before joining the training program, including providing their consent for the study and completing personality and demographic items.

A randomly selected sample ($n = 240$) of participants were invited to participate in a pretraining opportunity to interact with others across the world (the control condition experimental conversation–more details below). This was scheduled an hour before the training was due to start to mirror a "waitlist" or "no treatment" condition so that we could compare participants who had not been trained with participants who had been trained. Participants were not informed they were on a waitlist and indeed, were scheduled to receive training at the same time as the intervention group, mitigating waitlist condition limitations such as a negative psychological expectation of having to wait for the intervention, thus better representing a "no treatment" group (Furukawa et al. 2014). The control group ($n = 157$) consisted of those (65%) who responded to the invitation and who completed the surveys (see supplementary material S1).

3.2 | Procedure

3.2.1 | Experimental Intervention

The listening training (i.e., experimental) group consisted of those who participated in the experimental conversation after having attended the full training program (but did not attend the control condition activity beforehand), and who responded to an invitation to complete the posttraining questionnaire ($n = 163$). Participants in the experimental group received listening training over 3 weeks (2 h per week–see supplementary material S1 for details of training content). The core focus of the training was instruction on listening well and opportunities to practice body language and silence. The training was intended to be a holistic listening training that supported participants in listening to attitudes that were opposed to their own. Because mindset is a key component of this, content included some specific activities to make the listening training fit-for-purpose; including meditation (Jones, Bodie, and Hughes 2019), loving-kindness (Neff 2023), shadows (Jung 1954), and finally, language and judgments (Rogers and Farson 1957). The listening training also employed group reflection and experiential learning techniques, where participants had the opportunity to test listening response strategies with each other. During the final week, they were randomly paired together to engage in the experimental conversation.

3.2.2 | Conversations for Both Experimental and Control Conditions

For both the experimental and control conversations, participants were assigned to breakout rooms to hold conversations about a topic on which they disagreed. None of the participants were made aware of the specific experimental nature of the conversation.

Observers measured participants' ability to listen by quantifying behavioral (eye contact, open posture, and focus on the speaker) and verbal cues (instances of using silence, reflecting content, interruptions, changing topic) during the live conversations (see supplementary material S1 for details of conversation instructions and listening scoring).

Instructions for the conversation were as follows: Participants received a 10-min briefing during which they were instructed to select one topic over which they most disagreed from a list of eight polarizing topics (e.g., the impact of social media on humanity, marriage as an essential institution for a healthy society, and reparations paid to descendants of the enslaved). The first participant was instructed to speak to a conversation partner for 5 min, while the second partner was instructed to listen. These roles were then reversed, so the other participant spoke and their partner listened for another 5 min. After these two interactions, both participants were instructed to converse together for 5 min about the topic. The encounter was 15 min in total.

3.3 | Measures

3.3.1 | Listening Quality

Observed behaviors comprised scaled ratings (*1- Rarely, 2- Sometimes, 3- Often, 4- Always*) of maintaining eye contact, an open posture, and being focused on the speaker as core components of listening (internal reliability across nonverbal indicators; $\alpha = 0.93$). Observers also attempted to measure frequency of verbal cues such as use of silence, number of reflective statements, interruptions or changing topic back to self (internal reliability across verbal cues; $\alpha = 0.30$).

3.3.2 | Dependant Variable Measures

All dependent variable measures were anchored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 *(not at all)* to 7 *(very much)*. Stems referred participants to recall the control/experimental conversation, with the prompt: "When I was talking to my discussion partner, I felt...," or "How much do you feel this conversation..."

3.3.3 | Interactional Intimacy

Three items were designed to measure interactional intimacy based on necessary and sufficient conditions for intimacy (self-disclosure, relational connection, and a shared understanding; Prager and Roberts 2004) and included items: "safe to express myself"; "connected to the other person," and "genuinely understood" ($\alpha = 0.80$).

3.3.4 | Self-Insight

Six items measured participants' learning about themselves (in the absence of previous reflection, e.g., Michael 2019) shown to be relevant in the context of biased attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2020). Items included "Helped me to understand myself better"; "Made me think more deeply about the topic"; "Helped me to discover new or different insights about myself"; "Helped me to reflect about my attitudes"; "Helped me think about things in a different way"; and "Helped me to reassess my values or priorities" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

TABLE 1 | Correlations across variables tested.

Variables	1	2	3
1. Defensiveness			
2. Interactional intimacy	−0.49**		
3. Self-insight	−0.18*	0.50**	
4. Attitude change	−0.05	0.21**	0.56**

*$p = 0.001$.; **$p < 0.001$.

3.3.5 | Defensiveness

Using the stem "When I was talking to my discussion partner, I felt...," three items made up the positively valenced subscale of feeling nondefensive (Open, Receptive, Inviting; $\alpha = 0.66$) and four items made up the negatively valenced subscale of feeling defensive (Closed up, Exposed, Defensive, Tense inside; $\alpha = 0.61$). After reversing nondefensiveness items, items were averaged and reported combined overall reliability of $\alpha = 0.65$.

3.3.6 | Attitude Change

A single item: "To what extent do you feel that the conversation changed your attitude about the subject?" measured participants' perceived change in their attitude towards the topic. The item has been adapted from prior research (relating to a prejudiced attitude; Itzchakov et al. 2020; Omoto and Snyder 1995).

3.3.7 | Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10 English Version)

A ten-item big five personality questionnaire. These items were issued before and after training to measure social desirability and consistency of questionnaire completion (Rammstedt and John 2007). The measure reports a correlation of $r = 0.83$ with the BFI-44 (John, Donahue, and Kentle 1991) and the test-retest correlation of $r = 0.75$ (over a period of 6–8 weeks; Rammstedt and John 2007).

3.3.8 | Qualitative Open-Ended Question

We included the following open-ended qualitative question at the end of the training to gauge the participants' subjective experience of listening during the experimental conversation: "Please share a story which stands out for you about your experience today of listening and being listened to when discussing controversial topics with someone who disagrees with you".

4 | Results

4.1 | Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the correlations among the dependent variables. Defensiveness was negatively correlated (moderate strength) with interactional intimacy but had little to no relationship with self-insight and attitude change. Interactional intimacy was moderately correlated with self-insight, and while interactional intimacy showed a weak correlation with attitude change, self-insight had a stronger (moderate) correlation with attitude change. All variables remain statistically distinct variables.

4.2 | Main Effects

4.2.1 | Observed Listening Behavior (Manipulation Check)

Comparison of means (in Table 2) suggests condition effects on listening behaviors: The experimental group observers identified more quality listening behaviors (body language, eye contact, attention) than the control group. Cohen's $d = 0.73$; a medium effect was observed in support of behavioral changes. The reliability of observers' evaluation of verbal cues was too low ($a = 0.30$) to draw any conclusions on verbal indicators of listening, thus the manipulation of listening quality was supported by the subset of observations quantifying nonverbal listening behaviors.

4.2.2 | Dependent Variables

Tests of between-subjects comparison of effects (see Table 2) indicated that the listening training manipulation predicted interactional intimacy; $d = 0.39$ (medium effect), self-insight; $d = 0.94$ (large effect), and attitude change; $d = 0.54$ (medium effect) following the conversation. There was no statistically significant difference in the means for feelings of defensiveness. These findings supported H1a, that the listening training condition predicted attitude change, and also H1c and H1d (see Figure 1) - that listening training predicted both interactional intimacy and self-insight respectively. H1b was not supported-thus listening training had no bearing on feeling defensive.

4.3 | Mediation Analysis

We used Model 6: PROCESS v4.2 in SPSS (Hayes 2022) to test the serial mediation pathway for H2, our avoidance-oriented causal pathway (see Figure 1) towards attitude change (y) with listening training versus control condition (x) predicting defensiveness (m_1) and then self-insight (m_2). The pathway was not supported.

We used the same statistical package to test H3, our approach-oriented serial mediation pathway (see Figure 2), to examine whether the manipulation: Listening training versus control condition (x) predicted attitude change (y) via interactional intimacy (m_1) and self-insight (m_2).

The total effect of the serial mediation model was significant, $\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$. There was also a significant indirect effect of the condition (x: training vs. control) on attitude change (y) via interactional intimacy (m_1), followed by self-insight (m_2), $\beta = 0.10$. This supports our serial mediation model suggesting that those who were trained in listening gained more self-insight through its effects on interactional intimacy, which then

TABLE 2 | Estimated marginal means per scale split by condition, significance (p) effect size (d), and confidence interval at 95% (lower and upper) for d comparing conditions.

Variable	Condition	*M*	SD	*p*	*d*	Lower bound	Upper bound
Observed listening behavior	Control	3.47	0.51				
	Experiment	3.76	0.32	0.011	0.74	0.25	1.20
Defensiveness	Control	2.42	0.88				
	Experiment	2.39	0.83	0.772	−0.03	−0.25	0.19
Interactional intimacy	Control	5.60	1.22				
	Experiment	6.02	0.93	< 0.001	0.39	0.17	0.62
Self-insight	Control	4.74	1.41				
	Experiment	5.86	0.92	< 0.001	0.94	0.71	1.18
Attitude change	Control	3.32	1.77				
	Experiment	4.29	1.79	< 0.001	0.54	0.32	0.77

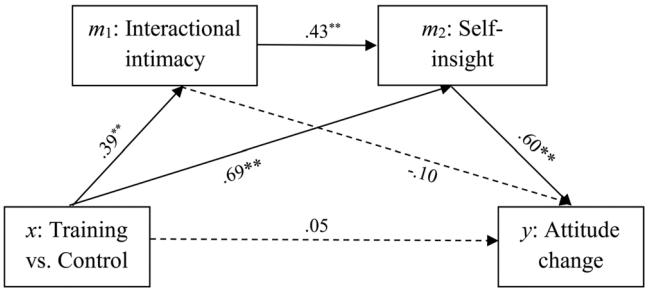

FIGURE 2 | Serial Mediation Model for H3 - Approach Pathway (Model 6: Process v4.2; Hayes 2022). Standardized paths. $^{**}p < 0.001$. The solid line indicates a relationship was significant. The dashed line indicates a nonsignificant effect.

facilitated a change in attitude. In all, approximately 19% of the variance in our model between training and attitude change was accounted for by this indirect serial mediation pathway (condition: training vs. control → interactional intimacy → self-insight → attitude change).

The indirect pathway from condition (x) to attitude change (y) via self-insight (m_2) alone was also significant, $\beta = 0.41$, suggesting that the effect of the listening training (x) on attitude change (y) could also be explained by increased self-insight (m_2) beyond its association with interactional intimacy (m_1). The model shows that approximately 78% of the variance of listening training towards attitude change could be accounted for by this indirect pathway (condition: training vs. control → self-insight → attitude change). The direct effect of the training condition on attitude change was not significant, $\beta = 0.05$, supporting that the change in attitude occurs as an effect of the mediators, and not directly by the training.

In sum, the mediation analyses suggested that participants who received the deep listening training reported higher levels of interactional intimacy during a conversation with someone over a topic they strongly disagreed about, which appeared to increase their self-insight and subsequently, supported a change in attitude.

4.3.1 | Personality (Social Desirability and Questionnaire Consistency Check)

The two conditions did not differ in personality scores; $t(318) = 0.73$, $p = 0.468$, suggesting that participants answered the questionnaires consistently across the conditions.

4.3.2 | Qualitative Feedback From Open-Ended Question

Themes identified from qualitative feedback received ($N = 163$) from the open-ended question on the experimental conversation supported that participants' experience of the conversation broadened their minds and helped them to appreciate a different perspective ($n = 56$), helped them to value listening ($n = 38$), it was described as a great or positive experience ($n = 35$), participants valued connection and empathy with others ($n = 34$), felt validated and respected ($n = 33$), felt more socially confident ($n = 13$), and discovered they had things in common with their conversation partner ($n = 20$). Equally, it was acknowledged that it was not easy to demonstrate listening in this (polarized opinions) context ($n = 28$), but that having tools and being able to practice helped ($n = 27$) and a few expressed a desire to continue listening ($n = 8$). Ten participants ($n = 10$) reported they didn't strongly disagree, and one ($n = 1$) reported a poor listening experience. There was an acknowledgment that it was an artificial environment and that transferring to the real world might be more difficult ($n = 6$).

5 | General Discussion

High-quality listening training has the potential to bridge divides by facilitating constructive interactions even in the face of disagreement. Such interactions can increase self-awareness and support an open mind, encouraging people to re-evaluate their own attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2020; Itzchakov et al. 2023a). Only a few studies to date have attempted to determine the outcomes of high-quality listening when participants disagree, and we are unaware of studies in real-world

settings or beyond Western populations. To address this gap, the current research investigated the effectiveness of a 3-week high-quality (deep) listening training with a diverse, global population of participants from the British Council and from among BBC audiences.

Following the training, attendees demonstrated more high-quality nonverbal listening behaviors, namely body language, eye contact, and focused attention on the speaker, during a conversation about a divisive topic over which participants held opposing views. Differences between the experimental and control groups showed a medium effect size, suggesting that the listening training was successful. Importantly, listening training may have promoted conversations that helped to bridge divides. Specifically, compared to participants in the waitlist control group who had not yet received the training, those who conversed after listening training experienced stronger feelings of interactional intimacy with their conversation partner. They felt safer to express themselves, genuinely understood, and a sense of connection with their partner. These findings are important because when such interactional intimacy (Reis and Shaver 1988) is present, people are more likely to consider the relational consequences of communication strategies they employ when they disagree with others, resulting in more respectful strategies (Cody, McLaughlin, and Schneider 1981). Indeed, high-quality listening is one such strategy that may preserve the relationship when conversation partners disagree.

According to the serial mediation analyses, interactional intimacy mediated part of the effects of listening training on self-insight. In other words, it may be that the listening training facilitated the experience of interactional intimacy, and partly because it did so, participants reported more self-reflective thinking about themselves regarding their attitudes. As a result of this connecting and reflective process, participants felt they could re-evaluate and change their attitudes. Mediation analyses also showed that the training had a direct effect on a participant's ability to self-reflect, which then supported a change in attitude. This suggests that high-quality listening training can enhance self-insight beyond what could be explained by interactional intimacy, but one means of gaining self-insight is an intimate interaction with another person through listening.

These findings, understood in light of existing research (Itzchakov et al. 2018, 2020), support a growing evidence base that suggests that high-quality listening can have downstream benefits towards increased self-insight and ultimately helps speakers to be more open in reconsidering their attitudes (Itzchakov et al. 2020; Itzchakov et al. 2023a). Furthermore, the findings that listening training confers these benefits in part because it fosters interactional intimacy, speaks to the importance of listening as a means to foster positive relationships in conversations where there is discord or disagreement.

It must be noted that although the listening behaviors were statistically significantly different between conditions, the difference between them was not large. Indeed, speakers in both conditions rated the listening quality above the mid-point of the scale. This finding aligns with previous experiments where research assistants were trained to provide moderate or high-quality listening (Itzchakov et al. 2020; Itzchakov, Weinstein et al. 2023a; Itzchakov and Weinstein 2021). This offers an interesting insight into how speakers perceive the listening they receive. It suggests that even moderate-quality listening, which lacks the features of high-quality listening (see Kluger and Itzchakov 2022), may be viewed as better than the average listening people typically experience. Future research could compare moderate-quality listening with speakers' perceptions of their everyday listening experiences. This could illuminate why listening is consistently rated positively in these experiments. The general state of listening in daily life may be quite poor that when a listener merely avoids interrupting or appearing distracted, it is perceived as 'better-than-average' listening (for evidence of poor everyday listening, see; Neill and Bowen 2021).

Although we focused on interactional intimacy in the current study, other similar relational outcomes, such as positivity resonance, described as a co-experienced positive relational experience involving mutual care, shared positive affect, and behavioral or biological synchrony, have been theorized and demonstrated to be effected by listening (Itzchakov et al. 2023a; Moin et al. 2024b; Zhou and Fredrickson 2023). Despite operational differences in our two intimacy constructs, we inform this work by demonstrating that relational benefits can support attitude change, this time with evidence collected outside of the lab. We speculate that relational constructs such as intimacy and positivity resonance – and other indicators of closeness, tap into the same underlying construct and, ultimately, that high-quality listening supports many forms of closeness.

In addition, while this work tested interactional intimacy between strangers - which meant that there was a "blank slate" that supported unobstructed development of intimacy - future research may consider comparing the effects on self-insight and attitude change through high-quality listening in populations where there is already a history of relational intimacy; for example, with close friends, family members or romantic partners compared with strangers. It may be that the existing presence of intimacy strengthens self-insight and attitude change even further, or conversely, if intimacy is impeded during the natural highs and lows of personal relationships, that self-insight and subsequent attitude change is also impeded – revealing the role of intimacy as a moderator.

It is interesting to note that feelings of intimacy could develop relatively quickly in our study, even while disagreeing with a stranger in a cross-cultural context. While Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) suggests that mere interaction (Eveland, Henry, and Appiah 2023) can explain positive results under the right conditions, there is evidence to suggest that even when the right conditions are present, cross-partisan conversations do not naturally result in positive outcomes (Santoro and Broockman 2022). Future researchers could explore the power of listening and listening training in developing feelings of intimacy during short and longer interactions.

Overall, our findings support a view that fit-for-purpose listening training can effectively operationalize listening behaviors and principles to be used as a tool within communities and organizations that can support intrapersonal (self-insight, an open mind) and interpersonal (interactional intimacy) benefits

in the context of disagreement and polarized attitudes. We show that this may be feasible in a cross-cultural context. While the research is still quite nascent, organizations or groups with culturally diverse populations can consider listening training to inspire better interpersonal relationships and understanding across divides. This could be implemented through listening circles (Itzchakov and Kluger 2017) or as part of an applied model or professional practice that is founded on the central principle of listening e.g., embedding a culture of coaching within organizations (Megginson and Clutterbuck 2006).

The current study also began to explore the question of whether *approach-oriented* (i.e., increasing intimacy) versus *avoidance-oriented* (i.e., reducing defensiveness) processes were most effective in facilitating self-insight and open attitudes as a result of listening training. Counter to our expectations, listening training did not appear to reduce feelings of defensiveness, although, as we expected, it did increase self-insight. Defensiveness protects one's self-concept and can occur because internal discrepancies are brought to the surface (Wylie 1957). Given we were unable to establish clear condition effects on listening quality itself, it may be that learning to listen well to people who hold opposing beliefs is challenging work, and speaker threat or discomfort could not be effectively expelled, despite benefits attained for the positive, approach-oriented experiences of interactional intimacy and self-insight. Indeed, feedback from the qualitative comments revealed a theme that listening to polarized views was still not easy, for example;

> "I found it interesting to realize that while I was happy to listen deeply, I was still very cautious and careful while speaking - as if I still did not expect the other person to listen deeply (even though this was the final workshop on deep listening). I shall have to reflect if this is an attitude I should work to dissolve, or if it is a natural and healthy approach to an unknown situation that will just as naturally go away when trust is cultivated between the two parties through such interaction." *(Participant feedback)*

It is interesting to note that defensiveness was moderately negatively correlated with interactional intimacy. Therefore, although the training itself did not appear to directly influence feelings of defensiveness over the short duration of the course, it may be worth exploring the relationship between defensiveness, intimacy, and listening further. We note limitations of the defensiveness scale itself, including the fact that it has not been validated in previous research. Yet, potentially, defensiveness is slower to change than intimacy and repeated experiences of high-quality listening behavior in this context could reduce defensiveness over time as intimacy builds into a stronger relationship. Tracking attitudes over time, it may be important to determine whether defensiveness plays a role in sustained attitude change. Another potential explanation is that the inclusion of mindfulness within the training may have drawn participants' attention to their internal states, including feelings of defensiveness, but also allowed participants to detach from potentially harmful reactions that might have otherwise arisen as a result of defensive feelings (Wells 2005). This would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Overall, feelings of defensiveness did not appear to preclude the experience of associated intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits from listening training in our study. Themes from the qualitative feedback further supported that the conversational experience of those who had received listening training was a positive relational experience for many participants, who reported broadening their minds, appreciating a different perspective, and having learned the value of listening. At the same time, participants acknowledged the difficulty in applying listening skills in the context of discussing polarized attitudes. As a self-protective mechanism, it is reassuring that vulnerable or at-risk populations need not let their defences down entirely to experience a relational connection while demonstrating good listening, for example, victims engaging with their aggressors or coaches and therapists working with risky populations (Moin 2021).

5.1 | Limitations of the Research

The study was conducted in a field setting and presented some methodological limitations. First, the British Council selected participants from a global pool of applicants with a limited range of demographics (e.g., trainees' age, comfort with the English language, access to technology), and therefore, the sample is not representative of the general population in each global region represented.

Our experimental conversation took place at the end of the training program where both speakers and listeners were participants who had been trained to listen well, making it difficult to isolate effects on the listener and speaker, separately. As participants reflected on the entire conversation which involved assuming dual roles and a back-and-forth interaction, we could attribute effects towards a dyadic interaction between the two, considering the relational nature of the outcomes observed to be affected by the listening training. While practical limitations didn't allow us to do this in the current study, future work could explore the outcomes of conversations between interlocutors leveraging a dyadic model of analysis (e.g., The Social Relations Model; Kluger et al. 2021; Malloy et al. 2023). Furthermore, effects could be investigated in a setting outside of the training (e.g., employees within an organization) to explore how the training transferred to conversations between speakers and/or listeners who were not similarly trained. A replication of the study with a longitudinal design exploring the stability of listening-induced changes is also recommended.

In addition, given the current sample self-selected into the training, it may well be that our participants were naturally more receptive and willing to engage with opposing views (Minson and Chen 2022) and more likely to hold a positive intention (a core component of good listening; Kluger and Itzchakov 2022) while doing so. While these qualities were held constant across conditions and participants were randomly assigned to receive an invitation to the waitlist or training group, it is possible that individuals receptive to participating in the training and participating in the study were more

enthusiastic about developing their listening and therefore more likely to benefit from the listening training than attendees who may have been mandated to join, such that we observed stronger effect sizes than we might have otherwise attained.

Finally, our research attempted to measure listening quality via observer ratings rather than self-ratings as a methodological improvement on previous studies. Observers rated behavioral cues reliably, however, attempts to quantify verbal listening cues (e.g., silence, verbal affirmations, interruptions) reduced the internal reliability of the listening scale to unacceptable levels ($\alpha = .30$). We believe the reason may have been the attentional capacity of the observers, and specifically, that it was difficult for them to accurately evaluate multiple, time-sensitive observational cues in situ. Perhaps, this is why we observed that the more reliable scores (of behavior) came from a rating scale whereas verbal cues were attempted to be measured as a frequency. In future research, interactions could be video-recorded to improve intra-rater and inter-rater reliability in observer measurements. However, it is worth noting that the benefit of in situ observers is that participants may have felt more comfortable discussing contentious attitudes openly knowing that no recording would capture their conversation (Moin and Van Nieuwerburgh 2021; Speer and Hutchby 2003). Regardless of whether it is done in in-situ or through a recording, we suggest it is worthwhile for future researchers to develop a consistent observer rating scale covering cues for each aspect of listening (i.e. identifying specific indicators of attention, comprehension, and positive intention). This could be combined with a more holistic evaluation of listening to align with how listening is generally perceived (Lipetz, Kluger, and Bodie 2020).

6 | Conclusion

The current experiment showed that a 6-h listening training resulted in more listening behaviors when interlocutors discussed a subject over which they firmly disagreed and that listening training promoted interactional intimacy, self-insight, and a change in attitude following discussions with people from different cultures about a divisive topic. Individuals trained in high-quality (i.e., deep) listening were largely able to develop the skills necessary to respectfully engage with people holding opposing views across cultures, laying the foundations for future respectful encounters and positive relationships. As the first study to explore causal outcomes of listening training when individuals disagreed about real-world social and political positions, and testing interlocutors from 86 countries, we demonstrate that in a world where polarized attitudes can cause division, high-quality listening training has the potential to support global communities and organizations seeking to build and enhance cross-cultural relationships across divides.

Author Contributions

Tia Moin: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, writing - original draft (lead), writing - reviewing and editing. **Guy Itzchakov:** formal analysis, methodology, supervision, validation, writing - reviewing and editing. **Emily Kasriel:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing - reviewing and editing. **Netta Weinstein:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, resources, supervision (lead), formal analysis, methodology, writing - original draft, writing - reviewing and editing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The coauthor, Emily Kasriel, claims commercial intellectual property for designing and facilitating the training that was implemented in the study. To mitigate any potential bias, Emily Kasriel was not involved in handling, analysing or interpreting any data or findings from the study. All other authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from The British Council. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were accessed by University of Reading under a confidentiality contract for this study. Data can be requested from the authors with the permission of The British Council. Supplementary information is available via: https://osf.io/q84az/.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.