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Tiffany D. Kriz, Phillip M. Jolly, and Mindy K. Shoss

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**Coping with Organizational Layoffs: Managers' Increased Active Listening Reduces Job Insecurity via Perceived Situational Control**

Tiffany D. Kriz<sup>1</sup>, Phillip M. Jolly<sup>2</sup>, and Mindy K. Shoss<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Organizational Behaviour, Human Resources Management, and Management,  
MacEwan University

<sup>2</sup> School of Hospitality Management, Pennsylvania State University

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Central Florida

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we draw on interdisciplinary research and theorizing to posit change in managerial active listening as a lever shaping change in affective job insecurity. Specifically, drawing on transactional theory, we argue that an increase (decrease) in active listening from one's manager should facilitate a dynamic coping process by strengthening (diminishing) perceived control. In turn, changes in perceived control should shape affective job insecurity. Using a longitudinal field study design, we collected three waves of survey data from 268 employees of a large real estate firm that was preparing for restructuring and layoffs. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found support for a mediation model in which an increase in active listening quality predicted a decrease in affective job insecurity, mediated by an increase in perceived control. Our findings suggest that in environments characterized by widespread change and impending job loss, an increase in active listening may have a ripple effect in increasing perceived control and decreasing affective job insecurity.

*Keywords:* affective job insecurity, job insecurity, perceived control, listening, longitudinal

## **Coping with Organizational Layoffs: Managers' Increased Active Listening Reduces Job Insecurity via Perceived Situational Control**

Layoffs are increasingly common events causing stress for those caught in the cross-hairs. As companies across the world lose revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many are facing the need to deploy mass layoffs. This is undoubtedly a stressor for employees. Yet research has shown that the uncertainty surrounding the possibility of losing one's job is even more harmful than actually being laid off (e.g., Snorradóttir, Tómasson, Vilhjálmsson, & Rafnsdóttir, 2015) and can lead to a range of negative attitudinal, behavioral, and health-related outcomes (Sverke et al., 2002). Moreover, while people eventually adapt to unemployment (De Witte et al., 2010), longitudinal studies of job insecurity suggest that individuals tend not to adapt to prolonged concerns around job insecurity, but rather they tend to experience a continual decline in well-being (De Witte et al., 2016). Fittingly, over the last couple of decades researchers have sought to better understand job insecurity and its harmful effects. The resulting body of research has primarily focused on identifying outcomes of job insecurity, including job satisfaction, safety behaviors, psychological strain, and physical health, to name just a few (for a more exhaustive list, see recent review by Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). Clearly, job insecurity has enormous costs, which seem to only be amplified over time of exposure. As such, it is incumbent upon researchers to identify the factors that could help to reduce prolonged or increasing job insecurity.

Job insecurity captures employees' subjectively appraised, future-oriented views regarding changes in their employment status (De Witte, 1999; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Shoss, 2017). That is, it is the cognitions and emotions about possible futures that impact one's current reactions and behaviors, and those cognitions and emotions vary from person to person,

and within person over time. Moreover, whereas the thought of losing one's job can cause concern, people vary in the degree to which they *worry* about the potential loss. It is the distress over potential job loss that tends to relate most closely to detrimental outcomes. Researchers refer to such distress as affective job insecurity (AJI; Huang et al., 2012).

Recently, Jiang and Lavasse (2018) confirmed that AJI is a proximal predictor to most of the negative outcomes of job insecurity, and concluded that organizations would do well to craft interventions that target AJI. Based on their meta-analysis of prior studies, they suggest as possibilities interventions that foster strong, respectful, trusting relationships between employees and supervisors, as well as interventions that expand opportunities to engage in participative decision-making, and those that enhance communication with employees about ongoing changes. Indeed, in the context of impending job loss, employees may look to relationships and organizational communication as sources of stability and support to help cope with uncertainty (Allen et al., 2007). However, the vast majority of studies used to form these conclusions are cross-sectional, raising questions about the degree to which changes in these types of actions relate to changes in affective job insecurity over time.

Moreover, it remains unclear the mechanisms through which supportive supervisor behaviors, such as listening, would shape AJI. From a transactional theory perspective (Lazarus & Folkman, 1994), factors that enable individuals to manage these threats at critical transition points enhance individuals' abilities to cope with those transitions (i.e., perceived control) and may lessen the worry they experience. As such, there have been recent calls for insights into ways to target feelings of control and shape the development of job insecurity (Koen & Parker, 2020).

In the current study we introduce and empirically evaluate change in perceived managerial active listening as a lever impacting change in perceived control, and ultimately, AJI. Active listening, a form of support characterized by the provision of attention, understanding, and acceptance fosters an individual's ability to develop a more comprehensive and less distorted view of self and situation, whereas in contrast, low-quality listening can thwart such insights by decreasing self-reflection and clarity (Itzhakov et al., 2018). Active listening also conveys a message about the power of the speaker (Tost et al., 2013). In the context of impending layoffs, a supervisor who actively listens more than usual can provide a positive signal to the employee about his/her power and control. As such, we assert that an increase in active listening during a period of major organizational change and impending layoffs should dynamically aid coping by enabling a greater sense of control. Thus, we propose that changes in active listening impact changes in AJI, with perceived control change serving as a mediator.

Our study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the literature on AJI by studying it in a longitudinal fashion and examining antecedents. Given the job insecurity literature's greater focus on outcomes rather than antecedents and continued reliance on cross-sectional data, little is known about the circumstances that shape increasing or decreasing levels of AJI in the context of significant organizational change. Second, we offer a test of the dynamic nature of the processes first proposed by Lazarus and Folkman over 30 years ago, but which have unfortunately been examined through a more static lens. Specifically, our research sheds light on an interpersonal process that enables individuals to reevaluate a situation, enhancing control and reducing worry over threat. In doing so, our work contributes to a growing body of literature in the organizational sciences that points to the importance of studying employees' experiences in a dynamic fashion (e.g., Chen et al., 2011; Hausknecht et al., 2011;

Pitariu & Ployhart, 2010).

Third, we contribute to the literatures on job insecurity and on listening by being the first to introduce active listening as a way to shape the development of AJI. Given widespread job insecurity, it is important to identify ways that managers can help employees feel more in control in the face of what is seemingly uncontrollable (Koen & Parker, 2020). Indeed, concerns have been raised that in times of crisis, managers often distance themselves while keeping communication to a minimum (Brockner et al., 2009). For example, managers may decide to avoid communication altogether out of a fear saying or doing the wrong thing when talking with an employee (Fast et al., 2009). Instead, we suggest active listening as a tool to help employees gain a sense of control. In doing so, we expand insight into listening and set the stage for further research into this topic. Additionally, our findings have practical utility in that they point to potentially useful leader behaviors that could be employed during layoffs, organizational change, or other situations characterized by significant uncertainty. From a practical perspective, organizational leaders may be limited on how much they can communicate or involve employees during critical change periods, and providing support to employees may be too broad and nebulous a target to lend itself to specific actions. Instead, the examination of listening as a specific type of supportive behavior provides clearer actionable recommendations to leaders dealing with organizational change (Yang et al., in press).

### **Hypothesis Development**

From a theoretical standpoint, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory provides a useful overarching framework for conceptualizing active listening quality as a dynamic predictor of affective job insecurity. Lazarus and Folkman suggested that stress should be viewed as dynamic and contextually-driven. Because situations or environments are rarely

static, either by the nature of situations or individuals' responses, their implications for individuals constantly change over time. Of particular relevance to the current study, Lazarus (1991) proposed that anxiety and worry reflect the core relational theme of facing an existential threat where one deems the entire situation (the threat and its consequences) entirely outside of one's control.

The notion of AJI as capturing an overall threat appraisal of job insecurity fits well within this model. Job insecurity has been described as a threat to the self due to the important role that employment plays in shaping individuals' identities, social status, resources, and rhythms of life (Selenko et al., 2017). Thus, questions about being "worried about having to leave my job before I would like to," (Hellgren, Sverke, & Isaksson, 1999) and views that one's job security situation is "nerve-wracking" (Probst, 2003) capture individuals' views of job insecurity as a particularly salient threat.

Transactional theory positions perceived control as an important part of coping with threats, and argues that control shapes people's views of situations in a dynamic and iterative fashion (Folkman, 1984). In other words, transactional theory is a dynamic model allowing for changes to this initial appraisal as one scans the environment for new cues, appraises one's coping options, and engages in coping strategies. Further, the coping process is ongoing as long as the distress remains, suggesting a continual cycle of coping in which changes in one's feelings of distress can dynamically fluctuate in accordance with ongoing situational appraisal and coping efforts (Folkman, 2008). In this way, control can act as a dynamic mediator emanating from a person's evolving experiences and perceptions and shaping reactions to a situation over time as it unfolds (Folkman, 1984).

### **Listening and Control**



As a secondary appraisal process, perceived control reflects an appraisal of situational control rather than broader individual differences in locus of control. Thus, appraisals of situational control, like appraisals of threat, are transactional in nature because they involve the way that the person perceives their environment and their available repertoire of coping options (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). In this vein, recent discussions emphasize the importance of circumstances that enable individuals' ability to see oneself and one's situation with greater breadth and clarity which should allow an individual to feel greater perceived control by helping to bolster the individual's ability to see their resources, make better decisions, and create contingency plans as needed (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Indeed, Folkman (1984) argued that powerful levers for shifting appraisals of control are through providing experiences that counteract one's main fears and through enhancing one's ability to manage the threat.

We suggest that an increase in active listening on the part of one's manager serves as a change in one's experiential landscape capable of altering appraisals of control in a situation of impending layoffs. Active listening has been defined in various ways, but here we use the term to describe listening that demonstrates, through verbal and nonverbal conversational engagement, an interest and investment in understanding the speaker's perspective, enabling a deeper connection with that speaker than is typically available in passive listening or in routine conversation (Spataro & Bloch, 2018; Weger et al., 2010). Stemming from Carl Rogers' seminal work originally situated in therapeutic contexts, active listening is thought to involve three main components: attention, comprehension (or understanding), and acceptance (or non-judgment) (Itzhakov & Grau, 2020). Importantly, Rogers also made clear that the qualities of active listening are beneficial when introduced in relationships outside of the client-therapist relationship, including within the realm of employee-supervisor interactions (Rogers, 1959;

Rogers & Farson, 1987; Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991). This is because, regardless of the type of relationship, the introduction of active listening can allow the speaker to feel a sense of comfort and togetherness with the listener, providing a safe space for self-exploration (Kluger & Lehmann, 2018). In this way, active listening can foster new ways of looking at one's environment and resources at hand (Castro et al., 2018; Yang et al., in press).

Beyond providing a safe space for exploration, active listeners also directly facilitate an individual's ability engage in the important process of verbalizing and processing their experiential world (Bavelas et al., 2000; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015). Active listeners tend to draw out longer disclosures while limiting their own verbal contributions (Jones et al., 2018), and introducing or increasing this opportunity to process conversationally can be especially valuable in stressful situations (Bodie, 2013). By allowing a distressed person to talk through the situation, active listeners are thought to enable affect improvement by fostering an environment ripe for cognitively processing the situation at hand, including bringing to mind the resources available for coping (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998). That is, good listeners promote the discloser's ability to think differently about goal relevance, goal congruence, and/or coping resources (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones et al., 2018). Indeed, recent laboratory research suggests that when individuals are provided access to active listening, they can relax their self-boundaries, experience enhanced self-clarity, and gain better insight into their attitudes, relative to those in a control condition (Itzchakov et al., 2018). Similarly, using a non-experimental design, Lloyd and colleagues (2015) asked speakers to tell a story to an unfamiliar listener, finding that active listening predicted greater self-clarity, which in turn was associated with enhanced emotional well-being. In contrast, distracted listening (experimentally manipulated)

has been associated with a decreased reflective self-awareness and attitude clarity (Itzchakov et al., 2018).

Our focus here is on changes in listening. Although active listening in general would be expected to have positive impacts on people's perceived ability to manage threats (i.e., control), we anticipate that *changes* in listening are particularly important in such dynamically unfolding events as organizational layoffs. During times of change and uncertainty, people constantly monitor potential signals in their environments that may indicate the degree to which they are in a threatened position (Van Vuuren et al., 1991). *Changes* in listening from someone in a position of power are likely to be noticed and interpreted as salient piece of information regarding the employee's value and power. Employees, at a relative power disadvantage, are prone to pay extra attention to the behaviors of and interactions with those in positions of relative power (Magee & Smith, 2013). Layoff situations further motivate attention toward interactions with powerful others in an attempt to offset a perceived lack of power and control (Allen et al., 2007; Fiske & Dépret, 1996). Moreover, those at a power disadvantage are thought to be relatively more attuned to and impacted by contextual changes (Magee & Smith, 2013). Thus, employees in an organization preparing for downsizing are likely extra sensitive to changes in managerial listening, and more likely to experience the benefits afforded by active listening (Bodie, 2013).

Verbal dominance tends to increase with such power discrepancies, and moreover, leaders may even emerge in part on the basis of verbal dominance (MacLaren et al., 2020; Tost et al., 2013). A decrease in active listening, thus, reflects a growing power disparity that threatens an employee's control over their job situation. In contrast, listening involves sharing conversational control and tends to level the hierarchy by enabling lower-status individuals to feel an increased sense of power (Hurwitz & Kluger, 2017; Santoro & Markus, 2021). A

supervisor listening more than usual may also signal to an employee his/her increasing value to the supervisor/organization. Managers who increase their active listening in a layoff situation are thus likely to help employees foster a heightened sense of control, whereas employees working for managers who engage in less active listening are likely to experience a reduced sense of control.

*Hypothesis 1: Change in active listening is positively related to change in perceived control.*

### **Control as a Mediator between Managerial Listening and Affective Job Insecurity**

We suggest that during times of impending layoffs and organizational change, changes in active listening serves as a situational cue shaping perceived control, which in turn shapes AJI. Transactional theory places heavy emphasis on perceived control in shaping individuals' appraisals and reappraisals of their environments. The basic rationale is that people have a psychological need for agency in their environments, and the perception that a situation is controllable contributes to feelings of agency while reducing the feelings of threat associated with one's appraisal of the situation. In this way, perceived control is intimately intertwined with outcomes of ongoing situational appraisal (Folkman, 1984). As a result, a lack of perceived control can lead one to experience an environment as threatening and to create worry and rumination about threats (Bordia et al., 2004; Koen & Parker, 2020; Spector, 1998).

We have argued that changes in managerial active listening should draw extra attention from employees in a context of impending layoffs, and further, that active listening should heighten perceived control by facilitating the reappraisal process. Managers are likely to be seen as good partners for conversational reappraisal due to their insights into both the environment and the employee's specific personal goals – both of which play a key role in one's overall

appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). In the context of impending layoffs and organizational change, the sense of control afforded by managers' active listening is expected to reduce affective job insecurity (i.e., worry over potential job loss). Even if individuals ultimately have little control over the loss of the job itself, perceived control emanating from listening may enable individuals to feel control over coping with the other challenges that come with possible job loss, namely questions about identity, meaning, structure, ability to accomplish goals, relationships, career narratives, and finding a new job (Jahoda, 1982; Selenko et al., 2017). A greater sense of control in turn should reduce worry over the consequences of potential loss, as reflected in lower AJI (Huang et al., 2012; Probst, 2003). As such, we expect that the relationship between active listening change and AJI change will be mediated by change in perceived control. As Rogers (1980; pp.160-161) wrote, "Then, in my experience, there are other situations in which the empathetic way of being has the highest priority. When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified, or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity—then understanding is called for. The gentle and sensitive companionship offered by an empathetic person (who must, of course, possess the other two attitudes) provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another."

*Hypothesis 2: The relationship between active listening and AJI change is mediated by change in perceived control.*

## **Methods**

All procedures and materials had been approved by the relevant institutional review board (IRB). Data were collected from employees of a large, US-based, publicly-traded real estate firm that was undergoing a significant restructuring effort. Approximately one month

before data collection, the firm officially announced impending but undefined structural changes, prompting fears of layoffs. Shortly before the second wave of data collection, the company announced the first round of layoffs, thus our respondents (who remained employed and provided responses at T2 and T3) were survivors of the first round of layoffs. This initial round of layoffs did not necessarily reduce uncertainty among remaining employees, because major organizational changes (including the reorganization of the corporate structure and the announcements of the separate sales of several major operating units) continued to occur between T2 and T3. Thus, this setting provided an excellent context to study the dynamic relationships between our focal variables.

In order to facilitate survey distribution, the company's human resources department provided names and contact information for 958 employees. HR also communicated with these individuals about the study and encouraged them to participate in our series of surveys. In addition, HR provided each individual with a link to the electronic informed consent form. In exchange for participation in the study, at the end of the study, all participants were provided with an informational worksheet on navigating change and received a personalized feedback report based on their optimism and proactive personality self-ratings.

Out of the 958 employees, 457 employees responded at Time 1, 367 employees responded at Time 2 (approximately 5.5 weeks after Time 1), and 289 employees responded at Time 3 (approximately 11 weeks after Time 1). After removing responses with unusable data, our effective sample size was 804 responses nested within 268 employees across three time points. Our final sample was 57.3% female. The racial breakdown of our sample was 85.8% white, 7.3% black, 2.7% Hispanic or Latino, 3.5% Asian, 0.8% two or more races. Age was reported as ranges: 1.9% (18-25), 22.3% (26-35), 25.8% (36-45), 26.5% (46-55), 20% (56-65),

3.5% (65+). Sample breakdown by highest education level attained was 5.4% (high school/GED), 15.8% (some college), 5.8% (2-year college degree), 48.1% (4-year college degree), 20% (master's degree), 4.6% (professional degree), 0.7% (doctoral degree). Average job tenure was 8.84 years.

## **Measures**

### ***Focal Variables***

Each of our focal variables was measured at each time point (T1, T2, T3). Affective job insecurity was measured using 10 items from Huang and colleagues (Huang et al., 2012). Sample items included “The lack of job security in this company makes me feel nervous,” “I lose sleep worrying about my future with this company” and “I am tense about maintaining my current job employment status.” Perceived control was measured using 3 items from Bordia and colleagues (Bordia et al., 2004). Items included “I feel I am in control of my future in this organization,” “I feel I can influence the nature of change in my work unit” and “I feel in control of the direction in which my career is headed.” Active listening was measured using 8 items from Lloyd and colleagues (Lloyd, Boer, Keller, et al., 2015). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement on each item with the common stem “Generally, when my manager listens to me, I feel that my manager...” Sample items included “makes it easy for me to open up,” “understands my feelings” and “doesn't judge me.” All items for each focal variable were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Cronbach's alpha was acceptable across time for all variables, equaling .97 for listening at each time point, and ranging from .79 to .83 for perceived control, and .94 to .95 for AJI across the three time points.

### ***Control Variables***

We controlled for age, education level, percentage of family income accounted for by respondent's job, gender, and race to rule out the influences of life experiences, social categorization, human capital, and career stage (Liu et al., 2012) on affective job insecurity reactions to organizational uncertainty. For example, more highly educated individuals may experience less AJI given a greater perception of mobility, and individuals whose income accounts for a greater percentage of total family income may experience higher levels of AJI due to the greater threat to family well-being that a layoff may pose. Finally, we controlled for proactive personality (10 items from Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ); and trait optimism (6 items from Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994;  $\alpha = 0.82$ ), both measured at Time 1, in order to examine the robustness of our findings when considering individual differences in proclivities to appraise the future positively and take initiative to actively change one's circumstances (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Carver & Scheier, 2014; Fuller & Marler, 2009).

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Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here  
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## **Analyses and Results**

### ***Discriminant Validity***

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Tables 1 and 2. To establish the discriminant validity of our measures, we conducted a series of comparative confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models in *lavaan* in R (Rosseel, 2012) for each of the three data waves. Given the ratio of sample size to number of items and the psychometric benefits (Landis et al., 2000) of parceling, we randomly assigned both AJI and listening items to three parcels per latent construct (c.f., Taylor, Bedeian, Cole, & Zhang, 2017). Due to the small number of items, the control



measure was not parceled. As shown in Table 2, the three-factor models (and a four-factor model at T1 including control variable trait optimism) demonstrated good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999) at each of the three time points. We also compared these models to alternative models that combined parcels/items into two or one latent factors, and model comparison tests indicated that the three-factor models demonstrated a superior fit to the data<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Longitudinal Measurement Invariance***

Longitudinal CFA models established the measurement invariance of the items across time (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). Following the guidance of Mackinnon et al. (2021), we first examined a fully unconstrained measurement model (Model A) in which indicator intercepts and factor loadings were freely estimated across the three time points; this model demonstrated good model fit ( $\chi^2(261) = 393.58, p < .001, CFI = .984, TLI = .978, RMSEA = .044$ ), establishing configural invariance. Next, we modified Model A by placing equality constraints on the factor loadings of each indicator across the three time points; this model (Model B) demonstrated good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(279) = 405.37, p < .001, CFI = .985, TLI = .981, RMSEA = .042$ ) and the difference between Model A and Model B was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 11.79, \Delta df = 18, n.s., \Delta CFI = .001$ ), establishing metric invariance. Finally, we modified Model B by imposing additional equality constraints on the indicator intercepts across the three time points; this model (Model C) also demonstrated good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(297) = 442.57, p < .001, CFI = .982, TLI = .979, RMSEA = .043$ ). While chi-square difference testing indicated a significant difference between Model B and Model C ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 37.20, \Delta df = 18, p < .01, \Delta CFI = .003$ ), there was no substantive change ( $\Delta > .01$ ) in goodness of fit (GFI) indices between these two models. Based on modeling indicating that  $\Delta$ GFI and in particular  $\Delta$ CFI is a more robust indicator of measurement

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<sup>1</sup> Model testing results available from the second author upon request.

invariance that chi-square difference testing (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), these results establish scalar invariance. Results of invariance testing are reported in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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### *Hypothesis Tests*

We hypothesize dynamic, within-person relationships across time, so we followed the guidance of Pitariu and Ployhart (2010) for testing dynamic mediation using random coefficient modeling (RCM). We used growth modeling in RCM with time-varying predictors to account for the simultaneous change in our predictor and dependent variables. In addition to the variables listed above, we included the average level of active listening and perceived control (calculated as the average of T1, T2, and T3 levels of each variable) to control for static levels of our independent variables of interest (cf. Wang, Hom, & Allen, 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Prior to hypothesis testing, we confirmed that there was systematic within-person variance in our repeated-measures variables using intercept-only models for each of the three repeated-measures focal variables. Results supported the use of repeated measures and random coefficient modeling (cf. Walker et al., 2013), as approximately 25% of the variance was within-person for affective job insecurity (75% between-person), 31% of the variance for perceived control was within-person (69% between-person), and 41% of the variance in perceived listening was within-person (59% between-person).

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<sup>2</sup> We first ran all analyses with all listed controls included, however, only trait optimism was significant, and we therefore removed all control variables except trait optimism from the analyses reported below (Bernierth & Aguinis, 2016). All substantive conclusions and patterns of significance were identical with all controls, with only optimism controlled, or without control variables, and analyses including all or no controls are available upon request.

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Insert Table 4 about here  
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Results are reported in Table 4. Because the predictor, mediator, and dependent variables are all at Level 1, we are able to use multilevel mediation testing techniques (Kenny et al., 2003) to test for indirect effects (Pitariu & Ployhart, 2010; Zhu et al., 2017). We first determined whether change in active listening had a significant direct effect on change in affective job insecurity ( $\gamma = -.17, se = .04, p < .001$ ) when change in perceived control was excluded from the model. Next, we tested a mediator as outcome model which indicated that that change in active listening was positively related to change in perceived control ( $\gamma = .28, se = .04, p < .001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Finally, when change in perceived control ( $\gamma = -.41, se = .03, p < .001$ ) was included in the model predicting change in affective job insecurity, the effect of active listening on affective job insecurity decreased ( $\gamma = -.05, se = .03, p = .079$ ) and was no longer significant, suggesting full mediation and supporting Hypothesis 2. To calculate estimates of indirect effect size and confidence intervals around the indirect effect, we used the Mediation package in R (version 4.4.7; Tingley, Yamamoto, Hirose, Keele, & Imai, 2014) to calculate a quasi-Bayesian 99% confidence interval for the indirect effect. Based on 5,000 Monte Carlo draws, results provided further evidence that change in perceived control mediates the relationship between change in active listening and change in AJI (indirect effect =  $-.11, CI_{99\%} [-.18, -.06]$ ).

### Discussion

Organizational restructuring and layoff events are common, often resulting in feelings of distress for employees (Lee et al., 2017). Accordingly, scholars have advocated greater attention

to AJI, and for attention toward the identification of organizational factors that can reduce perceptions of job insecurity more generally (Huang et al., 2012; Koen & Parker, 2020; Lee et al., 2017). In response to this call, our study examined active listening as a potentially important antecedent of changes in AJI over time. In a sample of 268 employees experiencing impending layoffs, we found that changes in active listening over time were negatively associated with changes in AJI over time, and that this relationship was linked by changes in perceived control.

The results of our work offer several contributions to existing literature. First, our paper is the first to explicitly discuss the role of active listening in shaping employee reactions to organizational change. Comparable antecedents include developing supportive relationships with employees and enhancing communication. Like perceived supervisor support, good listening conveys both value and care for the employee, yet listening offers additional practical value as it is a specific and targeted way to offer support (Lloyd et al., 2017; Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2020; Yang et al., in press), and thus offers a specific target for intervention efforts. Like communication, listening offers a way to help employees achieve greater insight into themselves and the situation, yet importantly, listening does not depend on the availability of information that can be shared. Active listening, in contrast to these other intervention possibilities, promises to help facilitate self-insights needed to identify and capitalize on one's resources to manage the threat of job loss. As such, we open the door to further research investigating listening, while simultaneously introducing a potential intervention point that can be further investigated by future researchers.

Second, by investigating levers impacting the development AJI over time, we help fill a gap in understanding about how employees react to threatening job conditions over time. AJI is thought to fluctuate with changes in the personal and environmental variables, as well as

appraisal of those variables and one's ability to cope with them. Yet to our knowledge there has been no research examining variability in AJI and relevant cognitions impacting AJI over time. Drawing from a sample undergoing significant, ongoing organizational change, our results demonstrate that AJI and relevant cognitions indeed vary over time.

Relatedly, our model explicitly focuses on changes as appraisal unfolds and how those changes impact the development of AJI, allowing us to test the dynamic elements of Lazarus and Folkman's (1987) transactional model of stress and coping. Transactional theory suggests that stress reactions are impacted by an ongoing appraisal process in which a person considers whether or not something serves as a threat to them based in large part on their options for coping with the potential threat. Our study provides support for this proposition and suggests that changes in active listening serve as an important variable in shaping perceived control and AJI change over time.

Finally, by explicitly investigating the role of perceived control in the relationship between changes in active listening and AJI, we broaden our understanding of the social-psychological processes underlying employee reactions to significant organizational change. While restructuring and impending layoffs of the scale experienced in our study context constitutes an acute insecure situation likely to cause a feeling of threat in any employee, the reactions to this threat are likely to differ across employees (Koen & Parker, 2020). As noted by Probst (2003) and recently reaffirmed by Shoss (2017), it is imperative for researchers to gain further insight into the conditions under which employees develop adverse affective reactions to such threatening contexts. Our results suggest that employees are likely to experience better (worse) outcomes to the extent that they are afforded access to increased (decreased) active listening.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our study has several notable strengths, including longitudinal data collection in the context of an organization undergoing impending change. However, like all studies, it is not without its limitations. One such limitation is the use of self-report data. While self-report data may raise concerns about variance explained by common-method, methodologists have emphasized that self-report data is appropriate when the variables under study can only be reported by the self (Spector, 1994). Transactional theory points to peoples' perceptions of their environment, and thus it was most appropriate to investigate perceptions of active listening as well as perceived control. Moreover, only individuals can report the extent to which they are worried about potential job loss. Conway and Lance (2010) encouraged researchers to not assume that other-rated data is preferable to self-rated data, and suggested that concerns about common-method may be in many cases overblown. Our longitudinal study also helps to alleviate concerns over this issue.

A second limitation is that we cannot be completely sure that changes in active listening are responsible for the downstream impacts we found on perceived control and AJI change. Most notably, we did not measure other manager behaviors that could have played a role in helping to bolster control and reduce affective job insecurity, such as interpersonal justice or perceived supervisor support. As such, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that these or other variables partially explain the results we attribute to change in active listening. As Yang et al (in press) point out, many positive leader behaviors (e.g., interpersonal justice, support), include listening as one specific component, and some of these same behaviors (e.g., supervisor support) have been linked to AJI in a recent meta-analysis (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). As such, future research would benefit from finding a way to disentangle the impact of listening from these

broader constructs to increase confidence that changes in listening are alone are enough to impact changes in perceived control and AJI.

Similarly, it could be that increased listening was accompanied by increased communication, and that some of the impacts of active listening could be due to increased interaction and information exchange. However, in a study focused on factors differentiating managers who were rated by subordinates as the most effective listeners versus those rated least effective, Brownell (1990) found that those managers rating in the top quartile for listening tended to communicate either very frequently or frequently with their subordinates, whereas those managers scoring in the bottom quartile for listening effectiveness were just as likely to communicate at the highest level of frequency as they were to communicate at the lowest level of frequency. Brownell's (1990) results suggest that although the best listeners tend to communicate with employees frequently, frequency of communication alone is unlikely to be responsible for producing a range of listening responses. These findings mitigate concerns that our measure taps into communication frequency rather than active listening. Regardless, future researchers would be wise to control for communication frequency in order to completely rule out the possibility of frequency serving as a confound.

Another limitation involves understanding the precise mechanism through which changes in active listening impact changes in perceived control. Based on the transactional theory of stress, as well as prior research on listening (e.g., Bodie & Burleson, 2008), we focused on situational appraisal/reappraisal as a theoretical mechanism driving the active listening, perceived control, and AJI change relationships. However, there may be other mediators involved in our implied causal chain. Most notably, we suggested perceived power likely plays a role in driving change in perceived control, but we did not directly measure power. Second,

active listening appears to predict both leader-member exchange and interactional justice (Lloyd et al., 2017). In a review of the extant job insecurity research, Shoss (2017) has argued that justice and organizational communication could also strengthen perceived control and thus mitigate the harmful effects of job insecurity, thus these factors may serve to mediate the effect of changes in listening quality on changes in control. Likewise, increased psychological safety is likely to play a role in the causal chain, given that it has been found to mediate the relationship between manager listening and flexibility in employee thinking (as a component of creativity) (Castro et al., 2018). As such, researchers may wish to investigate whether such variables play an intervening role in carrying the impact of change in perceived listening quality on change in perceived control.

Our study focused on the impact of change in managerial active listening given that employees may be particularly attuned to the actions of managers during organizational change. However, future research might consider listening from other sources, such as one's coworkers, customers, or family members, as active listening from any of these sources could conceivably impact perceived control and shape the development of AJI if the employee is sufficiently willing to engage in and process conversations with these listeners. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which our findings replicate across listeners. Further, it may be worthwhile to investigate what happens following listening interactions in the context of organizational change. Voice research suggests that individuals may react negatively when their voice is heard but not acted upon (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Follow-up action is not generally thought to be a part of the listening process according to listening scholars, however, recent qualitative work suggests that when employees expect follow-up action, their retrospective assessments of listening for a given interaction can hinge on whether or not the expected follow-



up action was taken (Schroeder, 2016). As such, it may be the case that employees are already taking action into account in their perception of active listening, or it may be that the assessment of listening is temporary and subject to change with later (in)action. Further theoretical and empirical work is needed to better assess the role of action in active listening assessments and outcomes over time. Regardless, we cannot rule out the possibility of a “blowback” effect in cases where initial listening assessments are not followed up by expected action (c.f., Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018).

Future research should also examine the impact of active listening for the manager. As previously noted, many managers distance themselves when dealing with layoffs, presumably because they (incorrectly) anticipate that doing so will help assuage the pain associated with layoffs (Barber et al., 2013; Brockner et al., 2009). While our findings indicate that active managerial listening is beneficial for employees, research is needed to examine whether such listening also serves to benefit managers. Research might also explore potential downward influence models of listening where top management listening may shape managerial listening, which may shape how employees interact with each other during organizational change. Such research holds promise for better understanding the important connection between workplace interpersonal relationships and how individuals cope with organizational change.

### **Practical Implications**

Our study offers important practical implications for organizations and managers dealing with impending layoffs. Previous exploratory research into the development of job insecurity over time has focused on demographic, rather than relational, factors (Kinnunen et al., 2014) that are related to growth or decrease in job security. Our findings suggest that active listening can help alleviate the distress associated with job insecurity. To the extent that active listening can be

enhanced through managerial training interventions, listening may represent a path toward boosting employee feelings of control and reducing the detrimental impact of organizational change. We offer that organizations may do well to train managers in these situations to be better listeners, although we caution that quasi-experimental designs involving listening interventions would help strengthen this assertion.

While treatment of active listening can be found in most management and organizational behavior textbooks, listening research is sparse in comparison to those of other topics given equal space. In contrast to the dearth of academic attention to workplace listening, practitioner accounts and management textbooks point toward the importance of understanding this topic. For example, Brink and Costigan (2015)'s review suggests that listening was considered a more important skill than communicating or presenting. In a separate analysis of coverage of these skills in business programs, they found that, among these same three oral communication skills, listening was the least frequently listed as an explicit learning goal in AACSB programs. This suggests that either a.) listening is underemphasized in education, or b.) listening need not require attention because by the time of university education people have already sufficiently developed in the skill. Extant data supports the former over the latter. For example, listening skills have been cited as a top deficiency in CEOs (Larcker et al., 2013), and research suggests that managers tend to overestimate their listening skills (Brownell, 1990). The lack of academic attention toward listening therefore seems to be resulting in an unfilled need within the workforce. We identified an important role for listening in a common, highly impactful context through the research reported here, however we expect we are only scratching the surface when it comes to the impact of listening in predicting outcomes of importance to management

scholars. As such, we encourage greater research and practical attention to the nature and impact of active listening within the workplace context.

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**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Between-Person Correlations*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Optimism	3.96	.62									
2. Listening (T1)	4.05	.83	.14								
3. Listening (T2)	4.01	.82	.10	.60							
4. Listening (T3)	3.95	.86	.18	.58	.61						
5. Control (T1)	3.20	.89	.34	.34	.26	.34					
6. Control (T2)	3.12	.89	.32	.31	.31	.32	.66				
7. Control (T3)	3.17	.89	.26	.32	.33	.44	.65	.77			
8. AJI (T1)	2.54	.89	-.43	-.30	-.18	-.29	-.56	-.53	-.50		
9. AJI (T2)	2.64	.90	-.35	-.21	-.16	-.28	-.47	-.66	-.61	.70	
10. AJI (T3)	2.52	.89	-.35	-.28	-.19	-.34	-.53	-.64	-.67	.73	.84

*Notes.*  $N = 268$ . AJI = Affective Job Insecurity. All correlations significant at  $p < .001$  except: optimism-listening T2 ( $p < .10$ ); optimism-listening T1 ( $p < .05$ ); optimism-listening T3, listening T2-AJI T1, listening T2-AJI T2, listening T2-AJI T3 ( $p < .01$ ).



**Table 2***Within-Person Repeated-Measures Correlations*

	1	2
1. Perceived Listening		
2. Perceived Control	.14**	
3. Affective Job Insecurity	-.09*	-.31***

*Notes.*  $N = 804$  observations.  $df = 535$ . Repeated measures correlation from Bakdash and Marusich (Bakdash & Marusich, 2017).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3***Model Fit Statistics for Testing Discriminant Validities and Measurement Invariance*

Measurement Model (3 factors)	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Time 1 (4 factors±)	60.80	48	.99	.99	.03
Time 1	41.89*	24	.99	.99	.05
Time 2	55.48***	24	.99	.98	.07
Time 3	73.04***	24	.98	.97	.09
Longitudinal measurement invariance across 3 time points					
Model A	393.58***	261	.984	.978	.044
Model B	405.37***	279	.985	.981	.042
Model C	442.57***	297	.982	.979	.043

Note:  $N = 268$ .

± Model included optimism control variable (3 randomly assigned parcels). Model A = unconstrained measurement model (configural invariance). Model B = equal factor loadings (metric invariance). Model C = equal factor loadings and indicator intercepts (scalar invariance). Model A vs. Model B ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 11.79$ ,  $\Delta df = 18$ , *n.s.*,  $\Delta CFI = .001$ ). Model B vs. Model C ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 37.20$ ,  $\Delta df = 18$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\Delta CFI = .003$ ). CFI = confirmatory fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation. The error terms of identical items/parcels were specified as correlated across time points.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**  
*Random Coefficient Modeling Results*

	Perceived Control	Affective Job Insecurity	
	Model 1 <i>coefficient (SE)</i>	Model 2 <i>coefficient (SE)</i>	Model 3 <i>coefficient (SE)</i>
Intercept	.55 (.31)	5.31 (.32)***	5.47 (.26)
Optimism	.38 (.07)***	-.52 (.07)***	-.35 (.06)***
<i>Dynamic predictors</i>			
Time	.00 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Perceived Listening	.28 (.04)***	-.17 (.04)***	-.41 (.03)***
Perceived Control			-.05 (.03)
Model fit			
AIC	1625.37	1536.31	1387.33
BIC	1662.88	1573.82	1429.54
Marginal $R^2$	.16	.17	.34

Notes:  $N = 804$  observations. Marginal  $R^2$  from Nakagawa, Johnson, & Schielzeth (2017).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .