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Colin Mackinnon Clark¹, Ulrike Marianne Murfett²,
Priscilla S. Rogers³, and Soon Ang²

Abstract

This study examines the nature and value of empathic communication in call center dyads. Our research site was a multinational financial services call center that we came to know through grounded study techniques, including analyses of 289 stressful calls. Examining calls as communication genre revealed that agents and customers have conflicting organizational, service, and efficiency needs that undermine communication. But three types of empathic expression can mitigate these conflicts in some interactions. Affective expressions, such as “I’m sorry,” were less effectual, but attentive and cognitive responses could engender highly positive responses although customers’ need for them varied tremendously. Thus, customer service

¹ University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

² Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore

³ Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:

Priscilla S. Rogers, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA.

E-mail: psr@umich.edu

agents must use both diagnostic and enactment skills to perform empathic communication effectively, a coupling that we call *empathy work*.

Keywords

empathy, empathic communication, call center communication, customer service, genre analysis, dyadic communication

Customer: I sent in the request, but you all didn't process until I call. Then the lady immediately do for me. . . . I faxed the request on 29 December, so expecting that it should be done. Then I call on the 12th [of January], and they just managed to do on that very day.

Agent: Mm, mm. I see. I get what . . .

Customer: [interrupts] So the delay is already almost 2, 3 weeks already.

Agent: Okay, so sorry to hear that ma'am. Don't worry. You do a check by the end of today. If don't have it tomorrow, you give us a call again.

In the preceding excerpt of a customer service call, the call center agent empathizes with the customer (e.g., "I get what [you mean]," "Okay, so sorry to hear that," "Don't worry"). What else could the agent do, given that his coworkers had evidently failed to perform the service requested? The agent might have offered to check the status of the request and report back to the customer. As for the agent's expressions of empathy, they seem peripheral to the task, do they not? Interactions like this raise the question: Is there a role for empathy in customer calls?

The ability to empathize with customers is regarded as an important competency for customer service agents in call centers (Bordoloi, 2004; Burgers, Ruyter, Keen, & Streukens, 2000; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008; Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Pontes & Kelly, 2000). Yet, the nature of agent–customer interactions has raised doubts about the necessity and desirability of empathic communication in this context. Although call centers exist to foster customer relations through service, their setup distances agents and customers. Relational small talk occurs less often in telephone conversations than in face-to-face ones (Halbe, 2012). Agents and customers are strangers, often from different cultures, and will probably never interact again. Their respective roles as service giver and service receiver are asymmetrical. Agents are taught to "maintain an emotional distance" yet to build rapport (Thompson, Callaghan, & Van den Broek, 2004, p. 140). They are instructed to disguise their own feelings, yet to identify

with customers' feelings (Hochschild, 2003; Thompson et al. 2004, as cited in Deerie & Kinnie, 2002).

But this imperative to enact empathy pales against other call center goals, such as service efficiency. Customers want their queries dealt with pronto; they want first-call resolution (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). Agents are pressed for time as other callers wait in the queue and as managers monitor call length, rewarding shorter calls. In this customer service environment, then, is empathy needed?

This study examines the nature and value of empathic communication in call center dyads (hereafter labeled *customer calls*). We wondered if empathic communication contributed meaningfully to agents' customer service, and if so, how? Therefore, we investigated several basic questions: What is the communicative genre of a customer call? What agent and customer purposes may invite (or disinvite) empathy? How is empathic communication performed in calls? And finally, what do customer responses to empathic communication tell us about its effectiveness in this context? Using a grounded methodology including analyses of calls, we identified three types of empathic responses that contributed to the success of some calls. But we also found that expressing empathy was not always a good thing—some customers wanted no empathy whatsoever. The fact that empathic needs differed from customer to customer led us to propose that just learning ways to express empathy is not sufficient for success; rather, agents should be taught to do empathy work. We define *empathy work* as listening attentively to assess the need for empathy and providing the necessary communicative responses to meet that need expeditiously.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that focuses on empathic communication using a discourse analysis of interactions between call center agents and customers. Some research has explored empathy as an interpersonal skill. Operational definitions and scales were developed, and students were scored on their ability to express empathy (Rogers, 1951, 1980), for example. But this research was criticized because it used students, was too tightly focused to capture a full range of expression, and emphasized decontextualized skills (Clark, 2007). To this day there is little universal agreement on what empathy is, let alone how it is performed, a state of affairs that we detail later.

Research on call centers mushroomed after they were introduced in the early 1990s as an efficient and cost-effective means of delivering customer service. But studies examining the calls as communicative texts involving both agent and caller sides of the interaction remain surprisingly few. Friginal (2009) provides a comprehensive linguistic description of calls and identifies features that may cause miscommunication; Zu, Wang, Forey,

and Li (2010) compared English and Chinese usage and described the generic structure of calls; Forey and Lockwood (2007) identified communication breakdowns in call dialogue; Adolphs, Brown, Carter, Crawford, and Sahota (2004) examined politeness and involvement strategies in health advisory calls; and Cowie (2007) studied attitudes toward various English accents and their implications for training. Several studies also identified various types of responses used by call center agents, including responses related to empathy, and the impact of these responses on call effectiveness. Rafaeli, Ziklik, and Doucet (2008) found that customers rated the quality of service interactions higher when agents used specific customer orientation behaviors such as providing emotional support. Our own research found that agent expressions of empathy correlated with teamwork, an achievement we characterized as solidarity (Clark, 2011; Clark, Rogers, Murfett, & Ang, 2008). We build on these studies here.

Research Context and Analyses

Our research site, which we pseudonymously call ABC Company, is a call center for aftermarket financial services located in Singapore. As a multicultural “showpiece of Asian capitalism,” where English is fully indigenized as the language of business, government, and education (Clark & Rogers, 2005, p. 12), Singapore is a rich and widely relevant context for studying business communication such as the customer calls we investigated.

To examine customer calls, we used a grounded study approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This involved observing call center operations, shadowing agents, interviewing 26 agents about their calls, communicating regularly with the supervising manager, and analyzing multiple sets of calls from our corpus of 587 calls in English (often calls were in Singlish, a distinctive Singaporean English influenced by Southern Chinese dialects). Early in our introduction to this customer service environment and prior to interviewing, we analyzed a set of 75 calls selected by the supervising manager, 25 calls each from high, medium, and low performers. From these we learned a great deal about communication features related to performance. Then we extracted from our corpus a set of 289 calls in which the agent was under social stress as a result of caller aggression or ambiguity (Dorman & Zapf, 2004). Independently analyzing these calls, we identified types of responses that agents can meaningfully use for relationship building and conversational control (Clark, 2011; Clark et al., 2008). So by now we are well acquainted with this service environment and its interactions.

For this study of empathic communication, we reviewed our set of 289 stressful calls, earmarking those in which agents demonstrated either a high or no use of relationship-building responses that we associated with

empathic communication: being attentive, offering emotional support, and anticipating needs. We flagged 68 calls for closer analysis, 56 in which the agent made a high effort to use these responses with customers and 13 in which the agent made no relational effort whatsoever.

Two of us (Murfett and Rogers) independently analyzed agent–customer turns in the high-effort calls, completing flowcharts of agent responses that we had characterized as empathic and customer reactions that indicated the negative or positive impact of the agent’s effort. Using the totality of each customer’s response as our measure, we holistically scored if the customer left the call *satisfied*, *moderately satisfied*, or *unsatisfied*. There was no discrepancy in our scoring. As a further check, one of us (Clark) examined calls that were difficult to score; he agreed with the original scoring. Thereafter, we treated customer-satisfied calls as exemplary. We scrutinized calls with moderately satisfied or unsatisfied scores as potential sites for empathic communication using the linguistic technique of substitution.

Three of us (Clark, Murfett, and Rogers) independently analyzed calls in which the agent made no effort to build a relationship with the customer, flagging calls that would benefit from empathic communication. We then discussed how the empathic responses that we identified earlier might have been used to improve customer satisfaction in these flagged calls. These analyses, coupled with our fieldwork at the research site, showed us that agents enacted empathic communication by listening closely to customers (attentive empathy), offering emotional support (affective empathy), and anticipating needs (cognitive empathy). We discuss these three types of empathic communication in detail later, but to understand their relevance, we first examine the customer call as a communicative genre, particularly the purposes that bring agents and customers to the call.

What Is a Customer Call?

Genre theory provides a foundation for examining the viability of empathic communication in the call center context. Viewed as a genre, the customer call is a typified communicative action in response to a recurring situation that is recognized by its form, content, and shared purposes (Bakhtin, 1986; Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990; Xu et al., 2010; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Call Form and Content

In form and content, aftermarket customer calls are dyadic phone conversations with considerable turn taking, beginning with the call center agent’s

opening, then promptly proceeding to the customer's concern followed by interchanges to address it, and ending with a quick close. The calls in our corpus averaged 5 minutes in length, with the stressful calls among them averaging 30 seconds longer. Similar to the calls in Xu et al.'s (2010) study, these calls tended to proceed in six phases:

1. *Greeting.* Agents clicked an icon on the computer screen to accept the call and repeated a standard greeting: "Good morning, ABC Company, [Agent's name] speaking. How may I help you?"
2. *Identifying.* Customers identified themselves, and agents requested an account number or an identity card number (issued to all Singaporean citizens). If the customer was a foreign national, agents requested a passport number. Agents then typically asked callers to wait while they retrieved the relevant customer account data. If the caller had multiple accounts, the agent asked which account was the topic of the call (e.g., "Is this about your endowment policy or your son's critical illness coverage?").
3. *Defining.* Agents then asked callers how they might help them with this account. Caller responses ranged from requests for information, descriptions of problems, or complaints about service.
4. *Negotiating.* Agents responded with supplementary questions if needed (e.g., "When did this happen?" "Have you discussed this with your bank?").
5. *Resolving.* Agents then resolved the call in a number of ways, depending on the nature of the call. The agent might provide information, adjust the account, or refer the caller elsewhere (e.g., to another department or another organization, such as the customer's bank, if payment processing was the issue). The agent would pass the call to a superior if the caller's request required special approval or would refer the customer elsewhere if the request was outside the call center's scope of service.
6. *Closing.* Agents asked if the customer needed anything else, and if the customer had no further concerns, they were expected to say, "Thank you for calling ABC" before hanging up. If needed, agents then revised customers' on-screen information and wrote notes about the call before proceeding to the next call.

Phases 1, 2, and 6 (greeting, identifying, and closing) each typically happened very quickly, in seconds, whereas phases 3, 4, and 5 (defining, negotiating, and resolving) constituted the heart of the call. At times, phases

3, 4, and 5 were recurring and iterative. For example, it sometimes became clear during the resolution phase that the issue was different or more complex than the customer initially indicated, so the call reverted back to the defining stage. If a call was long, it was usually stuck in these phases.

The degree to which scripts are used for this process varies with a call center's purpose and management. Scripts are used less often than people might assume. As Forey and Lockwood (2007) observed, "The notion that call center discourse is scripted and predictable is outdated" (p. 323). For highly repetitious tasks that require uniformity and standardization, such as sales calls, scripts may play a greater role. But there is less scripting of aftermarket calls such as those we studied because they necessitate more customization to complete the service (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2004).

Form and content expectations for the customer-call genre suggest where and how empathic communication might be used (e.g., to acknowledge a customer's explanation of a problem or to mitigate an adversarial dynamic during resolution), and research shows that agents have considerable liberty to express it. What analyses of these external features do not fully reveal, however, are the needs that the customer-call genre is intended to meet. As Swales (1990) explained, the purpose of genre is more difficult to get at and "may require the analyst to undertake a fair amount of independent and open-minded investigation, thus offering protection against a facile classification based on stylistic features and inherited beliefs" (p. 46). Determining if empathic communication is integral to the customer-call genre, then, requires some understanding of this genre's purposes.

Shared Purposes and Divergent Needs

Our analysis of the call center context reveals that customers and agents share three purposes for calls: (a) organizational support, (b) service completion, and (c) efficiency. But these shared purposes serve divergent needs for customers and agents (see Figure 1). We describe these shared purposes and divergent needs as well as how empathic communication might be used to mitigate the tensions that they evoke.

Organizational support. Both the agent and the customer are in some way dependent on the organization for support. The customer obtained a product or service from the organization and needs some sort of information or help in conjunction with it. Customers' degree of dependence varies. But in some instances, it is high, such as in the case of an illness or loss for which the organization provides insurance.

Divergent Needs	Shared Purposes	Divergent Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintaining employment 	<p>Organizational support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtaining products and services
<p style="text-align: center;">Agent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying customer's real concern Demonstrating expertise Depersonalizing Finishing the task fully to avoid repeat call 	<p>Service completion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressing concern Receiving information, remedy, or attention Saving face Keeping composed if feeling mistreated, upset about a personal loss, or fearful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completing work Moving to the next call expeditiously 	<p>Efficiency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding someone to help or listen now Getting full and immediate attention

Figure 1. Shared purposes and divergent needs for the customer-call genre.

The agent depends on the organization for employment and the quality of life and social status such employment provides. This dependence is multifaceted. Because call centers are typically outsourced, agents frequently serve two masters, the center that monitors their performance and the entity that buys that center's services. Agents must understand the products and services of the entity purchasing their labor, meet the performance criteria of the center for which they work, and address the needs of the customers who call. These demands are complex and sometimes competing.

Thus, customers and agents use the customer call for the shared purposes of organizational support. Although their needs for support differ, neither the customer nor the agent is typically an organizational insider. So their use of the call as a means of active recourse is restrained. There is only so much that either the customer or the agent can do. To the degree that it is professionally appropriate (which is a tricky issue), the agent may empathize with the customer from the outsider perspective that they share (e.g., “Yes, it’s frustrating that we can’t get this done”).

Service completion. Both the customer and the agent need the call to get the work of service done. At first glance, the customer may seem to sit in the catbird seat, the agent being a mere gofer. But they play important, independent roles.

Customers call to get information, receive help, or simply to be heard. They are not expected to have expert knowledge, to behave particularly well, or to prepare for the call. It is okay for a customer to be inarticulate. Discourtesy and unkind words go unchallenged if the agent is an effective emotional laborer (Hochschild, 2003), paid to turn the other cheek. Customers can also end the call if it is not going well (e.g., “Okay then. I’ll call another time or handle it myself”). But the customer’s role in getting service is not demand free. Customers need sufficient understanding to communicate their reason for calling and to interpret the agent’s response, which may require some technical knowledge about the products or services at issue. A customer who does not understand may experience a loss of face. We heard many a customer laugh apologetically or admit their embarrassment when they failed to express themselves well or to grasp the agent’s meaning. Customers may also be challenged by their need to maintain emotional control. A customer’s need for service may stem from a wide range of personal insecurities and crises, such as financial loss, life-threatening illness, or the death of a loved one. Callers may be grief-stricken, fearful, frustrated, or simply confused about the product or service they purchased. So, it is not inconceivable that they may have difficulty keeping such strong emotions under control.

On the other side of the call, the agent must serve with a smile, providing expert knowledge on demand. Agents are paid to serve, and they are expected to do it well. Their bosses listen to their calls, and customers are asked to evaluate them. Call centers keep records on first-call resolution; follow-up calls expend agent time and are costly. Completing the service fully in one go, then, is a paramount goal for agents. Some observers have noted that surveillance is rarely applied to its fullest extent because agents

resist, and trade unions may get involved (Deery et al., 2004; Taylor, Mulvey, Hyman, & Bain, 2002). Nevertheless, monitoring is important in evaluating agent performance.

Customer and agent roles differ considerably, but they are codependents when it comes to service completion. Customers are not expected to be experts or even particularly cordial, but their lack of knowledge or emotional control may hamper an agent's ability to provide what they need. As the genre's keeper, the agent is under pressure to set emotion aside, find out what the customer needs, and meet those needs while Big Brother watches with reward power. Making customers feel comfortable may encourage their cooperation to get the service done. We have heard both parties expressing empathy for their counterpart (e.g., the agent comments, "I've found this provision in the policy difficult to understand too," and the customer replies, "I really appreciate your patience in explaining this to me").

Efficiency. Efficiency is in the best interest of both the customer and the agent. These calls are business transactions, not social interactions, and the system for handling them is set up accordingly. Calls are stacked in a queue and allocated to agents via an automatic call distributor (ACD). Customers may call a center often, but they do not necessarily speak to the same agent. Moreover, customers seek to obtain service and move on as quickly as possible. As one agent observed, "Most customers just want to come on and get their query dealt with, they don't really care whether [you're] . . . best friends with them at the end of the call" (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002, p. 245). But this shared need for efficiency is conflicted.

Sometimes customers want more agent time, such as when they are registering a complaint. We found that during stressful calls, customers often made remarks such as, "Do you understand me?" or "But I already submitted a form that I don't want this." Customers may also want more agent time because they feel that they deserve it after waiting in a long queue, negotiating an automated entry system, or both (e.g., "I had to dial this number three times before I could figure out which category would get me to you!"). Customers may decide to linger as well, taking advantage of the opportunity to be heard or asking off-topic questions (e.g., "Oh, and while we're on the phone, let me ask you about my medical policy"). Customers pick when to call, whether to prolong a call, and when to hang up. They can choose to hasten the call or take their time. But for agents, efficiency is tied to job performance. Haste is not a choice; it is a standard. Technology enables management to obtain data on agent call times, the number of calls handled, unanswered calls, and customers' abandonment

rate (Armistead, Kiely, Hole, & Prescott, 2002; Deerie & Kinnie, 2002). Agents' conversational abilities are difficult to measure, but monitoring their efficiency is easy, unobtrusive, and quantitative, a manager's dream. It is not uncommon for call center managers to post individual agents' call times and number of calls handled (Bain, Watson, Mulvey, Taylor, & Gall, 2002). Thus, customers and agents have different efficiency needs that may conflict. Customers expect to have information and answers on demand (e.g., "Why don't you have that information?"); they may choose to extend the call out of, say, frustration, anger, curiosity, or loneliness. Agents, however, must labor under efficiency's heavy hand.

Our data include calls in which customers express some awareness that agents must bring the call to an end (e.g., "I know you have other callers waiting, but before you go, please be kind enough to repeat what you said I should ask my banker"). When customers showed no understanding of time pressures, agents sometimes reminded them (e.g., "Like you, I'm anxious to find what you need, but you'll have to give me a moment to look it up").

We have identified three purposes that customers and agents share and explored divergent needs that are associated with these purposes in customer calls. Customers and agents need organizational support. Both depend on the organization in some way, an organization that restricts the manner in which support is rendered by imposing the call genre as the meeting place. Customers and agents also want service to be done efficiently. But their divergent service and efficiency needs tug at each other in fundamental ways, raising questions about the viability of the customer-call genre. As Swales (1990) observed, "when purposive elements come into conflict with each other . . . the effectiveness of the genre as a sociorhetorical action becomes questionable" (p. 47). It is not surprising that in practitioner (e.g., Dawson, 2005) and research publications (e.g., Dorman & Zijlstra, 2003), call center service is reported as less satisfactory than what organizations anticipated. Might empathic communication make the customer call more effectual for customers and agents, or does empathy distract from the fulfillment of organizational support, service, and efficiency needs? These questions led us to explore what empathy is and how it is communicated in customer calls.

What Is Empathic Communication?

The literatures of customer service, marketing, organizational psychology, and counseling discuss the importance of empathy, but no definitive definition of it has emerged. As Clark (2007) observed, "empathy has multiple

meanings that have been conceptualized variously” (p. xii). Some descriptions of empathy in these literatures were well suited to the interactions we studied. Hogan (1975) captured the essence of these interactions in his description of the empathic speaker and listener:

An empathic “actor” will typically tailor his performances to the needs and requirements of his or her audience; the actor will also tend to be an effective speaker as a result of an ability to anticipate the informational requirements of his or her listener. . . . On the other hand, the empathic “audience person” will tend to be a tactful and appreciative listener, skillfully encouraging others in their performances, thereby providing an accepting and generally rewarding context for interaction. (p. 15)

In Hogan’s (1975) description, our literature review, and analyses of customer calls, we have found three types of empathic communication: (a) attentive, (b) affective (sometimes called experiential), and (c) cognitive (or observational). Using our call center data, we define these types of empathy, describe responses that express them, and suggest possible inhibitors and outcomes of each type (see Table 1).

Attentive Empathy

Being a “tactful and appreciative listener” (Hogan, 1975, p. 15) coincides with definitions connecting empathy to attentiveness. For example, Ford (1995) regarded empathy as “attentiveness to customers and employees with their best interests at heart” (p. 75). Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) defined empathy as “caring individualized attention” (p. 6). Winsted (2000) described it “primarily as showing an interest in the customer, paying attention to the customer” (p. 402).

Our call analysis revealed that agents demonstrated attentiveness in customer calls by behaviors associated with active listening, such as acknowledging, repeating, paraphrasing, elaborating the customers’ ideas, summarizing, and asking questions. For example, one call consisted of 23 turns, including a progression of attentive agent responses: 11 acknowledgments (“Yeah. Understand”), 5 questions (“Do you actually have any agent in mind?”), 7 clarifications or explanations of the actions (“Yeah, usually they will follow up”), and a concluding summary to check mutual understanding (“Okay, so what I’ll do is . . .”). The attentiveness expressed in this call garnered a positive customer response.

Table 1. Empathetic Communication in Call Center Customer Service.

Type of Empathy	Definition	Expressions	Inhibitors	Potential Outcomes
Attentive	Listening actively and appreciatively to customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging • Repeating • Paraphrasing • Elaborating customers' ideas • Summarizing • Asking questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surface listening • Impatience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirming understanding • Diagnosing customers' need for empathy • Uncovering customers' real reason for calling
Affective	Identifying with customers' feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stating understanding • Offering an apology • Referring to the experience of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seriousness discounted by either interactant • Inappropriate use • Customer embarrassment • Customer desire for objectivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating a shared condition—both agent and customer are beholden to the organizational entity
Cognitive	Assuming customers' perspective to provide help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing language customers need for their explanation • Proposing options • Stating what other customers have done 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misdiagnosis of customers' needs • Insufficient time to explain in detail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating genuine customer understanding and care • Moving the call toward resolution

Agents used attentive responses to comprehend customers' needs, thereby providing timely service. For example, the agent in the following call used attentive responses (italicized) to move this call toward service resolution.

Agent: This is actually for Mr. [XXX]? Can I know how are you related to him?

Customer: I'm his daughter.

Agent: Ah, okay Ma'am. *So how can I help you?*

Customer: Just ah, last month we took a loan of 9,500 from this policy with the interest of 6% . . .

Agent: *Mhm*

Customer: I would like to check if let's say he wants to do a payment ah now of the full amount . . .

Agent: *Is it going to be a full repayment?*

Customer: Correct

Agent: Okay, I'm sorry, ma'am, because for loan value we don't reveal to third party, but if you want I can actually call him directly, or I can post the information to him

Customer: Ah . . .

Agent: *Which do you prefer?*

Customer: Okay, you can . . . if you call him, mmm, ah . . . you can call him, but I do not know if he'll understand, that's why he asked me to call.

Agent: Ah

Customer: Because . . .

Agent: I just need to check. Can I . . . you know, whether I can reveal [the loan value information] to the daughter or not.

Customer: Yeah . . .

Agent: *Would that help?*

Customer: Yeah, you can call him.

By using attentive empathy, the agent was able to recognize that there was an organizational barrier preventing her from helping the customer—agents are not allowed to reveal some information to third parties without the policy owner's permission. The agent used a series of six questions to find out if her hunch was correct while taking steps to scale the organizational barrier to service completion.

Our call analysis and agent interviews also revealed two inhibitors of agent attentiveness: surface listening and impatience. We found that agents can fake attentiveness. Deploying acknowledging, repeating, and paraphrasing expressions passively (e.g., "Aha, yes I know"; "You're saying that . . ."); using a flippant tone and rushed delivery when acknowledging;

and repeating customers' words were all signs of inattentiveness. Some customers' responses suggested that they knew when agents were bluffing attention (e.g., "Yes, but do you hear what I'm saying?").

Affective Empathy

Affective empathy has been defined as identifying with what another person is feeling or responding with the same emotion as that of the other person (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). It is sometimes associated with the German *Einfühlung*, "feeling one's way into," or *Mitgefühl*, "feeling with someone" (Wispe, 1986). Clark (2007) considered it "a mode of experiencing" (p. 6). "Identifying with another person's experiences and feeling concern for them when things go wrong" could be characterized as affective empathy (Axtell, Parker, Holman, & Totterdell, 2007, p. 143; see also Betancourt, 1990; Egan, 1990).

In our data, agents expressed affective empathy by offering emotional support ("I understand"; "That must be difficult") or an apology ("I'm sorry, can you hear me now"; Clark, 2011; Clark et al., 2008; Rafaeli et al., 2008). We also found instances in which agents referred to customers facing similar difficulties (e.g., "Actually, other customers also called to clarify what the letter means").

Affective empathic expression also has inhibitors. First, customers may doubt the sincerity of such expressions. Agents are expected to use them, much like expressions of courtesy. Second, affective expressions can be inappropriately used ("I'm sorry you received such bad service"), exceeding boundaries imposed by the organization to protect its reputation. An agent should not reinforce customers' negative views about the service, products, or organization. Third, affective displays may embarrass the customer ("It's not so bad really. I'll handle it"), or the customer may want to keep the conversation objective ("This is a generic call"). Expressions of affective empathy may be easy to drop into a conversation, but they should be used somewhat carefully.

Cognitive Empathy

Cognitive empathy involves intellectually assuming the other person's perspective while retaining sufficient judgment to helpfully intervene. Clark (2007) characterized it as "a mode of observation" (p. 10; see also Axtell et al., 2007; Miller & Koesten, 2008). Kohut (1991) described it

as a higher form of empathy that entails the two competing functions of experiencing near and experiencing distant.

We heard agents expressing cognitive empathy by providing language that the customer needed, proposing options for eventualities that the customer might face, or stating what other customers have done. Customers sometimes lacked the necessary terminology and product knowledge. Empathetic agents filled in the blanks. The following excerpt is an apt example of an agent's use of cognitive empathy in helping a customer who is struggling to articulate a request. In reassuring tones, the agent provided the customer with the needed terminology ("Golden Years Plan") and reassurance that her assumptions were understood ("Yeah, correct"), thereby preventing the customer from losing face:

Customer: Okay, I give you the reference number, ha.

Agent: Okay, sure

Customer: [gives the number]

Agent: Okay

Customer: Yeah, because we receive the pre . . . the what, the medical program, the gold, ah . . .

Agent: The Golden Years Plan, aha

Customer: Aha. So what happens is we want to cancel this, ah . . . this, lah, what would it, this ah . . . insurance. Is it insurance?

Agent: Yeah, correct.

Customer: So I'd like to cancel this insurance. How, how do I need . . . do I need to fill in any form?

Agent: Yeah, if you wish to we can send you the form, and then, ah, you can send it back to us after completing it.

Customer: Could you please send to us . . .

Agents also used expressions of cognitive empathy to anticipate a customer's future needs and offer solutions in advance. For example, an agent anticipated that a customer requesting a change of address would wish to use this new address for other policies as well (e.g., "So you need to update your address for all your policies?") or that a customer would want to avoid incurring greater costs by paying a bill (e.g., "You should go down today. Every day a little bit of interest is incurred"). In such cases, intellectually assuming the customer's perspective enabled the agent to helpfully intervene.

Consider how cognitive empathic communication might have been used in the following call:

Customer: For the claim, right, let's say my husband got a tumor, then he needs to stay in a hospital. So can we use this for [that] sort of claim?

Agent: The [xyz] policy does not cover hospitalization.

Customer: So that means it only covers accident and . . .

Agent: It covers incapacitation as well as death.

In this call, the agent stated that the policy did not cover hospitalization, but did not elaborate on what the policy did provide until asked. This suggests little concern for the caller, who may in fact be discussing a real problem, not just a hypothetical one. Alternatively, the agent could have empathized with the customer's need to understand the coverage of his policy and helped him move forward:

Customer: For the claim, right, let's say my husband got a tumor, then he needs to stay in a hospital, so can we use this for [that] sort of claim?

Agent: I see here that your policy with us covers incapacity, where the insured person cannot work, or death. It does not cover stays in hospital for illness. You may want to consider other policies that cover hospitalization in case someone is sick.

The possibility of misdiagnosing customers' needs is an inhibitor of cognitive empathy. In the counseling context, cognitive empathy is described as evolving over time. Unlike affective empathy, which can be expressed immediately, cognitive empathy is said to require "prolonged immersion in the broader perspective of a client's life" (Clark, 2007, p. 11; Ornstein, 1979). But customer calls are one-time events that are expected to begin and end quickly. Thus, cognitive empathy is inhibited because the customer-call genre disallows relationship building over time.

Despite the need for efficient call resolution, some agents performed cognitive empathy with good customer effect. We hypothesize that agents' familiarity with the genre may facilitate their ability to effectively enact cognitive empathy. Call topics orbit around the particular service sold, which agents are prepared to discuss. Agents also become familiar with the range of concerns that customers present in these calls (e.g., "Oh I see. You're interested in taking a loan on your current insurance policy"). Familiarity that comes with experience is useful unless agents presume that customers have concerns that they do not have and thus propose irrelevant solutions.

Having examined the customer call as a genre—its form, content, and purposes—and having identified three types of empathic expression and what might inhibit their effectiveness, we return to the basic question driving this study:

Does empathic communication meaningfully contribute to customer service at call centers? Once skeptical about empathy's value in this service context, we have found that empathic communication plays a selective but highly significant role in aftermarket customer calls. But our data suggest that simply learning and repeating formulaic expressions of empathy may undercut its contribution. Consequently, we propose using an approach that we call empathy work.

What Is Empathy Work?

Our analyses suggest that realizing empathy's full potential for contributing to customer service at call centers requires not only knowing expressions of empathy but also making decisions about their use based on customer needs. That is, it requires *empathy work*—*listen attentively to assess the need for empathy and providing the necessary communicative responses to meet that need expeditiously*. Empathy work harbors back to Hogan's (1975) notions of being an appreciative listener and tailoring performance to meet audience requirements. We will now explain and illustrate how empathy work operated in the calls that we analyzed.

Listening Attentively to Assess Need

Empathy work is work in part because it requires paying close attention to determine customers' need for empathy. This conclusion coincides with Clark's (2007) observation that "empathy involves a commitment to grasp the internal state of an individual as accurately as possible" (p. 8; see also Cochran & Cochran, 2006; Egan, 2002; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). This "commitment to grasp" the customer's need for empathy requires actively listening for clues. Kent (1993) likened it to a tenuous guessing game:

When we communicate, we make guesses about the meaning of others' utterances, and we, in turn, guess about the interpretations that others will give our utterances. This guesswork is paralogical in nature because no logical framework, process, or system can predict in advance the efficacy of our guesses. (p. 5)

In our analysis of customer calls, we found eight types of responses that indicate the customer's need for empathy. In these responses, the customer invites empathy, disinvites empathy, expresses discontent, demonstrates misunderstanding, repeats the concern, asks the agent to repeat, requests affirmation, or criticizes service. Table 2 provides examples of each of these response types.

Table 2. Examples of Eight Response Types Indicating the Customer’s Need for Empathy.

Response Type	Examples
Invites empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Slow down. You’re going too fast” ● “How come nobody inform me?” ● “Hum. It’s very cumbersome. . . I’m surprised . . . ● “It’s all very complicated . . . It’s very hard to weigh the pros and cons” ● “Actually, honestly, I need this amount . . . Is there any way you can help me?” ● “That’s not very good, right?. . . If you were a policyholder yourself and you wanted to see. . . You know what I mean?” ● “So you can see how’s my feeling now.” ● “Let’s say I cannot pay back.” ● “Please I do need a lot of help because I cannot speak properly. . . .” ● “So that means I lose money. . . . Oh that is dreadful, isn’t it” ● “Oh, dear.”
Disinvites empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “This is a generic inquiry.” ● But to keep it short, I really don’t want to waste a lot of time.” ● “For the claim, right, let’s say my husband got a tumor, then he needs a stay in a hospital. . . .” ● “Do I need to declare the health?” ● “No, you listen to me first.” ● “Say, yes. Can you check for me also the . . . ?”
Expresses discontent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I understand but . . .” ● “Yah but we still have to . . .” ● “You are saying that if I . . . I will only be getting 55,000? Any other thing?... After 14 years death benefit is only . . . I mean you give me a heart attack.” ● “You better send me a form. I’m not going to write you a letter. I don’t have too much time you know” ● “Okay, so I’ll have to check” ● “So that means I lost money. Oh that is dreadful, isn’t it” ● “Cannot be”
Demonstrates misunderstanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What does commencement date mean?” ● “I would like to withdraw half of my, ah . . . what do you call it? Half of my savings.” ● “I don’t understand about this policy.” ● “I started the payment but I don’t know which month.” ● “I don’t know what’s really happening. Every month I receive . . .”

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Response Type	Examples
Repeats the concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● But I already submitted a form that I don't want this . . . I already submitted in October the form As soon as I received the letter I sent it. . . . I mean what's the point?" ● "You not understand English or what? I said you e-mail to me" ● "Oh, a letter at. . . . Okay if I mail in a letter. . . . So this letter is. . . ."
Asks agent to repeat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "What? Say again" ● "Sorry. Sorry. Come again?" ● "Say that again. I can't hear you"
Requests affirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "Do you know what I'm trying to say?" ● "So he has enough in his account to cover it, am I right?" ● "If sufficient funds are not in the account for coverage, you will let me know?" ● "You understand my concept?"
Criticizes service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "And then you sent a letter saying" ● "So why did [your agent] ask me to write into the bank?" ● "But the trouble is" ● "The 24th letter [from you] was, hah, hah, a mistake." ● "Did you give us a policy . . . book? Is this in the information at all? Is it stated? Usually when you buy these you have all these. . . ." ● "So your offer is not very good." ● "No. I explained to her very clearly . . . [Your colleague] passed the phone to you. No head; no tail."

Using such indicators to assess customers' need for empathy is critical. Empathic communication may be unnecessary or inappropriate in some cases. Not all customers seek, need, or appreciate empathy. Some want to avoid it completely, preferring an objective answer, even if their circumstances are grim. For example, in the following call, a customer just wants an objective answer to her question about reimbursement for treatments for her newly diagnosed cancer:

Customer: This is a generic inquiry Let's say about the critical illness policy. If I'm diagnosed with breast cancer, and I don't need the money . . . I don't claim?

Agent: If she doesn't want to claim first, but next time she decides to claim, just make sure she has all her medical reports with her.

Later in the call, this customer coupled the personal *I* with the soft modal *may* when she asked how a death would be treated under the policy, but the agent doing empathy work continued to respect the customer's desire for emotional distance, selecting *the person* rather than using *you*.

Customer: I may die of cancer. I may die of road accident so . . .

Agent: Okay . . . as long as it's, it's death, [the] bonus will still accumulate up to then. . . .

Customer: You wouldn't ask for the cause of death?

Agent: No, [it's] a living policy. Living policy also covers death, so we don't look at whether it's a major disease or not . . . the person [has died] already, so we just admit the death claim.

With other customers, genuinely expressed affective empathy sufficed. Examples include the agent who admitted he was speaking too fast ("Oh sorry. I said . . .") or the agent who affirmed understanding in authentic tones ("Yes. Don't worry. We will let you know if there are not sufficient funds in your account when the payment is due").

Other customers invited empathy ("Please I do need a lot of help because I cannot speak properly") or demonstrated considerable misunderstanding ("I don't understand about this policy"). Customers who were greatly discontented or critical of the service seemed to benefit most from agents' use of cognitive empathy with proposals of ways to meet upcoming needs. Sometimes agents effectively used a combination of attentive, affective, and cognitive empathy, as examples in the next section show. An agent doing empathy work detects and honors customers' differing needs for empathy and tailors responses to meet those needs expeditiously.

Tailoring Responses to Meet Needs Expeditiously

Our data analyses suggest that empathic expression can potentially mitigate the underlying, and sometimes conflicting, needs inherent in the call genre (see Figure 1 and the fifth column of Table 1). Agents used affective empathy—stating understanding, offering apology, or referencing what others have experienced—less than we expected, and this kind of empathy was often not essential, even for customers in personal distress. But after agents expressed affective empathy, some customers moved to the core issue motivating their calls, which suggests that affective expressions may help move some calls

toward resolution. Moreover, in listening to calls and talking with agents, we found that expressing affective empathy may help some agents cope when organizational constraints limit their efforts to assist customers (e.g., “So sorry. Multiyear projections of possible gains after bonuses, are not shown”).

In our subset of calls in which the agent made a high effort to use empathic communication, we found that attentive and cognitive empathic responses had a greater effect on customer satisfaction and call efficiency than did affective empathic responses. Some agents used attentive repetition, inquiry, and elaborative comments as investigative tools (e.g., “So you’re asking if hospitalization would be covered?”) for uncovering a customer’s real reason for calling and resolving the call. The most effective of these calls were those in which the agent employed cognitive empathic responses, such as providing terminology that the customer needed or suggesting actions that the customer might take. For example, in the following call, the agent employs all three types of empathic communication, but cognitive empathy expedites the call (customer–agent turns are numbered as locators for the subsequent analysis):

1. Customer: I used to have an insurance officer; after she left I was assigned three different officers for different policy. This is inconvenient for me, and so far none has contact me. I’m not sure that this is the service they are supposed to provide in the sense that they don’t follow up with me, they don’t check the status of my policy and then in fact when I once tried to call them, one of them never ever pick up her phone. . . . I’m really terribly unhappy with the service I’m getting from ABC. . . . Furthermore I want to be assigned just one officer for all my policies. . . .
2. Agent: Yes, I understand, ma’am. So you want one common officer for all.
3. Customer: Who is contactable and when I need any help I can get her easily. And maybe someone who bothers enough to like call up and check.
4. Agent: I understand what you mean. So what I’ll do is that I shall inform your account manager who [is] servicing your needs that she’ll assign you an officer for all your three cases, and we should also get the officer to give you a call as soon as possible. It may take a few days because I’m sure she needs to read through all your policies first.

The customer’s annoyance is expressed with negatively loaded adverbs, adjectives, and phrases (“inconvenient,” “none has contact me,” “terribly unhappy”) and some sarcasm (“not sure that this is the service they are supposed to provide, maybe someone who bothers enough to, like, call up”). The agent’s “Yes, I understand, ma’am” (turn 2) and “I understand what you mean” (turn 4) display affective empathy by acknowledging the caller’s feelings. But after each of these affective expressions, the agent

immediately enacted cognitive empathy to meet the customer's informational needs: by summarizing the gist of the customer's complaint (turn 2), thereby reassuring the customer that she did indeed understand correctly, and by explaining to the customer what she, the agent, would do to solve the problem (turn 4). The agent also volunteered additional information for the customer ("It may take a few days because I'm sure she needs to read through all your policies first"). This additional information was important in this call because delays in establishing contact were part of the reason for the customer's unhappiness in the first place.

If the agent had not used much cognitive empathy but had instead focused on elaborating the affective dimension and reinforcing the caller's obvious anger, the agent might have said something like this in turn 2: "Yes, I understand, ma'am. Really very sorry you had a bad experience." Such a response may have created some alliance between the agent and customer, but it probably would not have advanced the call toward a resolution. Instead, the agent managed customer anger well by keeping affective empathic expression ("I understand") brief and interjecting cognitive empathy quickly: ("So you want one common officer for all").

Cuttings from another call further demonstrate the interplay between attentive and cognitive empathic responses that serves the call's generic purpose while addressing the users' underlying needs. The call began with a rapid interchange, which remained friendly although neither the agent nor the customer observed the customary turn taking:

Customer: . . . I really like to feedback to you, ah, I'm getting really very frustrated with your, ah, telephone, ah. . . .

Agent: You mean the IVR [interactive voice response] system?

Customer: Your IVR is very nice, sound very good, but is really making me feel like a fool, you know.

Agent: Sir, can I know what happened when you actually . . .

Customer: Aaah, you know . . .

Agent: You actually trying to connect? Do you have a e-connect? I mean, sorry, a password to actually connect . . . ?

Customer: I don't have a password. I just call your normal help desk, customer service number.

Agent: Okay . . .

Customer: But everything go . . . you know, like long, long . . .

Agent: Maybe can actually be . . .

Customer: . . . but anyway to cut this short . . .

Agent: Okay . . .

Customer: I don't want to really waste a lot of time, you know . . .

Agent: . . . yes, does not help . . .

Customer: I give you [my] policy number. One. Double seven.

Agent: One. Double seven.

The agent did not apologize for the routing system by expressing affective empathy but instead investigated the caller's experience by asking attentive questions, such as "You mean the IVR system?" and "Sir, can I know what happened?" When the customer admitted that he lacked a password to expedite the process, the agent's simple "Okay" did not challenge the customer's face. Before the agent had time to assist with the password issue, however, the customer provides his policy number and gives his real reason for calling:

1. Agent: Okay, so Mr. [XYZ], how can I help with your policy?
2. Customer: I get this statement . . .
3. Agent: Okay . . .
4. Customer: I just could not understand. One entry I kind of find funny. Special cash bonus allocated for . . .
5. Agent: Okay, Mr. [XYZ], what happened is that right . . . ahm, last year . . . we actually allocate a special bonus for certain policy only Because it's a one-time special bonus, so we . . . actually post out a check
6. Customer: Oooh! I see.
7. Agent: Yeah, so there's a check actually . . . 505 . . . sent out to all the policyholders that may be affected.
8. Customer: Aah! When would I expect to receive this check?
9. Agent: Ah, we sent out on the first of July.
10. Customer: Ooh . . .
11. Agent: . . . did you receive this check?
12. Customer: . . . last year, first of July . . .
13. Agent: . . . but not exactly on first of July, but we sent out actually in July period.
14. Customer: I really don't, don't recall whether I get this, you know Too long ago . . .
15. Agent: . . . because maybe expiration date six months . . .
16. Customer: Is too long ago already, I could not remember whether I received this thing. . . .
17. Agent: Yeah, Mr. XYZ . . . let's say this check was not banked in, right . . .
18. Customer: . . . yeah?
19. Agent: Six months later exactly, the check would . . . expire.
20. Customer: Yeah.

21. Agent: Okay so, Mr. [XYZ], ahm . . . can I just trouble you that, can you actually refer to your bank account. . . . [Might] you actually have a quick [look for] this 505? . . .
22. Customer: I . . .
23. Agent: . . . in July?
24. Customer: I . . . You see the problem is this, ah . . . first of all, ah . . . I don't recall. Second is, ah . . . I'm having this passcard, so I don't have a . . .
25. Agent: Oh, you don't have an account book . . .
26. Customer: . . . yeah, you know . . .
27. Agent: Okay, Mr. [XYZ], I try to check whether . . . this check [has] been presented or not.
28. Customer: Why not, yeah . . .
29. Agent: Would you like to give me a contact number?

The customer gives his number, and the agent confirms it. The call ends on a high note:

30. Agent: Okay. I can't give you the information immediately
31. Customer: I'm sure . . .
32. Agent: It'll probably be the end of the day or tomorrow morning.
33. Customer: Okay, no problem
34. Agent: . . . so I'll try to call you back by end of today or tomorrow
35. Customer: Alright, marvelous

In the preceding call excerpt, attentive and cognitive empathy work together to help resolve the customer's concern. The agent signaled that she is listening attentively by acknowledging what she hears (e.g., by saying *okay* in turns 3, 5, 21, 27, and 30), asking a clarifying question in turn 11 ("did you receive this check?"), and repeating information for the customer throughout the call. The cumulative effect of these attentive responses is to let the customer know that he has the agent's full attention, thereby mitigating his negative feelings from being made to "feel like a fool" by the IVR system, which he had difficulty navigating to initiate the call.

The agent displayed cognitive empathy by proposing options for the customer. In Turns 21 and 23, the agent politely posed an option as a question rather than an imperative ("Can I just trouble you that, can you actually refer to your bank account. . . . [Might] you actually have a quick [look for] this 505 . . . in July?"). In turn 25, the agent expedited the call by providing the answer that the customer was trying to articulate ("Oh, you don't have an account book") and, in turn 27, by offering another, very different option to him ("Okay, Mr. [XYZ], I try to check whether . . . this check [has] been

presented or not”). This last option is the solution that the customer was seeking, and he leaves the call entirely satisfied (turn 35). The agent efficiently diagnosed the customer’s needs—not just the customer’s need for information but also his need for respect—and, by offering different options (the latter involving more work for the agent), demonstrated genuine care for the customer while moving the call toward closure.

As these examples suggest, empathy work challenges agents to move away from scripted responses and one-size-fits-all thinking to adopt an investigative approach that focuses on customer needs. Empathy work involves discerning the appropriateness of empathy for each customer in order to determine whether and how to use it. Customers come to calls with a variety of underlying needs, such as those concerning face issues, financial difficulties, and personal health concerns that frequently emerged in the calls we studied. But we found that customers’ need for empathic communication varied: Some customers did not want or need empathy; others benefited greatly from its thoughtful enactment, particularly from the attentive and cognitive empathic responses that demonstrated the agent’s effort to understand their problems and find solutions.

Our data suggest that attentive, cognitive, and, to a lesser degree, affective empathic responses can keep calls moving forward. But we also observed that cognitive empathic responses—particularly those helping customers find future solutions—do take time. Whether training in empathy work would help agents to use cognitive empathy to increase call efficiency remains to be explored as does whether cognitive empathy contributes to one-call resolution, thereby reducing the need for customer follow-up.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to identify how empathy is expressed in customer service and to explore whether empathic communication is beneficial in aftermarket customer calls. Our findings present both theoretical and practical implications. From the perspective of genre theory, this study suggests that empathy work, as a construct, is a complex effort that can help mitigate the tensions underlying the shared purposes that engender customer calls. Practically, our data show that empathic communication is not a remedy to be universally applied in stressful calls. But some customers responded positively to its enactment and even sought it. By offering genuine emotional support, the enactment of affective empathy did ameliorate tensions that some customers brought to calls; other customers indicated a preference for objectivity, even in the face of personal loss. Cognitive empathy was in greater demand and often highly

appreciated although the degree of its impact on customers remains to be investigated. In summary, this study shows that by diagnosing customers' need for empathy and providing appropriate empathic responses, agents can affect the tone of a call and the efficiency of call resolution.

We believe these findings are important for training. Customer-service agents will benefit from understanding the different types of empathy: attentive, affective, and cognitive. Learning the concept of empathy work may encourage their increased use of attentive listening strategies to determine when to employ or withhold expressions of affective empathy and when to deploy cognitive empathy in order to address customer concerns and expedite service.

In business and technical communication classes, we have used examples from this research to stimulate discussion about dyadic communication and relationship building in general. Around the world, the aftermarket customer call is a familiar genre for users of credit cards or new technologies. Some students identify personally with such calls and share their experiences eagerly. Those who have not used a call center benefit from learning about the challenges this genre presents and applying what they learn to other types of dyadic communication.

Future research should validate the multidimensional nature of empathy work, examine the relationships between the three types of empathic communication, and build and test theories about the differential predictors and consequences of each. Practically, the demands of empathy work suggest that it is insufficient to simply train agents to feel for the customer or to memorize types of affective responses. Agents must rather learn the art of puzzle solving—analyzing customers' responses to determine if empathic communication is needed and, if so, selecting attentive, affective, and cognitive responses that best meet that need.

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Author Biographies

Colin Mackinnon Clark is a senior project officer with the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. As a lecturer in business communication at Nanyang Business School in Singapore, he completed his PhD thesis on call centers and won the Association for Business Communication's Outstanding Dissertation Award.

Ulrike Marianne Murfett is a senior lecturer in communication management at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. She teaches communication management modules in undergraduate, MBA, and military programs.

Priscilla S. Rogers is an associate professor of business communication at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, teaching in the Global MBA and Executive Programs. She has research awards from the Association for Business Communication and the National Council of Teachers of English.

Soon Ang is the Goh Tjoei Kok Chair and professor of management at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University. She is the foremost expert in cultural intelligence and author of two pioneering books on the topic, both published by Stanford University Press.