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Listening to the family: a qualitative exploration of coworkers' listening and trust building processes

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Abstract

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Within organizational families, listening between coworkers plays an essential role in enabling organizational success and the effective enactment of family dynamics. It allows information to circulate, collaboration to take place, and trusting relationships to develop. Yet, coworkers' listening processes, agency and experiences in an organizational family continue to be overlooked by organizational and communication scholarship. This fails to account for how coworkers do not simply process information and managerial directives but enact their work family through their communication. Placing coworkers at the center stage and adopting a socio-constructionist perspective, this thesis explores how listening between them takes place in an organizational family, and the role it plays in building trust among them. This is done by looking at coworkers' own perceptions and experiences. The family metaphor and trust are employed as the chosen theoretical framework to interpret the insights emerging from ten semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted at an Italian dental clinic. The results identify six ways coworkers perceive their role as listeners: 1) a dance with two leads, 2) a learning device, 3) a necessity, 4) a relationship building tool, 5) an innate quality, and 6) a conditional pursuit. They also introduce three factors that explain how listening contributes to the establishment of trust among coworkers: 1) consistency and actions, 2) psychological safety, and 3) benevolence. Moreover, the relationship between the family metaphor, listening, and trust is clarified, as well as that between the family metaphor and psychological safety. Overall, the study invites academics and practitioners to pay more attention to coworkers' listening practices directed at their colleagues, and how these shape organizational realities and relationships.

Keyword: strategic listening, trust, family metaphor, coworkership, face-to-face communication, symmetrical communication

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Introduction

Effective and efficient internal communication is the backbone of organizations as it allows information to circulate, be processed, and utilized for the purpose of developing and adjusting strategy. For some organizations, like those that choose to embrace the family metaphor, labeling their workforce as a family, a holistic approach to communication is essential. These work families are defined by collaboration, flatter internal hierarchies, and increased employee participation in the organizational life (Casey, 1999; Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013; Tognazzo, 2022). Employees are expected to actively contribute to organizational success and communicate openly with one another. All characteristics that arguably would not be achievable without active and strategically oriented listening. The lack of it would reduce internal communication to mere information transmission, preventing the exchange of information necessary for collaboration and involvement.

Building a work-family and displaying a family-oriented organizational culture is thought to represent a competitive advantage for organizations as they are linked to higher job satisfaction, productivity, and motivation (e.g., Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013; Furlich, 2016). However, the family metaphor is not immune to criticism. Instead, it has been connected to the emergence of anxiety among employees, and most concerningly, accused of being a disguised form of totalitarian control (Casey, 1999; Tognazzo, 2022). Critiques that question the extent to which coworkers are listened to, empowered, and can meaningfully contribute to organizational success within said businesses. As coworkers' perceptions of working inside the family metaphor remain unexplored, this thesis will pay closer attention to how they communicate, focusing on how they listen to each other. Hence, providing further insights into a debated workplace dynamic and enriching the general understanding of listening processes.

Notably, listening is pivotal for the establishment of the open communication and flatter hierarchy implied by the family metaphor. However, a closer look at organizational practices reveals that it is too often taken for granted and/or occurs at a superficial level without acting on what is shared by the speaker (Lewis, 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). When listening failures occur, organizations miss out on several advantages including improved relations

with stakeholders and financial performances, crisis prevention, reduced turnover, learning environment, trust, psychological safety, and employee wellbeing (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Macnamara, 2016, 2024; Schramm, 2017; Castro et al., 2018; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Furthermore, the widespread lack of listening paints a bleak picture of coworkers' agency as it casts doubts on the actual inclusion of their opinions and experiences in strategy planning and their contribution to its implementation (Lewis, 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). All in all, not listening can compromise the acquisition and strategic use of valuable insights, which can improve internal efficiency and enable a better understanding of customers (e.g., Macnamara, 2016; 2024; Schramm, 2017; Qin & Men, 2021; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Yet, while much attention is now being paid to listening, studies have often failed to consider how coworkers listen to each other and the implications their listening holds. The chosen study pays special attention to the connection between listening and trust, and how the first contributes to the latter in communicative exchanges among coworkers (Brownell, 2008; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023).

Exploring coworkers on coworker listening has the potential to enrich and expand the current knowledge on strategic listening. The research field is predominantly focused on the dyadic relationship between managers and employees, on organizational listening practices such as social media scanning and/or surveys, and external listening (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Mishra et al., 2014; Lloyd et al., 2015a; Cardon et al., 2019; Price, 2019; Kriz et al., 2021; Qin & Men, 2021). As listening between coworkers remains underexplored, it appears that the field is missing out on a whole dimension of organizational listening. The little attention paid to coworkers' listening processes is particularly problematic as it is through their communication with other coworkers and the remaining stakeholders that they produce and reproduce the organization, enacting the strategy envisioned by managers (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Heide et al., 2018; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). This will be done by also paying attention to the informal relationships among coworkers, which have so far been disregarded in favor of formal ones (Heide & Simonsson, 2011). I argue that a partial understanding of coworkers' listening amounts to an equally partial understanding of organizational listening and operations. Hence, the need for further exploration that addresses this oversight.

To ensure a more nuanced understanding of coworkers' listening, I will employ the family metaphor and trust as its theoretical framework. The combination of these two concepts will enable a nuanced understanding of coworkers' perceptions and experiences of listening processes within the family metaphor and their relationship to trust building. While the family

metaphor was chosen as it represents the workplace dynamic of the chosen organization, trust was selected as its importance is such that Verčič and Grunig (1995) claim it is necessary to keep operations running. Adopting a case study approach, an Italian dental clinic embracing the family metaphor (hereby Clinic) was selected as the case study for this thesis. In-person semi-structured qualitative interviews will be conducted to collect data. Dentistry in Italy is left to the private sector, and as such, clinics are comparable, with their exclusion of the ethical implications associated with medicine, to most other organizations. Hence, holding the potential to produce results generalizable beyond the medical field.

Research aim and questions

The study aims to uncover how listening occurs among coworkers of an organization that chooses to embrace the family metaphor, and how listening within said organization contributes to trust building. To do so, the study will answer the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** How do coworkers of a dental clinic that embraces the family metaphor perceive their role as listeners?
>
> **RQ2:** How do coworkers of a dental clinic that embraces the family metaphor experience trust building through listening?

By answering the above research questions, the thesis will contribute to the field of strategic communication by providing an understanding of how listening affects the processes that underpin trust building among coworkers. The emphasis on coworkers will also highlight their role as active organizational members and how they can contribute to organizational success through their communication. Furthermore, the focus on an organization embracing the family metaphor will shed light on how coworkers navigate said metaphor and how that affects their communication in terms of listening and trust building. The chosen case study will also provide an insight into internal listening processes in a medical practice that operates as a private entity, employing medical and non-medical staff. How these coworkers communicate with each other holds implications for the care provided to patients, and as such, it is worthy of special consideration (e.g., Chilcutt, 2009; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). In practical terms, the study also calls on managers and organizations to enhance coworkers' listening through training and the fostering of a space, physical and dialogical, that enables meaningful and beneficial listening practices that encourage trust and relationship building.

Hence, enabling organizational success through internal strategic listening and a holistic understanding of listening practices.

Literature review

This chapter is organized thematically and provides the reader with an overview of the studies that have informed this thesis. In the first part, the ongoing listening crisis is summarized and connected to coworkers' listening role. This is done to introduce the challenges faced by organizations and their members when it comes to listening strategically. Such contextualization is then followed by a review of the works highlighting the importance and benefits of listening strategically within an organization, paying once again particular attention to how it affects coworkers. An overview of the literature on listening in the healthcare sector is then introduced to contextualize the chosen case. Lastly, a synthesis tying everything together is presented.

Listening strategically in a listening crisis

The importance for organizations to listen was initially acknowledged in the 1950s but gained momentum in the 1980s with the publication of *In Search of Excellence* by Peters and Waterman (1982). Said publication highlighted the connection between listening, internally and externally, and organizational success (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). This study refers to strategic listening intended as "the relationship-oriented, goal-oriented, and systematized listening of organizations that creates the conditions for successful operations" (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). The adoption of this definition serves the coworker-centered nature of this thesis as it highlights listening's role in establishing relationships among coworkers and their connection to organizational success. Nowadays, organizations place much emphasis on listening to their stakeholders as a way to establish two-way communication and gather valuable insights aimed at informing their decision making and guiding their operations (Macnamara, 2016; 2017; 2024; Lewis, 2019; 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Yet, the Organizational Listening Project found that on a global scale "most organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly and sometimes not at all" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 236). An observation supported by the fact that within most organizations, resources and efforts are channeled in the distribution of information to the detriment of listening activities

(Macnamara, 2017; Lewis, 2019; 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). This has led Macnamara (2016) to declare that organizations are facing a "crisis of listening".

Furthermore, organizations often engage in 'faux voice' (Lewis, 2022) or pseudo listening (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023) by allowing stakeholders to express their opinions and concerns but lacking the intent to include these in their decision making. Lewis (2019; 2022) notes that listening is portrayed by these organizations as a 'gift' to their stakeholders. Yet, other than representing an opportunity to voice thoughts and frustrations, this 'gift' falls short of having any meaningful impact. Similarly, in organizational literature, listening is presented as the right thing to do, without providing reasons as to why it would be beneficial for the organization and those involved in the communicative exchange (Borner & Zerfass, 2018). Based on these insights, I argue that there is a risk that when organizations claim to engage in and encourage extensive listening processes, they could be doing so only at a surface level in a vain attempt to meet expectations. The same can apply to coworkers listening to their colleagues. This thesis will address this possibility by investigating coworkers' perceptions.

Moreover, when listening takes place with the intent of gathering useful information, it can still fall short of reaching its strategic potential. Decision makers are not exempt from confirmation bias, meaning that negative upward communication can be disregarded in favor of information that supports preexisting beliefs (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Cardon et al., 2019; Lewis, 2019; 2022) Although most studies investigate confirmation bias among managers, coworkers are also likely to display signs of it, as all humans "tend to pay attention and take in information that supports [their] views" (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023, p. 11). Hence, when it comes to coworkers' listening to other coworkers, dissent and criticism could go unheard by the listener if they do not match his or her view. This could mean that crucial insights and information could fail to spread across the organization, preventing strategic listening.

On top of this, many organizations lack channels for collecting and evaluating information, and strategies to implement the insights obtained (Lewis, 2019; 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). This adds to a deficiency of listening skills among managers and coworkers, which sees studies and books on listening calling for investments in listening training (Brownell, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2015a; Cardon et al., 2019; Bregenzer et al., 2020; Kriz et al., 2021; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). For instance, Itzchakov & Kluger (2017) introduced a listening circle exercise governed by three main rules: raise relevant issues; listen with attention and take participants' wellbeing into account with each contribution (p. 222). They argue that the circle empowers employees with different ranks, guided by trained instructors, to find their voice by establishing a climate of open

communication. Results saw participants report lower social anxiety, improved listening, and moderate attitudes compared to another workshop run in the same organization. Furthermore, Webasto's US division's 'Listen Like a Leader' training program played a central role in the 're-birth' of the company's organizational culture and in its efforts to establish an organization-wide listening (Schramm, 2017). Taken together, the empirical evidence strongly supports rolling out extensive listening training programmes and initiatives to teach and improve listening skills. Yet, I posit that these would be more effective if more is learnt about coworkers' listening processes to target such training.

Nonetheless, organizations' failure to listen remains particularly concerning as today, more than ever, stakeholders expect to be heard, and see their feedback acted upon. The literature acknowledges these expectations by exposing the listening crisis, promoting best listening practices, and providing examples of successful listening (Macnamara, 2016; 2024; Lewis, 2019; 2022). Yet, the attempts and calls to remedy the ongoing crisis seem to largely disregard internal listening, prioritizing the voices of external stakeholders and the collection of information via surveys, social media channels and other forms of data gathering (Macnamara, 2016; 2017; 2024; Cardon et al., 2019; Ewing et al., 2019; Lewis, 2019; 2022; Brandt & Donohue, 2024). While asynchronous listening often is a matter of convenience for large organizations, it represents a significant limitation given the importance employees attribute to synchronous internal listening.

Upon interviewing PR executives, Mishra et al. (2014) uncovered that employees benefit greatly from face-to-face communication, finding it more effective and direct. Cheney (1999) claimed that employees prefer this form of communication as it enables them to interpret visual cues on top of the information expressed verbally. Similarly, Neill & Bowen (2021) found that face-to-face meetings with supervisors are perceived to be more effective than surveys, suggesting the necessity to pay more attention to in person interactions. Mastering all available communication channels should be on organizational members' agenda as some channels may be more suitable than others depending on the type of communication intended; for instance written communication can be suitable for reminders (Brownell, 2008; Mishra et al., 2014; Cardon et al., 2019; Neill & Bowen, 2021; Ruck, 2021; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Nonetheless, face-to face-communication remains worthy of additional attention as on top of being preferred by employees, it also significantly contributes to trust and relationship building (Mishra et al., 2014; Neill & Bowen, 2021). At present, however, empirical studies continue to prioritize communicative exchanges between managers and employees, leaving communication among coworkers unexplored. Hence, the decision to focus the current study

on these interactions in light of their strategic role. Furthermore, Price (2019) noted that the PR practitioners she interviewed, despite an agency-wide emphasis on internal listening, predominantly discussed listening to external audiences. Hence, suggesting that internal listening continues to be taken for granted even by communication professionals.

Additionally, Neill & Bowen (2021) discovered that when employees feel that management is not interested in listening to them, they are unwilling to speak up. In line with this, Ruck (2021) argues that feeling unheard can lead to cynicism and the perception of asymmetrical communication, as employees are aware of and negatively affected by pseudo listening (Ruck et al., 2017). The idea that coworkers are aware of whether they are being listened to has been confirmed by multiple studies (Kriz et al., 2021; Qin & Men, 2021; Ruck, 2021; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Itzchakov & Kluger (2017) suggest that managers, when they are too busy to pay attention, should postpone their listening to a later time. Empirical evidence also supports that employees, although they do not expect to see all their feedback addressed, feel heard when their suggestions are followed by actions and/or when they perceive they are taken into account (Simmons, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2015a; Cardon et al., 2019; Kriz et al., 2021). This posits that listening efforts should be sincere to hold any benefit, be encouraged by leadership, and followed by actions. Indeed, feeling unheard has been found multiple times to prevent employees from speaking up, and to reduce their engagement and motivation (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Ruck et al., 2017; Schramm, 2017; Lewis, 2019; Neill & Bowen, 2021; Ruck, 2021; Macnamara, 2024). Studies have focused on the consequences of feeling unheard by managers, but I argue that feeling unheard by other coworkers would also prevent open communication from taking place. This comes as it would reduce psychological safety and trust (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Castro et al., 2018; Edmonson, 2019; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Hence, I posit that feeling heard characterizes strategic listening and leads to its positive consequences. The latter are discussed in the following section.

Listening for organizational success

Despite the ongoing listening crisis, practice and academia convene that listening is a skill that needs to be enhanced and prioritized for an organization to communicate efficiently, both internally and externally (Schramm, 2017; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023; Macnamara, 2024). At this stage, the data on listening between coworkers remains scarce, while the dyadic relationship between managers and coworkers (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2015a; Kriz

et al., 2021), and organization-wide listening practices are far more available (e.g., Qin & Men, 2021; Macnamara, 2024). Although this empirical evidence does not directly address the benefits of listening among coworkers, I argue it remains worthy of being reviewed for the purpose of the current study. The reason being that it illustrates how, when listening occurs, it contributes to positive outcomes including, among others, improved performance, and sounder relationships. Outcomes which, I argue, can also be expected to emerge from strategic coworker on coworker listening. Furthermore, strategic listening is to be intended holistically and as such it requires a leadership willing to implement it and encourage it (Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Brownell, 2008; Simmons, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2015a; Schramm, 2017; Cardon et al., 2019; Lewis, 2019; 2022; Neill & Bowen, 2021; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Hence, this section will explore the benefits of internal listening holistically as listening can not be strategic if limited to a segment of the organization. But instead needs to be a collective effort aimed at establishing a climate of open communication (Heide et al., 2019).

A crucial benefit associated with listening is the emergence of psychological safety, "a climate in which people are comfortable in expressing and being themselves" (Edmondson, 2019, p. xvi). This does not mean that coworkers are not held accountable for their actions, but rather that they feel comfortable with sharing their mistakes, and the organization is willing to learn from them. When the other party is ready to listen in a non-judgmental manner, employees enjoy lower social anxiety and are more likely to speak up (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Edmondson, 2019; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Edmondson et al., 2024). Castro et al. (2018) found that listening can be used as a predictor of psychological safety, testifying to the connection between the two constructs. The same study also uncovered that when employees feel listened to and enjoy psychological safety, they are more likely to be creative as they feel comfortable with experimenting. Kluger & Itzchakov (2022) also posit that feeling heard generates psychological safety. For them, listening can lead to a state of togetherness in which both parties benefit from the communication taking place and strengthen their attachment to one another. On the contrary, when organizational members do not feel psychologically safe, their creativity, voice, and wellbeing are hindered (Edmonson, 2019). If coworkers decide to stay silent in fear of embarrassment and repercussions, the organization could be prevented from addressing potential pitfalls, experience lower creativity and innovation, and have a less committed workforce (Edmondson et al., 2024). I posit that when coworkers listen to each other and feel heard, they do not only feel more comfortable

and connected to the workplace, but also represent a resource for the organization as they facilitate innovation and promptly address any mistake that may occur.

Listening, like psychological safety, is connected to learning in both its interpersonal and organizational forms. By choosing to listen to the other party, listeners open themselves to the acquisition of new information, which they are then expected to process and act upon. When this occurs at an organizational level, the insights acquired can guide decision-making and ensure that it reflects the needs of the organization. Itzchakov & Kluger (2017) argue that while good listeners learn from others, too often managerial figures are portrayed as superhumans who are expected to know it all, hindering listening. The need for managers to show themselves as vulnerable and ready to learn is also acknowledged by Heide & Svingstedt (2023). Arguably, a lack of vulnerability at the managerial level could suggest that there is no room for mistakes at work. On the contrary, Brownell (2008) claims that when leaders listen to their employees, they can establish a learning environment within their organization. By listening, they "promote a learning environment where employees work together to solve problems, explore options, and increase the organization's knowledge base." (p. 222). Something which can be further supported by the creation of physical spaces for dialogue and listening (Price, 2019), and by selecting employees who display a predisposition towards listening. Moreover, Cardon et al. (2019) suggest that digital platforms represent an increasingly important space for learning and listening. Yet, these spaces continue to be characterized by asymmetrical communication where employee voice is limited to asking questions. The lack of insights into coworkers' perceptions of listening worsens when it comes to communicative exchanges with other coworkers. By focusing on the latter, this thesis can inform strategies aimed at developing a psychologically safe and learning oriented organizational environment, while also enriching the literature on listening.

Although listening is not an all-encompassing solution for any issue an organization may face, it represents a starting point to address them (Schramm, 2017). When managers are bad listeners, organizations are more likely to experience low engagement, higher turnover, and scarce employee wellbeing (Lloyd et al., 2015a; Lewis, 2019; Bregenzer et al., 2020; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). In line with this, evidence from educational and hospitality settings suggests that leadership and listening are connected (Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Brownell, 2008). Lloyd et al. (2015a) found that employees' negative perceptions of supervisors were correlated with higher turnover intentions. The same is also true for parishioners leaving their church when the pastor does not listen (Claybrooks, 2022). Furthermore, Bregenzer et al. (2020) also concluded that listening can predict job satisfaction. Hence, it appears that

employees who feel heard are also more satisfied and willing to commit to the workplace. Considering that much of the daily internal communication occurs among coworkers, understanding how listening takes place and which factors lead to it can provide further insights into how it can be aided. Something which this thesis aims to do.

Furthermore, when employees feel listened to, their relationships with the organization and other coworkers are also positively affected (see Qin & Men, 2021; Neill & Bowen, 2021; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Qin & Men (2021) discovered that employees with positive perceptions of internal listening had their psychological needs satisfied and enjoyed better relationships with their organization. Similarly, Lloyd et al. (2017) and Brunner (2008) highlighted a connection between listening, job satisfaction, and relationship building. Ruck (2021, p. 98) identifies listening as a "fundamental component of relationship building". Macnamara (2024) also talks extensively of how listening can lead to the establishment of mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders. An argument that also finds confirmation in Price (2019)'s findings. Indeed, to maintain good relationships, listening and processing feedback is pivotal (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Strengthening relationships is also the aim of listening training initiatives such as the listening circle (see Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). The positive effects of listening on relationship building can be encountered since initial interactions. Weger Jr. et al. (2014) discovered that respondents who experienced active listening in initial interactions were more likely to feel understood compared to other conditions. Moreover, the contribution of listening to building solid and committed relationships extends beyond the dimension of internal communication. For instance, Simmons (2011) describes listening as complementary for public service, concluding that when there are less opportunities for people to speak up and to feel heard, relationships with users will be negatively affected. A similar argument is also raised by Claybrooks (2022) in the context of Christian leadership.

The need to listen to build solid relationships is hence empirically demonstrated and perhaps, I dare to say, it would also be a logical assumption. However, the connection between relationship building and listening is too often overemphasized in organizational literature, and the need to listen is limited to it. Borner & Zerfass (2018) claim that when this happens, authors and practitioners fail to demonstrate how listening can contribute to value creation and consequently how to efficiently allocate resources to it. They also go further by claiming that normative ideals of symmetrical communication should be abandoned in favor of an acknowledgement of listening's role in serving strategy. While I do not find myself fully

in agreement with this latter point, I do second the need to connect listening to value creation and will attempt to address this issue in the analysis and concluding discussion of this paper.

Listening in the healthcare sector

When it comes to the healthcare sector, the discourses on listening are predominantly focused on the dyadic relationship between healthcare providers and patients. Effective communication and even more so good listening are essential for the establishment of a positive relationship between the two (Davis et al., 2008; Waylen, 2017; Ho et al., 2024). On the contrary, when it comes to internal communication, listening is seldomly addressed by sector specific literature, but it is implied when two-way communication is discussed. A common conclusion is that when healthcare professionals, including medical and non-medical personnel, communicate poorly, the quality of care offered and that of their work environment decreases, exposing patients to harm's way (Chilcutt, 2009; Hewett et al., 2009; Weller et al., 2011; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). Nonetheless, achieving successful interprofessional communication appears to be one of the main challenges faced by coworkers. Zwarenstein et al. (2013) found that in hospital settings, doctors prioritize the opinion of fellow doctors, often ignoring that of non-physicians and interacting with them predominantly during scheduled meetings. These unbalanced workplace relationships lead to a lack of communication that can prevent interdisciplinary collaboration and trust building.

Furthermore, despite ongoing efforts to promote interdisciplinary collaboration during formation years, healthcare professionals, including those operating in the dental sector, are taught different, often contrasting, communication skills (Foronda et al., 2016; Willcocks, 2018; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). The latter can exacerbate ongoing communicative difficulties introduced by structural constraints and a strong sense of belonging to the respective professions or specializations (Hewett et al., 2009; Weller et al., 2011; Foronda et al., 2016). Looking at the relationship between dentists and dental technicians, Ismail & Al-Moghrabi (2023) found that status differences and perceived hierarchies were seen by participants as having a negative effect on the relationship. At the same time, open communication, trust, and a one-on-one rapport were seen as beneficial. According to the sample, “[d]emonstrating vulnerability by admitting mistakes and accepting feedback were desirable traits” for both sides to have (p. 7). Hence, highlighting the role of two-way communication in enabling effective communication.

Until recently, dentists were almost exclusively in charge of decision making, but are now expected to embrace shared leadership to improve workplace motivation, ensure optimal patient care, and augment productivity (Willcocks, 2018). All these objectives would be impossible to achieve without listening to the members of their team and involving them in decisional processes. For instance, Chilcutt (2009) suggests that taking part in decision making can increase the sense of team identification experienced by dental office staff, improving collaboration. While Nuwayyir et al. (2024) have claimed that good communication and collaboration contribute to ensuring patients' needs are addressed and errors are avoided. Establishing open communication, rooted in the ability to listen to each other, can facilitate the development of positive workplace dynamics as well as ensuring quality healthcare (e.g., Molyneux, 2001; Chilcutt, 2009; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). In line with this, authors and professional bodies recommend investing in communication training, building interdisciplinary communication skills at an educational level, and identify the need for managerial involvement (Weller et al., 2011; Zwarenstein et al., 2013; Foronda et al., 2016; Willcocks, 2018; California Dentistry Association, 2023; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023).

All in all, good communication, and with it effective listening, are needed to ensure quality care and a positive work environment in dentistry and healthcare. Yet, different professional sensibilities, communication skills, and parochialism too often get in the way of it. To this author's knowledge, the studies conducted so far are scarce and fail to develop an understanding of how healthcare providers perceive their communicative role. Moreover, words like listening and trust are often used in relation to good communication but seldomly connected to optimal behaviors as identified by coworkers. This partial understanding of communicative processes is problematic given the impact poor communication can have on patients' health. The present study, by grounding its empirical analysis on data collected at a dental clinic, sets itself to, at least partially, address the issue.

Synthesis

To sum up, coworkership and listening are interconnected, and the importance of internal listening has long been acknowledged and discussed by both academia and practice. Listening is an essential element for organizational success as it allows information to flow and be processed, innovation to spread, for mistakes to be identified and corrected, collaboration to occur, and trusting relationships to be built. It is also connected to lower turnover and higher

job satisfaction. Yet, a closer look at organizational practices reveals that organizations are undergoing a listening crisis. In fact, while they claim to listen, they often do so in meaningless ways by engaging in pseudo listening and/or failing to provide coworkers with opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns. This questions the extent to which a listening climate is supported throughout the organization, and coworkers are motivated to listen to each other. Listening itself is a complex process which can be hindered by confirmation bias, the use of incorrect communication channels, a lack of training, and follow up actions. Additionally, when coworkers do not feel listened to, they are likely to self-censor, preventing valuable information from circulating and reducing their motivation and engagement. Within the healthcare sector, listening represents a key job requirement at both an internal and external level. In fact, without listening to both patients and fellow staff members, healthcare providers would not be able to offer quality care. However, structural, and hierarchical constraints, poor listening training, and exacerbated professional parochialism can prevent effective listening and compromise patients' outcomes. Furthermore, at a research level, studies predominantly focus on the managerial understandings of listening and external listening efforts, failing to account for coworkers' own perspectives and processes. Taking into account the importance of coworkers' listening and its contributions to organizational success, this thesis will explore how coworkers perceive their role as listeners and how their listening practices can contribute to establishing trusting relationships with other coworkers. These insights also have the potential to shed light on how a climate of open communication is established and maintained within a work family and beyond.

Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical underpinning employed to analyze coworkers' perceptions of their listening practices and how these contribute to trust building within an organizational family. The framework is constituted by two concepts: the family metaphor and trust. Firstly, the family metaphor is introduced and connected to coworkers' experiences within an organizational family. Ethical concerns and weaknesses associated with the metaphor are also explored to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept. Secondly, trust is presented and explored from an organizational and coworker centered perspective. Trust is a necessary condition for many organizations to exist and conduct their operations, and it is strongly connected to listening. Thereby, it is particularly suitable to analyze coworkers' listening perceptions and experiences. Mayer et al.'s (1995) Integrative Model of Organizational Trust is also introduced. This section will end with a reflection on the theoretical significance of the chosen framework.

The family metaphor

Metaphors are crucial for conveying meanings that would otherwise be too abstract or complex to be communicated or grasped (Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). In the words of Furlich (2016), "a metaphor helps people make sense of their environment by relating it back to symbolic meanings that are familiar to them" (p. 9). Yet, as this familiarity implies, metaphors do not simply hold a mirror to reality. Instead, they frame it, highlighting certain aspects over others. In the words of Morgan (2006), "the use of a metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing that pervades how we understand our world generally"* (p. 4). In business literature and practice, family metaphors such as the organization as family, marriage, and baby are routinely used (Tognazzo, 2022). In particular, the family metaphor became increasingly popular in the 1980s following the emergence of Total Quality Management and the consequent emphasis on the establishment of collaborative organizational cultures (Casey, 1999; Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013). Organizations across all sectors adopt this metaphor to address their stakeholders with the intent to evoke a commitment and relationships that go beyond a purely financial domain, while also

discursively reifying their organizational culture and values (see Alakavuklar, 2009; Tognazzo, 2022).

At an internal level, when organizations refer to themselves as families, employees are invited to connect the workplace to a social structure, the family, which lies outside the business realm (Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009; Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). Casey (1999) suggests that the family metaphor "invokes pre-industrial romantic images of kinship bonding and shared struggles against adversity" (p. 162). These relationships are not confined by the organization's boundaries but extend beyond work to their free time (Furlich, 2016). Furthermore, these bonds imply that members of the same family care for each other and are, in turn are expected to work together towards shared goals (Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). By embracing the organizational family, employees are encouraged to feel involved, committed, engaged, and emotionally attached to the organization (Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009; Tognazzo, 2022). The latter is characterized by a flat hierarchical structure and a culture with an emphasis on open communication, mutual learning, and collaboration (Casey, 1999; Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013; Tognazzo, 2022). Nonetheless, the family metaphor does not only provide images for organizational members to refer to, but also affect their work and sense-making processes, which in turn shape the organization itself (e.g., Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022).

In his qualitative exploration of sources of employee's motivation, Furlich (2016) found that feeling part of an organizational family and having family-like relationships with coworkers were connected to higher motivation. Participants also reported feeling comfortable with their coworkers-family members, and how that aspect "opened up the communication" among them (p. 16). Michael-Tsabari & Tan (2013) in their analysis of sports teams found that the family-like dynamics were associated with better performances, cohesion, flexibility, and job satisfaction. Similarly, looking at family businesses, Vallejo-Martos (2011) argues that when connected to Value-Based Management, a family-like organizational culture can bring profitability, cohesion, and survival to organizations by empowering employees. While Casey (1999) noted how employees of an American organizational family were committed to the organization, tied their identity to it, and cohesed. Aspects which Tognazzo (2022) connects to "the [human] desire for a simple, undivided social identity, which provides a clear sense of belonging and connection" (p. 63). Employees experience emotional gratification in their work family and see their experiences at work as significant additions to their lives, contributing to the idealization of their workplace. Embracing and reflecting the family's values can "provide more opportunities for

experiences of competence and accomplishment" (Casey, 1999, p. 165), leading to improved performance, profitability, and interpersonal skills.

Yet, despite being connected to higher satisfaction, and profitability for the organization (see Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013; Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022), the family metaphor has not been exempted from criticism. This comes as it can not be disregarded that metaphors hold definitional and discursive power. Hence, a closer inspection can reveal processes, structures, and power dynamics that would otherwise go unquestioned or taken for granted (Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009; Tognazzo, 2022). In a critical discourse analysis, Alakavuklar (2009) posits that the family metaphor is "a disciplinary and controlling device that enable[s] employees to comply, obey, identify, and associate with the business" (p. 7). Drawing on Foucault (1979), he argues that perceiving the business as a family prevents employees from opposing supervisory decisions, unionize, and pushes them to prioritize the organization over their wellbeing and families. Hence, despite a promise of democratization, employees are subjected to exploitation. Similarly, Casey (1999), following her empirical exploration, concluded that the family metaphor masks a more pervasive form of control that virtually erases forms of resistance. Employees willingly and enthusiastically embrace the family in exchange for identification and support. But, at the same time, face anxiety, forsake unions, and self-sacrifice to satisfy organizational interests. Interestingly, drawing on Parker (2008), Tognazzo (2022) argues that organizations, just like the Mafia, present themselves as families to ensure that every member stays in their place.

Furthermore, in addition to the ethical considerations associated with the family metaphor, current discussions fail to consider that there are many types of families and not all of them live in harmony (Tognazzo, 2022). For instance, families are not exempt from patriarchy and nepotism (see Ainsworth & Cox, 2003; Tognazzo, 2022). While metaphors can generate valuable insights into organizational life, they can only lead to a partial understanding and are tendentially biased and misleading (Morgan, 2006). The family metaphor highlights collaboration, commitment, and strong relations, but fails to look at the impact of power dynamics on coworkers. Nonetheless, the perverseness of the family metaphor, the competitive advantage it brings to organizations, and the higher satisfaction, motivation, and commitment found among employees call for additional exploration of how the latter make sense of it and navigate it. However, in doing so, I will critically evaluate the limitations of the metaphor so as not to be confined by them, account for the complexity of organizational life, and generate valuable insights (Morgan, 2006). Moreover, while the literature on the family metaphor does not directly mention listening, I argue that it represents a precondition

for ensuring that collaboration, learning, and open communication take place. If they were to feel unheard, organizational members would be prevented from forming close relationships with each other and consequently from becoming emotionally attached to the organization and their coworkers (e.g., Qin & Men, 2021; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Hence, I posit that understanding how listening occurs and is connected to trust among employees within an organizational family can provide valuable insights into both concepts for literature and practice.

Trust

Over the years, trust has received extensive attention across numerous fields (Mayer et al., 1995; Brown et al., 2015; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; Valentini, 2021). All these disciplines seem to agree that it is a necessary element of social interaction, and a cornerstone for positive relationship building (Gambetta, 1988; Lumineau et al., 2023; Nelson et al., 2025; Qin, 2025). Nevertheless, a universal definition of trust has not been reached (Thomas et al., 2009), leaving studies to employ a range of conceptualizations. Reflective of its focus on the organizational context, this thesis adopts the widespread definition presented by Mayer et al. (1995) in the field of organizational studies, which sees trust as

> *the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other part* (p. 712)

Hence, for the purpose of this paper, trust is understood as relational and dependent on the willingness of a coworker to be vulnerable and take risks in his or her interactions with other coworkers. Interactions are intended as communicative interactions in which listening constitutes a dyad with speaking

Organizations, Communication and Trust

Organizations would not be able to operate without trust (Verčič & Grunig, 1995), nor would it be possible for communicative coworkership to take place (Andersson et al., 2021). Trust and control are closely related, and their interplay needs to be balanced to ensure collaboration within a given organization (Lumineau et al., 2023). As post-bureaucratic organizations move towards flatter hierarchies, building internal trust has become a pressing

concern for managers and communicators (Mayer et al., 1995; Mishra et al., 2014; Pološki Vokic et al., 2020). Andersson et al. (2021) argue that for coworkership to be successful and internal trust to emerge, coworkers need to feel seen and heard. If these conditions are met, they will also become engaged in the organization. Furthermore, when coworkers trust each other and their organization, they are more likely to refrain from engaging in self-centered behaviour and more likely to disclose mistakes, collaborate, build sound relationships, and be motivated, engaged, and satisfied (Mayer et al., 1995; Thomas et al., 2009; Jiang & Luo, 2018; Velten & Heggen, 2022; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Brown et al. (2015) claim that employees' trust in management is associated with higher productivity, financial performance, and product/service quality. Overall, the establishment of internal trust can have widespread positive effects across a given organization.

As trust emerges through interactions (Mayer et al., 1995), it follows that communication is closely tied to it. Empirical evidence on the matter is largely concerned with coworkers' trust towards their superiors and their organization; however, I argue that it is still relevant to explain the connection between the two. Eva et al. (2024) posit that communication skills strongly contribute to employees' trust in management and the organization. Interviewing PR executives, Mishra et al. (2014) uncovered that two-way internal communication plays an important role in trust building. When information circulates transparently across the organization and dialogue occurs, employees can be expected to trust their supervisor and, in turn, display engagement. The same study also supports the idea that face-to-face communication can facilitate trust building processes by fostering a sense of community. In fact, non-verbal cues might be informing how the speaker perceives a listener's attitude and intention (Lloyd et al., 2015b). Furthermore, engaging in undistorted communication has also been found to enhance trust (Mishra, 1996). Qin (2025) posits that transparent leadership communication, paired with a good use of communication channels, leads remote employees to perceive a higher communication quality, which in turn fosters trusting relationships with leaders. The latter lead employees to provide feedback, engage in voicing behaviour, and contribute to engagement. Similarly, further empirical evidence suggests that to retain and enhance trust, leaders should ensure employees are provided with useful and accurate information, able to give feedback, and involved in communicative and decision-making processes (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2015; Jiang & Luo, 2018). Thus, it appears that for communication to significantly contribute to trust, it needs to be a two-way exchange in which transparent and efficient dialogue enables coworkers to engage in participatory voicing behaviour.

Thomas et al. (2009) discovered that when coworkers perceive the information received to be "timely, accurate, and relevant they are more likely to feel less vulnerable and more able to rely on their coworkers and supervisors" (p. 302) as well as perform better. The same study also found that trust frames how coworkers see the communication climate within the organization. Trusting relations are associated with the perception of an open climate in which coworkers are comfortable with expressing themselves and engaged. Položki Vokic et al. (2020) demonstrated that when coworkers are satisfied with the communication climate, they develop a trusting relationship with the organization. Satisfaction with horizontal communication was also found to contribute to internal trust. An open communication climate is, in fact, characterized by trust within the organization and is dependent on listening and the support of management for its establishment (Heide et al., 2019; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). In such a climate, coworkers, thanks to psychological safety, build trusting relationships with their colleagues as they develop a shared perception that the work team is "safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354). Hence, when coworkers perceive communication to be of quality, they are more likely to trust their colleagues and supervisors and experience a shared sense of psychological safety. The latter then contributes to an open communication climate which encourages coworkers to express themselves and share their mistakes, fostering learning behaviour (see Edmondson, 1999; 2019; Edmondson et al., 2024).

Paying closer attention to listening, it emerges that it is strongly tied to trust. Brunner (2008) goes as far as to claim that "trust could be redefined as a willingness for both parties to communicate and listen with an open mind" (p. 80). It can be argued that without listening, trust building would not be possible. Notably, by paying attention to speakers and displaying an openness to the message shared, good listeners are rewarded with higher trust from their conversation partners (Brownell, 2008; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Additionally, Itzchakov & Kluger (2017) posit that good listening behaviour shows care for the other and their thoughts, leading to mutual trust building. Lloyd et al. (2015b) uncovered that perceived listening quality "seems essential for well-being as well as relationships" (p. 23). Moreover, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) highlight the importance for managers to engage in internal listening behaviors during a crisis to develop appropriate strategies to maintain trust. Yet, the literature on listening, despite acknowledging the importance of trust, fails to provide nuanced explanations on how it is experienced among coworkers and how it contributes to relationship building among them. The same problem seems to characterize publications on trust more generally. These too often objectify the

populations studied and consider them “simply as ‘devices’ to better plan or improve strategic communication initiatives” (Valentini, 2021, p. 98), failing to gain valuable insights into how trust is perceived and experienced. Exploring how listening contributes to trust building among coworkers and how this is connected to the family metaphor will address this oversimplification. At the same time, the study will provide a deeper understanding of trust building processes within an organization characterized by a flatter hierarchy and collaboration.

Lastly, organizational literature predominantly refers to the role of professional communication in establishing trust. However, it appears that conversations of a personal nature could also play an important role in trust building among coworkers. A recent study by Hagmann et al. (2024) claims that disclosing personal stories can facilitate the emergence of trust even in the presence of an ideological divide, enhancing collaboration. While work and personal trust can be understood as different concepts, non-work-related disclosures from supervisors were found to contribute to employees' trust in both domains due to an overall perception of trustworthiness. As such, organizations are invited to create spaces and recurring social events in which employees are comfortable engaging in non-work-related discussions (Nifadkar et al., 2019). Additionally, a study conducted by the University of Michigan uncovered that sharing personal information with coworkers can contribute to higher work energy, stronger connections, and wellbeing. The opposite occurred however, when the conversation was only motivated by a need to vent or the speaker did not demonstrate an interest in the disclosure (Trinh et al., 2025). Thus, recent empirical evidence implies that self-disclosures are likely to play a part in trust building among coworkers. As such, for the purpose of this study, it will be useful to also pay attention to non-work-related listening situations at the workplace and their implications.

Integrative Model of Organizational Trust

A useful model to understand trust building mechanisms within an organizational context was developed by Mayer et al. (1995). While their Integrative Model of Organizational Trust was initially envisioned to explain trust building between employees and managers, its dyadic setting makes it equally suitable to explore trust building as emerging from listening occurring among coworkers. The model identifies three factors that influence a trustor’s perceptions of a trustee’s trustworthiness. These are perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to a trustee’s competence and expertise in a determined field,

benevolence to a positive attitude displayed by the trustee towards the trustor "aside from an egocentric profit motive" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 718), and integrity to a display of acceptable values. When all these factors are rated high, a trustee's trustworthiness will also be high. Furthermore, the model understands trust as a continuum rather than a presence or absence, and as evolving over time through repeated interaction. Thus, accounting for the dynamic nature of trust. When it comes to initial interactions, it identifies propensity to trust as a "stable within-party factor that will affect the likelihood the party will trust" (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 715). Different individuals will display different propensities and, as such, approach potential trustees differently, often making an initial judgment based on a perceived integrity prior to any interaction. As the acquaintance progresses, benevolence is likely to have a bigger effect. Lastly, the model understands trust and risk as interconnected; it is in the face of risk that trust becomes evident.

The model has been widely applied to organizational settings, producing valuable insights. For instance, Nelson et al. (2025) found that sport analysts attempt to portray themselves as trustworthy by displaying competence in their job, a hardworking nature, and a friendly and approachable attitude. Thus, reflecting ability, benevolence, and integrity. Applying the Integrative Model of Trust to the empirical material will help me develop an understanding of how coworkers come to deem fellow coworkers trustworthy in the aftermath of engaging in listening.

Theoretical significance

To sum up, the family metaphor and trust have been paired to explore coworkers' perceptions of their listening role and the resulting experiences with trust building within the context of an organizational family. Metaphors are commonly employed in organizational literature to reify and simplify abstract concepts and processes with the intent to enhance their understanding and frame them in particular ways. While not exempt from criticism, the family metaphor is embraced to evoke family-like ties between employees, thus encouraging commitment, involvement, and emotional attachment towards the organization and its members. Additionally, work families are characterized by a flat structure, collaboration, and open communication. All these elements rely on trust and listening, and in a more general sense, trust also plays a crucial role in enabling organizations to operate and coworkership to be established. The chosen conceptualization of trust, paired with the Integrative Model of Organizational Trust, highlights its relational nature and the importance of communicative

interactions for its establishment. Additionally, the emphasis placed by the model on vulnerability and risk-taking further aids the analysis. In fact, in a climate of open communication, like that that characterizes organizational families, coworkers are expected to make themselves vulnerable and take risks by proposing new ideas and/or disclosing their mistakes to other organizational members. Overall, the chosen framework, by adopting a coworker centered perspective on the two chosen concepts, promises to aid the understanding of their listening process and shed light on their experiences with trust building with an organizational family.

Methodology

This chapter dives into the epistemological, methodological, and analytical choices that underpin this thesis. Ethical considerations and reflexivity are also addressed in designated subchapters. As listening gains currency in both academia and practice, much has been said on the need to appraise it quantitatively (e.g., Macnamara, 2016; Volk, 2023). Nonetheless, this study conducts qualitative in person semi-structured interviews to gather empirical material. This methodological choice is aligned with the intent to investigate how coworkers belonging to a work family experience trust building through listening and how they perceive their role as listeners. I concur with Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) that "most of the non-simple research problems that are of broad intellectual interest tend to be more complicated and less than well-suited for [the] hypothesis-testing" (p. 26) typical of quantitative approaches. Semi-structured interviews enable the exploration of the how and why of human experience, allowing for in-depth insights into coworkers' lives and perceptions, accounting for their complexity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Flick, 2023).

This thesis adopts social constructionism as its epistemology, understanding coworkers as constituting their organizational reality through their communication (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Heide et al., 2018; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Consistently, the empirical material analyzed, and preexisting literature are understood as the result of interpretations, that of the sample and the researcher(s), and of the language that constructs them (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Aware of the influences exerted by various social constructs on its findings, the present study sets itself in the domain of reflexive research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). This is characterized by a constant reflection upon the researcher's own interpretation, the research process in its entirety and the knowledge constructions that produced the empirical material, previous literature, and chosen theoretical framework. Additionally, this thesis embraces Alvesson and Kärreman (2011)'s claim that empirical material should be for theory "a partner for critical dialogue" rather than a means to confirm assumptions and preexisting frameworks (p. 14). Such standing allows me to question, expand, exemplify, and adapt theory and display openness towards the material analyzed, facilitating the emergence of valuable insights through breakdowns (Alvesson &

Sköldberg, 2018). To enable the critical dialogue, this thesis adopts an abductive standpoint which sees the literature review and the chosen theoretical framework as a "source of inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding" to the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 5). The act of research is hereby conceptualized as that of identifying and investigating a mystery (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

Epistemology: Social constructionism

Far from being a one-dimensional school of thought, social constructionism is a multifaceted and multidisciplinary theoretical lens (Lock & Strong, 2010; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Flick, 2023). It nowadays represents a dominant paradigm in social sciences (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Its aim is to uncover the how of social processes and their institutionalization, questioning what is taken for granted (Burr, 2015). The term social constructionism was coined by Berger and Luckmann (1967), who argue that while reality goes unchallenged by individuals, it is constructed by their "thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these" (p. 33). For social constructionists, it is through encounters with others and constant interactions with them that reality and the individual come to life (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Lock & Strong, 2010; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). It follows that "when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed" (Burr, 2015, p. 11). Consequently, language plays a crucial role in shaping reality and its interpretations (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Burr, 2015).

To put it simply, "language use produces as much as it reveals of the world" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 38). The acknowledgement of the relational nature of social constructions makes the chosen paradigm suitable to investigate first how coworkers construct their role as listeners and second how they build trust through their communication with one another within a metaphor. Equally, the emphasis on each individual's agency in constructing their reality makes this epistemology optimal for exploring coworkers' perceptions and experiences, and of how these contribute to shaping their workplace. Furthermore, by conceptualizing language as the primary definer and creator of the shared social world, social constructionism can help explain how the family metaphor and coworkers' communication shape and are shaped by each other. At the same time, this paradigm also emphasizes the influence of the researcher in knowledge creation by pointing out how linguistic choices can affect the development and results of research projects at all stages (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). To address the risk of bias, I will carry out a reflexive

analysis grounded in a *repertoire of interpretations,* formed by both the literature review and the theoretical framework, that acknowledges the nuances and complexity of a shared social world (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), and will constantly reflect on my contributions.

The case

To ensure a layered and in-depth understanding of coworkers' listening and trust building processes within the family metaphor, this thesis adopts a single case study approach. Following Flick (2023), the term case study is "broadly understood", and it refers to the choice of interviewing coworkers belonging to the same organizational family (p. 94). Focusing on a single case ensures that all participants share the same organizational background and geographical area, thus limiting the influence of local and organizational culture on the insights obtained. Additionally, it also means that all coworkers interviewed have shared experiences in the same organizational family and communication climate, enabling me to grasp social construction processes from multiple angles and to account for managerial influences in their establishment. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), case studies are an optimal method for producing valuable and detailed insights as a result of the proximity to real life they require from the researcher. Such immersion in the object of study also addresses the need for more engaged scholarship intent at bridging the gap between academia and practice by obtaining mutually beneficial results (Van de Ven, 2007). Furthermore, by producing context-dependent knowledge, case studies are thought to challenge preexisting theoretical assumptions and favor the development of new explanations for observed phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This reflects the abductive reflexive standpoint embraced by this thesis and its goal to treat theory as and preexisting literature, "a partner for critical dialogue" and inspiration (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011, p. 14).

Gaining access to an organizational family proved to be difficult as listening and coworkers' perceptions are regarded as 'sensitive' information by most organizations. Eventually, an Italian dental clinic, Clinic, found through networking agreed to allow me to conduct the interviews with its coworkers. On its website, the case organization describes itself and those employed in it as a "big family" which patients are invited to join. To further ensure the family metaphor was actively embraced by Clinic, I also sought confirmation with the founder and chief medical officer (CMO). Clinic is based in a medium-sized Italian city and operates locally. Starting out as a dental practice in the 1990s, it expanded into a bigger entity about 8 years ago, growing both its physical spaces and employee base. Today, over 40

people between dentists, hygienists, dental assistants, secretaries, administrative staff, and lab technicians, are part of this organizational family. The workplace develops over two main floors, connected internally by an elevator, and a separated third floor where the dental laboratory is located. While some coworkers work in close contact with each other, sharing spaces (e.g., doctors and dental assistants; secretaries, etc.), others are physically separated and meet less frequently. Regardless, constant communication, interdisciplinary (e.g., secretary and doctor) and non, is expected to successfully implement the holistic patient-centered approach embraced by Clinic.

As per an internal value chart available to all employees, coworkers should collaborate, constantly communicate with each other, establish a climate of open communication, respect diversity, value each other, and reflect the organization's commitment to the circular economy and solidarity. Furthermore, over the years, on the initiative of the founder, coworkers have followed multiple communication training and experts have been called to aid the establishment of a climate of open communication. A listening room on the first floor, primarily destined to patients, occasionally serves as a space to voice concerns to management and solve issues between coworkers. Organization-wide meetings are held at least twice a year to discuss the technical details, promote team (family) building, and offer the opportunity for Q&A. The medical staff meets once a week, and three coworkers, who have worked for Clinic for over a decade, are included in weekly strategy meetings. These coworkers do not have a formal standing above others but are rather included because of their loyalty and commitment to the organization and its values. The organization-wide emphasis on collaboration and open communication, to which listening, and trust are pivotal, supports the choice of Clinic as a case for this paper. This choice is strengthened by the multifaceted nature of the organization's workforce, the spatial divisions faced by it, and the organizational listening efforts in terms of training and listening spaces. Overall, Clinic presents itself as a dynamic and listening oriented organizational family that holds the promise of offering valuable insights into coworkers' listening and trust building processes.

Sampling

Suitable interviewees were identified through purposive sampling because of scheduling conflicts and the dynamic nature of the clinical environment. This sampling choice is common for qualitative studies where difficulties arise in accessing the object of the study (Flick, 2023). To schedule the interviews, the CMO put me in contact with one of the

secretaries. While contacting coworkers on my own would have been optimal, it would not have been possible without managerial approval. Thus, the organization's involvement was necessary to obtain access. The secretary was also deemed a valid participant as she did not receive more information about the research compared to the other participants.

To ensure a representative sample and a holistic understanding of listening and trust building processes across the entire organizational family, I asked for participants who would represent the different non-managerial occupations within Clinic: doctors, dental assistants, secretaries, and dental technicians. The final sample included: four secretaries, two doctors, one dental technician, and three dental assistants. Their tenure ranged from 27 years to 5 years. Involving Clinic in the sample selection represents a drawback as it can not be excluded that only those coworkers reflecting its values and work family orientation were recommended for the interviews. Nonetheless, the selection of extreme cases remains a valuable form of purposive sampling as they are more likely to embrace the family metaphor (Flick, 2023), thereby balancing this downside.

Semi-structured interviews

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore coworkers' understanding of listening and trust building processes within the context of an organizational family. This methodology was deemed suitable as it allows and encourages participants to elaborate on their perceptions and experiences, providing rich and detailed empirical material for the researcher to analyze (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016). The lack of a strict structure helped me ask follow-up questions and revise the order of the existing questions to obtain clarifications and explore new themes as they emerge, increasing the likelihood of gathering in-depth insights (Flick, 2023). To aid the researcher in maintaining the interviews focused on the themes of the study, an interview guide (Appendix A) consisting of four sections was developed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Flick, 2023). The first section served to gather information on the participants and their internal communication within the organization. The second and third sections dealt respectively with coworkers' listening and trust building processes. The last section focused on the family metaphor and coworkers' perceptions of it. Before conducting the interviews, the guide was tested multiple times with an Italian speaking convenience sample to ensure the questions and concepts mentioned were clear and comprehensible.

The interviews took place at the Clinic in May 2025, were audio recorded, and lasted an average of 32 minutes. Upon entering the room, participants were provided with the informed consent (Appendix B), and if they agreed to take part in the study, they were asked to sign it. To reduce the risk of social desirability bias, participants were assured that there were no wrong answers to the questions asked and were reminded that their contributions would remain anonymous (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, as in all qualitative interviews, social desirability bias can not be excluded as interviewees may have attempted to portray themselves as better listeners or more trustworthy than they may be to feed their self-image, please the researcher, and/or portray the organization in a good light (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Hence, during the collection of the empirical material and later in the analysis, I, the researcher, constantly reflected on its potential impact on the material gathered and attempted to minimize its influence. Moreover, it is important to note that in line with this thesis' social constructionist reflexive approach, the interviews were understood as a non-neutral space in which the empirical material gathered was constructed by the researcher and the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). After all the interviews had taken place, they were transcribed and translated from Italian to English with the aid of Google Translate to save time.

Analytical method

In line with the intent of exploring coworkers' listening and trust building processes, the empirical material was analyzed according to a thematic approach. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of emerging patterns in the data while avoiding preconceived understandings of the material (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Flick, 2023). As all the interviews were conducted on the same day, transcribing, and carrying out a first analysis of the material in between interviews, as typical of this approach, could not be achieved (Fugard & Potts, 2019). However, between each interview, I wrote down my thoughts and started to familiarize myself with the material. This helped me identify common patterns and explore them in more depth in subsequent interviews (Fugard & Potts, 2019). At this stage, I also took notes of my initial interpretations, which were later combined with the rest of the material collected and further interpretations. To develop familiarity with the empirical material, I immersed myself in it over the course of the transcription and translation processes and read it multiple times once those were completed.

The analysis was underpinned by abductive reasoning, which saw me moving back and forth between the empirical material and preexisting literature in an iterative process, engaging the two in a critical dialogue (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Throughout it, the chosen theoretical framework and preexisting literature were treated as a "source of inspiration" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 5). They served to develop a novel understanding of the material rather than act as taken for granted explanations for it. This allowed me to look for alternative understandings of coworkers' listening and trust building processes within the family metaphor, thus questioning their dominant conceptualizations and uncovering new understandings. To facilitate the emergence of new insights, I refrained from adopting rigid codes at the initial stages of the analysis; instead, I chose to rely on an interplay of different concepts and techniques (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). One of these techniques consisted of annotating the translated transcripts to reflect on the knowledge produced, actively interacting with the text, expanding the insights emerging from the analysis, and refraining from finality (Shelton & Coogler, 2024). In line with the social constructionist reflexive standpoint of this thesis, this technique also "accentuates the reader/marker as one of the central meaning makers and an essential part of the analytical toolset" (Shelton & Coogler, 2024, p. 40). Overall, the flexible approach adopted enabled me to better grasp the complexity of coworkers' listening and trust building processes within the family metaphor and their interplay. Eventually, the themes that emerged from the analysis were refined, and presented in the following chapter. Lastly, it is important to note that this thesis does not seek universal generalizability but rather analytical generalizability (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Hence, rejecting the notion that all findings can be applicable to coworkers, but rather focusing on the emergence of applicable conceptualizations across organizational families and similar contexts (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Ethical considerations

An important step in conducting an insightful and sound study is the acknowledgment that "interview research is saturated with moral and ethical issues" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p. 28). As coworkers' listening and trust building processes are often regarded as sensitive, the need to comply with ethical standards is pivotal (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mann, 2016). Thus, I reflected on the implications of my study and took measures to address the areas of concern that emerged. Firstly, before taking part in the interviews, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent (Appendix B). The document served to illustrate to

interviewees the purpose of the study, its design, how their contribution would be employed in the final document, and to inform them that their participation was voluntary and that their consent could be withdrawn at any time (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Flick, 2023). The document also clarified that I would be the only one with direct access to the collected material. Hence, participants were able to make an informed decision about whether they would be comfortable with taking part in the present research.

Secondly, to grant participants' privacy, the collected data was anonymized upon transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to each one of them (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Due to the sensitive nature of the information collected, these provisions served to ensure that participants felt comfortable with sharing their perceptions and experiences without fears of facing repercussions or judgement (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thirdly, the intimate setting of the interviews led some participants to share sensitive personal information (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), which only partially served to answer the research questions. To further protect them from harm, this material was summarized in the transcripts, deprived of details that could connect it to specific individuals, and only included in the final document in a shortened form when deemed relevant. Additionally, in line with the reflexive constructivist approach adopted by this thesis, I constantly reflected on the ethical implications of my role as a co-constructor of knowledge and on the power dynamics associated with me having the role of primary definer of the knowledge constructed in the final text (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Flick, 2023). Aware of these dynamics and implications, I took great care in critically examining and re-examining my analysis so that it would reflect participants' social constructions as accurately as possible while also remaining aware of potential biases on their parts. Lastly, all the material collected will be erased within a month of receiving the final evaluation.

Reflexivity statement

As I have tried to emphasize throughout this chapter, the entire research process was characterized by the adoption of a reflexive attitude. In line with Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018) and the constructive epistemology adopted, I constantly reflected on the material collected, my interpretations of it, and my role as a researcher, considering potential biases and challenging myself to go beyond my initial analysis. The final analysis and discussion were read multiple times and critically appraised and re-appraised. Additionally, I also paid significant attention to how biases and power dynamics during the collection of the empirical

material could have influenced participants' statements (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Flick, 2023). When conducting the interviews, I made sure participants were comfortable with answering the questions, were aware that there was no wrong answer, and of the anonymity of their contribution to mitigate the risk they would feel compelled to twist the account of their experiences and perceptions in an act of self-preservation and/or to please the researcher. Furthermore, my personal connection to Clinic's founder was not disclosed before the interviews to avoid a further risk of self-censorship from the participants.

Analysis

This chapter presents the empirical findings and the analysis derived from the ten semi-structured interviews conducted for the purpose of this thesis. In it, I provide an account and explanation of coworkers' perceptions of their role as listeners and of how listening to fellow coworkers contributes to trust building within the context of an organizational family. Thus, shedding light into coworkers listening processes. I do so by adopting an abductive reflexive approach, which sees me treating the literature review and the theoretical framework as a repertoire *of interpretations (*Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018) to guide my understanding. In the first subchapter, I conceptualize six ways coworkers perceive and understand their role as listeners, answering the first research question. Then, in the second subchapter, I delve into coworkers' experiences with trust building, identifying three overarching factors influencing trust towards fellow coworkers. The interview statements featured in this chapter, when necessary, were adjusted for better readability by erasing filler words, repetitions, and prioritizing semantic correspondence in the English language over a literal translation.

Listening to the family

Throughout the interviews, it emerged that Clinic's coworkers constantly listen to each other during their workday. The topics discussed include the introduction of new ideas, mistakes, self-disclosures, but predominantly focus on patients and their care. Coworkers appear to be aware of their role as listeners and of its importance in the workplace. Interviewees have highlighted how listening is perceived as a learning device, a relationship building tool, and a necessity to do their job to the best of their capacities. Furthermore, there is an expectation that good listening should be purposeful and involve an exchange between the listener and the speaker, and a reversal of the role as the conversation progresses. However, despite a partial acknowledgement of the importance of listening training, listening is often seen as a predisposition rather than a skill one can successfully acquire over time. Additionally, while listening can occur at any time, coworkers report specific conditions that should be present so that effective listening can take place. Overall, the empirical material collected provides

nuanced insights into how coworkers understand their role as listeners and how it affects their organizational family and the communication and relations within it.

A dance with two leads

When coworkers were asked to reflect on their role as listeners, it emerged that their perception of an optimal listening interaction resembles a dance between listener and speaker. In this communicative waltz, the two parties alternate their roles within the conversation, generating a constant feedback loop. The listener expects the speaker to value their opinion on the matter discussed and to allow them to express such opinion when the appropriate moment comes. On the contrary, if a coworker perceives the other to interact with them for the sole purpose of a cathartic release, they appear demotivated and unwilling to continue engaging in the conversation (Trinh et al., 2025). Camilla claims that her listening is hindered when she does not "see an exchange" or at least a predisposition to it. Eleonora also experiences a similar feeling when her coworkers only approach her to complain. In her words: "it's different to listen to a person that burdens you with negativity or listening to someone that instead has an actual problem and asks you for help to solve it…it's very different". In line with this, Maddalena agrees that listening is easier when there is a constant exchange with her colleagues. Thus, it is not only that the speaker may be prevented from speaking up if he or she feels unheard (Neill & Bowen, 2021), but also that listening can be hindered if there is a lack of symmetrical communication (Ruck et al., 2017), and role reversal. I posit that the speaker is not the only one who may feel unheard; such feelings can equally extend to the listener if there is no perception of symmetry, virtually preventing effective communication from taking place. This is particularly problematic as feeling unheard is connected to fewer voicing behaviour, engagement, and motivation (e.g., Tourish & Robson, 2006; Schramm, 2017; Lewis, 2019; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023).

Coworkers also report that they are more likely to listen when their listening can lead somewhere. Listening to complaints without having a possibility to contribute to the discussion is an end in itself, but working together towards a solution is a powerful motivation to listen. Asia makes a distinction between listening to someone venting and listening to a complaint aimed at changing something. Similarly, Aldo claims that when a communicative exchange occurs and his listening is oriented towards finding a solution, he can experience a sense of wellbeing from helping his coworkers (Trinh et al., 2025). Consequently, just as coworkers resent pseudo listening at an organization wide level (Lewis, 2019; 2022; Heide &

Svingstedt, 2023), they seem to also be sensitive to instances when their colleagues are not interested in valuing their opinion or providing feedback. Reflecting on being listened to by others, Aldo states:

> *If... I have the impression that the other person isn't listening to me or is listening to me passively, simply giving me an empathetic relationship, but not a confrontation... Well, I have a feeling of not wanting to communicate that thing anymore. I often end up interrupting the conversation without going into more depth, because I realize there's no confrontation, because even when I communicate, I need a confrontation, not to simply be listened to, in a confessional kind of way.*

Clinic coworkers believe that working together will hold beneficial outcomes for all and hold the expectation that their work-family members should not only lend an ear but also contribute to the conversation. Aiding fellow coworkers and offering mutual support is strongly aligned with the interactions evoked by the family metaphor (Casey, 1999; Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). In the face of a struggle or even in their daily work life, coworkers see listening as a tool to care for family members and ensure good outcomes for the organization. If there is no intention to collaborate and act upon what is shared, some coworkers may even refuse to speak up or listen. Overall, as Elena emphasizes, if there is no exchange, "there is no listening between colleagues". Thus, coworkers' perceptions of listening are not only confined to the exact moments in which listening takes place, but instead extend to the whole communicative dance. Moreover, for effective listening to take place, it needs to be done with purpose and spark collaboration. If these conditions are met the family metaphor is likely to be communicatively enacted and reinforced (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2011). This supports the existence of a strong connection between the family metaphor and listening.

A learning device

Supporting the idea that effective listening needs a purpose, another theme that stemmed from the interviews is the perception of listening as a learning device. Coworkers actively, and often enthusiastically, listen to each other when they believe it can be an occasion for professional, or even personal, growth. According to Camilla, a listening interaction "it's not just giving to the other but receiving a lot in every conversation. Because you're always

building something". Listening becomes a way to acquire new perspectives and eventually disclose one's own with others, creating a shared understanding through dialogue. Asia claims that listening is always "enriching". Previous studies posit that good listeners learn from each other (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017), my findings confirm this and suggest that coworkers are aware of it too. They claim to constantly engage in dialogue and learn from each other while doing so. Like Swedish coworkers (Heide et al., 2018), they believe they contribute to the establishment of a good dialogue in their workplace. Interviewees admit that being part of an interdisciplinary and diverse workforce can be challenging, but they appreciate the learning opportunities it offers. In Elena's words, "it is the beauty of working in such a big Clinic". Hence, diversity becomes a driver for learning. Furthermore, while trust is not the focus of this section, it can be observed how perceiving a coworker as competent to give advice contributes to his or her trustworthiness to the eye of the listener (Mayer et al., 1995). Thus, supporting the emergence of trust within the organization and reinforcing family-like dynamics among its members, which in turn can explain the propensity towards listening displayed by the sample (Furlich, 2016).

Additionally, it appears that Clinic's management promotes listening within the organization, contributing to the establishment of a learning climate (Brownell, 2008). In this climate, coworkers are motivated to listen to each other, engage in problem solving and come up with new ideas that enrich their knowledge base and that of the organization. Filippo states he's motivated to listen to his coworkers when they "have something to propose, ideas", he enjoys it and gets "the desire to try it too". He also believes he can always learn something from his colleagues, and when a mistake occurs, they can eventually work on a solution together. Aldo shares a similar sentiment by claiming he's positive that listening to others can help him identify his mistakes, improve, and enhance his knowledge base. When there is no opportunity for learning, he appears demotivated to listen. These statements suggest that Clinic also enjoys a climate of open communication and a good degree of psychological safety which see coworkers being comfortable in expressing their opinions and respectful of each other's ideas (Edmondson, 1999; 2019; Heide et al., 2019; Andersson et al., 2021). Psychological safety can also explain the interest in innovation and creativity expressed by Filippo (Castro et al., 2018). Lastly, for some coworkers, listening can also represent a way to protect less senior coworkers and ensure their learning. When asked why she listens to her coworkers Maddalena stated "maybe for protection, because most of them are younger than me…they could be my daughters…and so there is also almost a protective relationship, as if I were a mother, you know…that's how I see them". Reflecting a mother and daughter

relationship, she chooses to share her knowledge with them, in turn helping the organization by enhancing their skills (Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009; Tognazzo, 2022). Overall, coworkers' perception of listening as a learning device motivates them to listen to their coworkers willingly and attentively and welcome their disclosures, strengthening the family dynamic. Such perception also serves to increase psychological safety and contribute to a learning environment and a climate of open communication. Hence allowing the organization to better tackle potential pitfalls and benefit from the proposed innovations.

A necessity

Coworkers perceive listening as pivotal to working efficiently within their organization. Clinic experiences a constant flow of communication surrounding patient care and failing to listen can compromise patient outcomes (Chilcutt, 2009; Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). Maria tells me of how she and her coworkers in the secretariat listen to each other to present patients with coherent information. As secretaries are specialized in different tasks, they also need to listen to each other when they have to deal with something beyond their competency. For others, like Filippo, listening is a way to keep track of the progress made on a patient's case and know how to contribute. Without listening, these coworkers are aware they would not be able to meet their job expectations and could potentially compromise Clinic's image with their mistakes (Nuwayyir et al., 2024). Hence, collaboration, enabled by listening, allows them to be flexible in their tasks and perform better, in turn reifying the positive workplace dynamics emphasized by the family metaphor (Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013). Through their interactions, coworkers construct Clinic's collaborative family dynamic (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Burr, 2015) and define their organizational reality.

In an interdisciplinary work-family like Clinic's, listening is essential for working together and reducing mistakes. Camilla believes that feeling heard is the first step towards finding a solution; she tells me, "having people and colleagues close to me who are ready to listen to me, in short, allows me to do my job and to feel good in general". For others like Sofia, being listened to can be an incentive to improve, as it generates a feedback loop that informs her of whether she is doing things right. As work-families are expected to work together towards shared goals (Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022), listening can push them to achieve them. On the contrary, feeling unheard has been found to reduce engagement and voicing (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Ruck, 2021; Lewis, 2019), and as such could compromise collaboration. I did not find evidence of this among Clinic's coworkers, as the effects of feeling unheard were

mitigated by the overall psychological safety experienced within the organization. As a result, coworkers were not prevented from speaking up on further occasions.

Nevertheless, listening and feeling heard can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging in the workplace. This is evidenced by Ginevra stating: "[thanks to listening] I feel part of the group, I feel part of the clinic, so it's not me, but it's us". Hence, I posit that taking decisions as a group is likely to increase identification in the work-family, further enhancing collaboration (Chilcutt, 2009). For some coworkers, a lack of listening and a subsequent lack of collaboration would prevent them from being satisfied with their workplace (Bregenzer et al., 2020) and could even motivate them to seek employment elsewhere (Lloyd et al., 2015a; Lewis, 2019). According to Maddalena, "without collaboration it would be hell, it would really be hell". While Maria is confident, she would not still be working for Clinic if that were the case. Overall, the findings support the idea that coworkership and organizational families would not be able to exist without listening, as collaboration would be hindered tremendously. Coworkers are aware of the importance of listening and constantly take on the role of listeners to generate positive organizational outcomes.

A relationship building tool

Listening's contribution to relationship building is widely proclaimed and accepted within organizational literature (e.g., Borner & Zerfass, 2018; Price, 2019; Macnamara, 2024). Less is known, however, on the role it plays in building relationships among coworkers, as most of these studies focus on organizational listening or on the dyadic relationship between managers and coworkers. This thesis' findings contribute to addressing this pitfall by suggesting that listening plays a crucial role in building sounder relationships among coworkers. While the word relationship is seldomly mentioned in the interviews, it emerges how listening enables a mutual understanding that is conducive of stronger bonds. Asia often spends time with some of her coworkers in her free time and has built many friendships over the years among them. But even with those coworkers she only sees at Clinic she tells me "I feel like they are my friends precisely because we listened to each other, well…let's say we listened to each other and supported each other". Thus, the importance of listening in establishing positive relationships is highlighted (Brunner, 2008; Ruck, 2021). Maddalena reinforced this notion by claiming that "communication is essential, otherwise getting along would be impossible". Furthermore, comments such as Asia's provide further empirical support to the argument that in an organizational family, relationships extend beyond the financial domain, tapping into

deeper connections (e.g., Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009). It is common for members of the same organizational family to spend time together beyond work (Furlich, 2016). Interviewees report spending time with at least one coworker outside of the workplace; the activities mentioned include dining, shopping, sports, and family gatherings. During our interview, Filippo happily shared with me that he and his coworkers recently started to play football together. These connections serve to further strengthen workplace relationships and motivate coworkers to remain committed to the workplace (Furlich, 2016).

Furthermore, listening plays a crucial role in smoothing differences and ensuring that positive and collaborative work climate evoked by the family metaphor comes to life. Asia explains to me that listening to a coworker with whom she could not get along improved their relationship as she understood more of the other person. Elena experienced something similar with a former coworker, she states:

> *There was a lot of friction between us, and then we had a clash, let's say a very serious verbal one, but I have to say that this fight helped us understand each other... because we basically misunderstood each other's behaviors.*

Consequently, listening even during a confrontation can strengthen bonds between coworkers by enabling the construction of a shared understanding (Burr, 2015). I posit that when disagreements are smoothed over, the family dynamics within the organization are reinforced, along with the connection coworkers feel towards them. Cohesion is, in fact, an important characteristic of work families (Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013). Moreover, having a good relationship with coworkers can ensure that when a more routine disagreement occurs, this remains confined to that workday and does not drag on. Elena finds that she gets along with all her coworkers, and even when there is a clash, the following day, the anger is no longer there. Positive relationships among coworkers can contribute to job satisfaction and a higher commitment to the organization (Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013; Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). Coworkers who enjoy spending time with each other are less likely to manifest turnover intentions and are willing to collaborate to ensure the success of common pursuits, as an ideal family would. I conclude this subchapter by arguing that the importance of good workplace relationships is such that while Ginevra is unsatisfied with management, she still feels well when at work because of getting along with her coworkers. Hence, organizations should be committed to ensuring their coworkers listen to each other not only because good relations are pleasant, but in light of the value they bring to the organization (Borner & Zerfass, 2018).

An innate quality

The general understanding is that listening is a skill that can and should be trained (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). While I share this dominant opinion, coworkers do not present themselves as a united front on the matter. Over the years Clinic has invested repeatedly in listening training as its founder deems it vital when interacting with patients and working in a large interdisciplinary group. Camilla and Filippo are strong supporters of the benefits of such exercises and suggest their efficacy has extended beyond work. Camilla is particularly enthusiastic about the results and reflects on her employment at Clinic, stating:

> *Throughout my journey here, but also with other communication courses, at the beginning I thought I could listen. But that wasn't the case…I was missing out on so many important details… When I actually tested different dynamics and formulas, I felt a big difference. Listening is linked to understanding…If you can really understand, you connect with the other person.*

From this statement, it can be inferred that listening skills can not only be improved but also generate what Kluger & Itzchakov (2022) call a state of togetherness. In it, the listener and the speaker become attached to one another as they gain mutual benefit from the communicative exchange. Hence, listening training can be said to reinforce listening's capacity to act as a relationship building tool, and in turn strengthen the collaborative dynamics evoked by the family metaphor (Tognazzo, 2022). Additionally, Camilla's claim can also be interpreted as an example of the emotional gratification employees experience in a work-family, and equally as a sign of its idealization (Casey, 1999). This latter point is supported by the fact that she responds to the family metaphor with enthusiasm.

On the other hand, interviewees also seem to perceive listening as an innate quality they have always possessed. As a result, they are often unable to explain what motivates them to listen to their coworkers other than claiming it comes natural to them. The answer did not change much when they were asked whether they felt it was easier to listen to some of their coworkers instead of others. While they may find some coworkers easier to listen to, they believe their disposition enables them to listen to everyone regardless. When I ask if something motivates her to listen, Ginevra replies firmly, "no, that's just how I am". Additionally, coworkers also proudly report receiving compliments for their listening skills from other coworkers and the people in their lives. It can not be excluded with certainty that these coworkers are exceptionally good listeners and have always been so; however, it is more likely that they are overestimating their listening skills. Organizations can be overly

confident in their capacity to listen (e.g., Macnamara, 2016; 2017; 2024), and coworkers are no different. I posit that if listening is taken for granted, it can hinder training efforts. Coworkers who believe that they are already excellent listeners may not be receptive to the teachings offered and instead continue to stick to their own ways. In support of this point, Maria claims that training can only be effective if one is committed to listening and wants to improve. She reflects that some of her coworkers have undergone extensive training, but without significant results, as they were not sincere in their intent to listen. Thus, organizations should continue to invest in listening training but also ensure coworkers understand its importance and willingly commit to it.

A conditional pursuit

So far, the analysis has shown how coworkers perceive listening to be a dance, a way to learn, a necessity, a tool to strengthen and build relationships, and an innate quality. What has been less clear is whether they perceive effective listening to be conditional. The empirical material I collected suggests that this is the case, and that optimal listening emerges with the right combination of communication channels, time, and place.

Coworkers make use of multiple channels to share and listen to information. These include messaging apps, documents, telephone calls, and face-to-face conversations, and they are chosen depending on what needs to be communicated (Mishra et al., 2014; Neill & Bowen, 2021; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). Communication, except for documents, remains informal as expected of an organizational family (Michael-Tsabari & Tan, 2013). Documents are relied upon only when extremely necessary, for example, when important information regarding a patient needs to be written down. Messaging apps are used regularly for quick conversations when a coworker is absent, can not be reached at that moment, or when something needs to be planned and shared widely. Yet, chats are perceived as cold, impersonal, and likely to generate misunderstandings. When possible, coworkers prefer to engage in face-to-face communication. Eleonora explains her preference as follows:

> *[M]essages can often be misunderstood depending on how you read them, especially nowadays when we tend to avoid commas and all those tools the Italian language affords you to give a tone to what you write... so depending on the state the person is in at that when reading, they read it in a certain way. Instead, if I tell you, you hear the tone of my voice, you see my face, you understand... misunderstandings are just around the corner [with chats].*

Consequently, coworkers tend to avoid chats to ensure listeners are able to grasp the intended meaning of the message by making use of visual cues as well as the tone of voice. These findings are aligned with previous ones, which suggest that employees accord a preference to face-to-face interactions as they provide valuable contextual cues and go straight to the point (Cheney, 1999; Mishra et al., 2014). Some coworkers suggest that face-to-face interaction is even more valuable when they communicate with someone belonging to a different generation. For instance, Sofia finds communicating with younger coworkers challenging as she struggles to get her message across the way she intends due to a lack of familiarity with the most recent chat-etiquette. Furthermore, coworkers also report finding face-to-face communication to be less time-consuming and more efficient as they can get an answer right away and correct misunderstanding on the spot. Thus, offering support to claims that in person interactions are perceived as more effective (Mishra et al., 2014). Lastly, as concerns telephone calls, Asia seems to perceive them as a valuable alternative to the preferred channel of communication. Although coworkers mostly referred to their role as speakers, I argue that it is evident they engage in face-to-face communication to facilitate listening tasks.

On top of a preference for face-to-face interactions, coworkers connect optimal listening to its timing. This is not intended as a specific hour of the day, but rather as finding the right moment. When coworkers are preoccupied with their own jobs or personal issues, they struggle to listen and avoid taking a listening role. Aldo tells me his capacity to listen is conditional on having a "clear head". Similarly, Asia refrains, with the exception of urgent matters, from engaging in conversations with her colleagues when she is interacting with patients, as they take priority. In these instances, listening is delayed to a time in which the speaker can be given full attention. This is in line with Itzchakov & Kluger (2017)'s claim that listening should be postponed when there is not enough time for it to avoid communicating a lack of interest. Interestingly, for Ginevra, receiving unconditional attention from listeners is enough to feel listened to. Hence, these coworkers engage in optimal listening practices and show care for their organizational family (Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). Furthermore, when coworkers identify a specific segment of the day, this still has more to do with having the time to dedicate to it. Filippo states he's predisposed to listen in the morning, but as his storytelling progresses, I notice that his predisposition is connected to the coffee break he usually takes then. Likewise, for Ginevra, listening is easier during breaks or early in the morning before patients enter the clinic. Thus, I suggest informal occasions can encourage listening as coworkers experience less pressure with their workload and become more predisposed to pay attention to others.

Furthermore, coworkers do not have a dedicated space to listen within Clinic and are skeptical that having one would change their attitude to listening. Instead, they claim listening can take place anywhere as long as the place is quiet, and in the case of a confidential disclosure, privacy is guaranteed. Eleonora says, "I prefer a more secluded place, especially if I see that the person has difficulty speaking in front of others because perhaps, they are looking for advice or to confide". Similarly, Aldo finds that it has more to do with meeting the right conditions, namely, lack of noise and distraction, than it has to do with the place. Nevertheless, not having a formal listening space does not prevent coworkers from creating their own, as Maddalena puts it. For example, on the second floor, employees often make use of the changing room, the sterilization room, and the storage room to effectively listen to their coworkers without external distractions. Notably, all these places are accessible exclusively to coworkers, allowing them to distance themselves from patients. Filippo communicates a clear interest in having a dedicated listening space, and I posit organizations should prioritize its creation. The findings of previous studies suggest that dedicated physical spaces can promote listening within an organization, and with it establish a learning environment (Brownell, 2008; Price, 2019). While these spaces may not be essential, they can provide a significant contribution to the flow of communication within the organization, as coworkers could be more likely to disclose their mistakes in what they perceive to be a safe environment.

Trusting the family

Having outlined coworkers' perception of their role as listeners, this chapter now discusses the relationship between listening and trust building. The analysis highlights three themes helpful in understanding how listening contributes to building trust between coworkers. Throughout these themes, it is evident how listening can contribute to the establishment of trusting relationships among coworkers and how that benefits them as well as their organizational family.

Consistency and actions

Over the course of the interviews, coworkers mentioned repeatedly that trust is built over time and may decrease or increase as they get to know another coworker. When coworkers interact with each other, it is the sum of these interactions that allows them to determine the extent to which they deem their conversation partner to be trustworthy (Mayer et al., 1995). As Camilla posits:

> *Little by little you have to trust others and to be able to trust you must first build a relationship…sometimes we don't trust because we don't know. So, I don't think throwing a ball out there at random is wrong, but you have to know, and then there's trust.*

Consequently, it can be inferred that to get to know another coworker, it is necessary not only to gather information about him and his stances, but also to listen to what he or she has to say (Mayer et al., 1995). Listening is a first step towards making a determination on a coworker as the relationship progresses. Aldo is confident that listening can strengthen any relationship "because listening means there is a relationship in the making". By listening to his coworkers, he has the power to make them feel heard and, as such, contributes not only to the establishment of trust, but also to successful coworkership dynamics (Andersson et al., 2021). These trust building processes can however, be hindered by a lack of shared experiences. In the aftermath of Clinic's expansion and the spatial separation that followed, coworkers seem to be struggling with building trusting relationships with those colleagues that they seldomly see (Weller et al., 2011; Foronda et al., 2016). For instance, Eleonora admits that she is only now getting to know some coworkers who have been working at Clinic for a year. This suggests not only that trust is conditional on recurring interactions but also that the family needs to be lived to be believed. This can be explained by the fact that face-to-face interactions are connected to the establishment of a sense of community (Mishra et al., 2014). Hence, if coworkers are not provided with opportunities to interact, it will not be possible for them to form the strong bonds that characterize an organizational family (Casey, 1999; Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022).

Moreover, consistency in communicating and working alongside fellow coworkers is understood as conducive to trust. Before a first meeting, Asia suggests that she forms a positive predisposition towards a new coworker by observing his or her work performance and actions. Her statements support the validity of the constructs of ability and integrity proposed by Mayer et al. (1995). By conceptualizing the propensity to trust as innate to an individual, the same model also explains why some of the coworkers seemed more willing to trust compared to others, regardless of their listening skills. Furthermore, reflecting on listening's contribution to trust building, coworkers suggest that what follows an interaction determines whether they feel heard by, and in turn can trust their colleagues. Maddalena shares with me a recurring frustration linked to the trash in the clinical area. She feels unheard when she needs to remind coworkers to sort it correctly, since some only do it for so many

days. Conversely, she trusts coworkers who have heard her complaints and are now experiencing the same frustration. Likewise, for Sofia, it is the presence or absence of a collaborative attitude in the other after she raises a problem that leads her to feel heard and trust. She posits that actions are what matters. Facts and words need to match to ensure that listening has occurred, and trust can be built. Eleonora sums this up perfectly by saying, "to me, listening isn't just a moment, something passive. It's something that must become active". Thus, coworkers feel heard when the feedback they provide is received and addressed by the listener. Feedback should not only be acquired, but also translated into actions (e.g., Cardon et al., 2019; Kriz et al., 2021). Overall, ensuring coworkers listen and feel heard within the workplace should become an organizational goal as it is conducive to trust. Trust, in turn, can contribute to job performance by supporting and enhancing collaboration. As trust is an emergent condition that can not be externally imposed (Mayer et al., 1995), organization wide listening training can be implemented to work towards it. Furthermore, trust can also be said to enhance family dynamics between organizational members by strengthening the relationships among them.

Psychological safety

The empirical material highlights how psychological safety emerging from listening can significantly influence the establishment of trusting relations among coworkers (Castro et al., 2018). When they feel their work environment is psychologically safe, coworkers are likely to express themselves, engage in risk-taking behaviour, speak up, and share their mistakes and ideas within their work family (Edmondson, 1999; 2019). Based on the empirical material, Clinic appears to be a psychologically safe environment. Eleonora talks of it as one in which "everyone jokes... laughs... there's no hierarchy… there's respect for everyone. There's no need to be formal except in front of patients, perhaps... But we all stick together, without distinctions." Aldo also suggests that "[t]here's a climate in which we can talk about extra-clinical things, tease each other a little, the usual things between colleagues who are happy in the workplace". Considering these coworkers engage in humoristic communication and disclose aspects of their personal life, they can be said to express their identity within the workplace, supporting the presence of psychological safety. Feeling well in the workplace and having good relationships with one's coworkers is what characterizes an organizational family (Casey, 1999; Tognazzo, 2022).

Furthermore, coworkers also report speaking up when something is not to their liking or there is a problem. Maddalena trusts her coworkers and is comfortable voicing her dissent when she feels it is necessary. She states: “with the doctors…when we have a problem, we talk. I talk and then however they take it, they take it, but I tell them what I need to tell them”. Similarly, Elena confides that when she disagrees with a coworker, she talks to him or her about it in person, “even with harsh words where necessary”. Compared to a previous workplace, she feels she does not need to “weigh her words”. This suggests that communication between coworkers is transparent as issues are addressed directly, possibly enhancing trust (Thomas et al., 2009; Jiang & Luo, 2018; Qin, 2025). Both also report feeling heard by their coworkers and comfortable with discussing personal matters. Feeling heard is connected to less social anxiety and can motivate coworkers to speak up as they believe their opinion will be taken into account (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Edmondson, 2019; Edmondson et al., 2024). Kluger & Itzchakov (2022) take this a step further by claiming that feeling heard establishes psychological safety.

If trust is built, coworkers are less likely to act self-servingly and more likely to engage in collaborative behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995; Velten & Heggen, 2022). This latter point is emphasized by Filippo’s sharing of his mistakes and ideas with his coworkers. He feels heard by them, they help him solve problems, and he does the same for them. He tells me this is the case because working at Clinic “you are part of a family, so to speak.... So, you are not ignored when you have a problem or want to make a suggestion”. Belonging to an organizational family for this coworker contributes to establishing a perception of psychological safety, which in turn leads him to trust that someone will be listening. Thus, I posit that listening, psychological safety, and the family metaphor are interconnected. This raises questions on whether the family metaphor is a controlling linguist device, as implied by some, or a clever way to promote positive associations between its members. I lean towards the latter as the presence of psychological safety suggests that coworkers do not simply comply and refrain from resistance as implied by some (e.g., Casey, 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009). But instead, are comfortable with voicing their dissent in a family-like environment thanks to the trusting relationships they have established with fellow coworkers.

Benevolence

The last theme gets its name from one of the three factors of influence on perceived trustworthiness identified by Mayer et al.'s (1995) model. In line with the original

conceptualization, it refers to the perception of a positive and caring attitude bestowed by a trustee (listener) to a trustor (speaker) for non-egotistical motives. Benevolence can be sensed from visual cues (e.g., a smile, a nod), but good listening can play an important part by signaling care towards the speaker (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). Talking of why she trusts one of her coworkers, Ginevra states: "[s]he very, very maternal, so you put yourself in her hands because you know she will never hurt you, her attitude leads me to trust her…I know for sure she will never say anything bad about me*"*. Interestingly, she resists the family metaphor, but uses a familiar adjective to describe a benevolent coworker who she confides in. Hence, suggesting the same metaphor can be valuable in understanding workplace trust regardless of a commitment to it. Moreover, while benevolence aids trust building, a perceived lack of it can hinder it. Aldo sees himself as a good listener and trusting, but his attitude shifts when he realizes that "someone is looking out for their own interests without thinking about the rest of the family". Thus, for some coworkers, benevolence should equally be directed to the organizational family to display a commitment to shared goals and consequently being perceived as trustworthy.

Moreover, coworkers believe that having a genuine interest in listening and acting on it contributes to their trustworthiness. For Sofia, "everything starts from there". When a coworker is open to listening and does so well the speaker will not only deem him or her trustworthy (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017), but also feel good (Lloyd et al., 2015b). Camilla smiles when she tells me that "sometimes even a simple gesture from a colleague who brings you a pastry, a pizza, because maybe she sees that it's been a bit of a bad week and gives you a small gesture of affection" is enough to feel heard. Trust was not explicitly mentioned in this extract, but the empirical material suggests that these gestures contribute to establishing a trusting relationship. Crucially, however, coworkers differentiate between work trust and personal trust. While a coworker may discuss private matters with another, establishing deeper connections and wellbeing outcomes from being heard, it does not necessarily mean that they will trust another coworker when delegating a task. For that, being capable of doing a task (Mayer et al., 1995), willing to listen and collaborate are more relevant factors. Nonetheless, establishing personal trust among coworkers may just be as much of a strategic pursuit as establishing work trust. Listening to personal issues with a benevolent attitude allows coworkers to be more understanding of one another, facilitating their collaboration. As Eleonora puts it, "when one has problems at home, they bring them to work", and when discussing them, she later adds, "you enter into each other's daily lives and therefore everyone feels more at peace". While understandably management may attempt to

curb non-work-related communication, this can play an important role in ensuring a cohesive workforce (Hagmann et al., 2024). Hence, spaces and regularly occurring social occasions should be dedicated to it (Nifadkar et al., 2019).

Concluding Discussion

This study was inspired by and questions the disregard for coworkers' points of view and agency shown by the dominant scholarship on the family metaphor and listening. It also problematizes how listening is often taken for granted by academia and practice, and how listening processes between coworkers are overlooked by communication scholars, who instead prioritize external and centralized listening practices, as well as the dyadic relationship between coworkers and managers. Addressing these pitfalls, this study aims to gather nuanced insights into how coworkers understand their listening to fellow coworkers and how these processes contribute to trust building within an organizational family. Thus, expanding the current understanding of their listening. This is done by focusing on coworkers' perceptions and experiences collected with ten semi-structured interviews conducted at an Italian dental clinic adopting the family metaphor. In the analysis, preexisting literature and the chosen theoretical framework, composed of the family metaphor and trust, are used as *repertoires of interpretations* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018) in an abductive reflective approach to the empirical material.

The results highlight how coworkers are aware of the importance of listening in enabling collaboration, optimal job performance, problem solving, and stronger relationships, and can reflect on their listening skills, identifying what enhances or hinders them. Answering the first research question, I conceptualize six ways coworkers understand their role as listeners: 1) a dance with two leads, 2) a learning device, 3) a necessity, 4) a relationship building tool, 5) an innate quality, and 6) a conditional pursuit. Firstly, coworkers are motivated to listen to each other when they believe they are engaging in an exchange with the speaker and can reverse their conversational roles. If they see no opportunity to contribute to the conversation and/or change things, their listening is hindered. Secondly, they are more likely to listen if they believe they can learn from each other. In a psychologically safe learning climate, coworkers acknowledge their limitations and work together towards improving, benefiting themselves and the organization. Thirdly, listening is understood as necessary for collaboration and optimal job performance. Fourthly, listening is perceived as a tool to strengthen workplace relationships and can further enhance collaboration, as well as commitment and satisfaction.

A fifth perception is that some coworkers do not necessarily see listening as a skill, but rather as an innate quality that can hardly be improved, potentially compromising listening training efforts. Lastly, while coworkers are committed to listening to each other, their listening benefits from face-to-face interactions, quiet and reserved spaces, and having time to dedicate to the speaker.

Guided by the second research question, I also identify three factors that explain how listening contributes to building trust between coworkers, namely: 1) consistency and actions, 2) psychological safety, and 3) benevolence. It first emerges that listening needs to be followed by consistency and be met with actions. If a coworker does not act or address what was is said, the speaker will feel unheard and see the other party as less trustworthy. Secondly, when coworkers feel heard, they are more likely to confide in other coworkers as they know they will not be punished for their mistakes, nor judged for the way they express themselves. Thus, listening can be said to enhance psychological safety and trust, enabling organizations to address mistakes swiftly and benefit from innovation. Lastly, when coworkers feel the other party displays benevolence and is willing to listen, trust is enhanced. This also applies to self-disclosures, which can benefit the organization by enabling coworkers to understand each other's behavior and attitude.

Lastly, the study also illustrates how listening, the family metaphor, and trust are interconnected. Coworkers actively reify the family metaphor and that in turn shapes their relationships with one another as well as the internal communication climate of the organization. On one hand, listening enables collaboration, relationships, mutual learning, and trust, enacting the metaphor. On the other hand, the metaphor invites coworkers to listen, supports psychological safety, and encourages the emergence of trusting relationships that facilitate collaboration, commitment, and mutual learning. I conclude that the family metaphor could not be successfully adopted if listening and trust were hindered. Furthermore, in a break from critical scholarship, I posit that when an organizational family is characterized by psychological safety, the family metaphor is not a pervasive form of control, but rather a valuable tool in improving organizational performance and coworkers' wellbeing. An organizational family is not born when management adopts the family metaphor, but it is instead created by the interactions among its coworkers.

Theoretical contributions

This thesis presents multiple contributions to the field of strategic communication and healthcare communication. Pivotally, it supports calls to understand coworkers as active communications, who produce and reproduce their organization in their interactions with one another and the remaining stakeholders (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Heide & Svingstedt, 2023). When it comes to the family metaphor, it is through coworkers' interactions that family-like dynamics come to life and bring advantages to the organization. As coworkers listen to each other and feel heard, they strengthen their relationship, promote collaboration and mutual learning as they care for each other and the organization (e.g., Furlich, 2016; Tognazzo, 2022). In this communicative process, listening is to be understood as a communicative dance in which the speaker and listener should both be given a chance to contribute to the discussion with intent (Ruck et al., 2017). Additionally, the analysis confirm that coworkers are aware of, and understand, how their communicative role contributes to an effective dialogue within the organization (Heide et al., 2018), and its connection to efficiency, job performance and satisfaction, problem solving, and in the case organization, to optimal patient outcomes (e.g., Ismail & Al-Moghrabi, 2023). Thirdly, by illustrating its benefits and implications, this thesis goes beyond presenting listening as simply the right thing to do or a way to improve relationships (Borner & Zerfass, 2018), but emphasizes how it contributes to value creation. Thus, positing it should take fronter stage in strategy planning (Heide & Svingstedt, 2023).

Furthermore, the results are aligned with previous studies highlighting the connection between listening and trust (e.g., Brownell, 2008; Brunner, 2008; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). Listening and feeling heard are introduced as necessary preconditions for the emergence of trust between parties, while the need for listening to be met with consistency and actions is also highlighted (e.g., Mayer et al., 1995; Cardon et al., 2019; Kriz et al., 2021). Additionally, the findings confirm how listening contributes to the establishment of psychological safety within an organization (Castro et al., 2018; Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017) and how that, in turn, enhances trust between coworkers. Recent studies on the importance of self-disclosures in increasing perceived trustworthiness at work are also supported (Nifdkar et al., 2019; Hagmann et al., 2024; Trinh et al., 2025). Self-disclosures in the workplace are found to strengthen relationships between coworkers. Hence, suggesting they should not be hindered unless they prevent organizational operations from taking place.

Lastly, this thesis expands the present scholarship on the family metaphor by providing empirical evidence of its dependency on listening and trust in its reification. It also challenges theoretical assumptions envisioning it as a discursive instrument of control (e.g., Casey 1999; Alakavuklar, 2009), highlighting instead the metaphor's contributions to organization wide collaboration, trusting relationship, learning, and open communication between coworkers. Psychological safety is hereby understood as a precondition to positive family dynamics and should be considered when the family metaphor is explored. The adoption of the family metaphor in a fast paced, stressful work environment like that of healthcare organization is understood as advantageous in enhancing collaboration and worthy of additional consideration.

Practical implications

The study calls on managers and communication practitioners to acknowledge the strategic importance of coworkers' listening practices and to support them in their communicative endeavors. A first step would be to treat coworkers as more than strategy instruments (Valentini, 2021), accounting for their communicative needs and developing a holistic understanding of internal listening practices as a result.

Coworkers' communication can be aided by running recurring listening workshops (e.g., Schramm, 2017), which not only attempt to teach new skills but also motivate them to commit to improving their listening skills. These workshops should feature an interdisciplinary participation to ensure effective listening across the different professions that constitute a given organization. In the healthcare sector, interdisciplinary collaboration holds implications for patients' outcomes (e.g., Chilcutt, 2009), and as such should be of the utmost priority when it comes to strategy planning.

Organizations should also commit themselves to fostering physical and dialogical spaces that enable meaningful and beneficial listening practices of both work and non-work-related nature (e.g., Price, 2019). Such spaces can include coffee lounges, breakrooms, as well as Christmas parties, or even something more casual as pizza nights (Nifadkar et al., 2019). As coworkers get to know and understand each other more, their listening skills will not only improve, but they will also be more likely to establish trusting relationships with each other.

Future research

The present study illustrates the value of adopting a coworker-centered perspective when researching the interplay between the family metaphor, listening, and trust building in an organizational setting. To develop a more holistic understanding of listening between coworkers, future studies should combine interviews and observations. This come as while interviews shed light on how listening is perceived, observations can provide an account of how it is enacted.

Furthermore, as both trust and organizational families are dynamic concepts, longitudinal studies can illustrate how listening contributes to their changes over time. Additionally, the current study looked at employees with considerable tenure, but it should be replicated including recent hires in the sample. This would enable an exploration of the impact of tenure on listening-enabled trust and family identity.

Moreover, it could also be beneficial to explore the relationship between listening and trust building in an experimental setting, potentially identifying ways in which trust can be enhanced through listening. Lastly, future research should pay closer attention to how power dynamics and parochialism can shape listening, trust, and identification in an organizational family among interdisciplinary work teams. Developing such an understanding could be helpful in identifying strategies aimed at reducing the challenges brought along by interdisciplinary collaboration.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Introductory questions:

- Can you tell me about your job description?
- How long have you been working for the organization?
- Age
- What does your communication with your coworkers within [organization name]/your department entail?
- How do you communicate with your coworkers?

Listening

- Listening to others:
    - Could you please give me an example of a time you listened to one of your coworkers at work?
        - Do you feel like your attitudes towards listening change depending on where the listening episode takes place (e.g., in a meeting)?
        - Do you find it easier to listen to some of your coworkers than others? Why?
        - How does listening to others make you feel?
    - What motivates you to listen to your coworkers?
        - When are you more likely to listen to one of your coworkers?
    - What prevents you from listening to your coworkers?
        - Can you give me an example of a time you did not listen to a coworker?
    - Do you think that listening to their coworkers affects one's capacity to do their job? (Does it make it more challenging? Easier?)
- Feeling heard by coworkers
    - When do you feel heard?
        - Can you give an example of when you did not feel heard by a coworker?
    - What should the other person do to make you feel heard?

- How does feeling heard make you feel?

Trust building

- Would you say you trust your coworkers?
- What makes you trust a coworker?
- Do you think feeling heard by a coworker plays a role in trusting them? (Why?)
    - If yes: Can you tell me of one occasion when feeling heard made you trust a coworker more?
    - If no: What makes you say no?
- Do you think listening to your coworkers (also) improves your relationship and trust in each other?
    - Can you give me an example of why?
    - Do you recall an instance in which you felt like listening to a coworker improved their trust in you?
- When communicating with your coworkers, is there something they can do to make you trust them?
- How would your coworker know they can trust you when you are communicating with them?

The family metaphor

- How would you describe your work environment?
- How would you describe your relationship with your coworkers?
    - Do you spend time with your coworkers outside of work?
- Your organization is family owned and describes itself as an organizational family, how do you understand this family dynamic?
    - Has your understanding of this changed over the years?
- If someone asked you about your workplace, would you mention belonging to an organizational family? Why yes/why not?
- If one of your coworkers were to say you belong to the same work family, how would you feel?
- If you worked before for another organization, do you notice any differences in how you communicate with your coworkers?
    - (If yes) Did this organization describe its employees as part of a family?

Appendix B: Informed consent

Informed consent

By signing this document, you agree to participate in the present research on peer listening and trust building. Your contribution consists in taking part in a semi-structured interview in which your opinions and reflections on the topics covered by the research will be discussed. The following data will be treated:

- Age
- Profession
- Opinions and reflections on the topic discussed during the interview
- Audio recording of the interview
- Written and translated transcript of the interview in English

The aim of the study is to understand the listening processes between colleagues and their contribution to building mutual trust. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your consent at any time. Your identity, as well as your workplace, will be anonymized and every reasonable precaution will be taken to ensure that the material included in the final text cannot be traced back to you. The opinions collected will be included in the final text in the form of short quotes and/or paraphrases. The data collected will be used solely and exclusively for the purpose of the present research carried out for the completion of a master's thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund University. For any questions about the study or the data processed, the researcher can be reached at the following email address: gi6183ca-s@student.lu.se.

Date and place:

Name in capital letters:

Signature: