

Would You Choose a Stutterer for President? Looking at Listener Perceptions and Employment Discrimination towards People who Stutter.

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The current study examines the discrimination faced by people who stutter in the workplace. Two hundred four participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology classes at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Participants filled out a survey after listening to audio samples of “potential candidates” who were running for president; one of the samples contained fluent speech and one of the samples contained stuttered speech. The first hypothesis was that if someone who stutters was being chosen for a high-status job, they would receive negative feedback and be less likely picked for the job. The second hypothesis was that the label “stutterer” used to identify a person with a stutter would negatively influence the attitudes and ratings of the listener. The results of the study supported the belief that if someone who stutters was being chosen for a high-status job, they would receive negative feedback and be less likely picked for the job.

Key words: stuttering; speech disorders; listener perceptions; negative judgments, discrimination; workplace

When people with normal speech listened to people with communication disorders, they have a negative reaction toward the person with the disorder (Williams & Dietrich, 1996). In particular, those who stutter were often perceived negatively based on their communication disorder. For example, people who stutter can be viewed as less capable at the workplace based simply on their disorder (Klein & Hood, 2004). If two candidates were running for president where one candidate was slightly better for the job but had a stutter and the other candidate was slightly less qualified but sounded confident, who would you vote for? Most people would probably not pick the candidate with the stutter because his disorder would lead people to make negative judgments about him and his credibility.

People who stutter experience internal negative feelings as well as negative attitudes from their peers. In fact, past research has revealed that even Speech-Language Pathologists can hold negative attitudes towards people who stutter (Crichton-Smith, 2002). According to the article *Attitudes of Speech and Language Therapists towards Stammering: 1985 and 2000*, researchers found that therapists – just two decades ago – held negative attitudes toward those who stuttered. Fortunately, since 1985 (when these negative attitudes were studied), Speech-Language Pathologists have become more positive when dealing with patients who stutter. It is apparent that people who stutter face potential discrimination in many settings, so the daily workplace should not have to be one of them. As Speech-Language Pathologists are becoming more positive towards people who stutter, this could lead to more efficient therapy and better outcomes for dealing with workplace discrimination.

Research is needed in this area so that speech

therapists can better counsel their patients who are in the work force. People at the workplace need to be educated about speech disorders and other disorders and disabilities in the hope of reducing negative attitudes. Research is also needed in finding if the label used to refer to people with a stutter will affect the ratings given by the listener in a negative way. Calling someone a “stutterer” is more negative to hear than if you were to label that person as a “person who stutters.” Depending on the label that someone is given, a person with the stutter may be perceived more negatively.

About Stuttering

Stuttering can be characterized by an abnormally high frequency and/or duration of stoppages in the forward flow of speech (Guitar, 2006). These stoppages usually take the form of (1) repetitions of sounds, syllables, or one-syllable words, (2) prolongations of sounds, or (3) “blocks” of airflow or voicing in speech (Guitar, 2006). When a person stutters, they usually react by trying to force the words out, by using extra sounds, words, or movements (i.e., face or neck tension) in an effort to become “unstuck” or to avoid getting stuck on a word. Many of those who stutter develop secondary behaviors, which are broken down into escape and avoidance behaviors (Guitar, 2006). Escape behaviors are used at the termination of a stutter and are usually shown by eye blinks, head nods, and interjections such as “uh”. Avoidance behaviors are used when the person is anticipating a stutter and tries to avoid the negative experience of the stutter by using the above escape behaviors or changing around what they were going to say.

People who stutter usually experience feelings of frustration, shame, guilt, and fear (Guitar, 2006). As

negative stuttering experiences continue to happen, people who stutter usually develop negative feelings about themselves and feel as though those around them find them stupid and nervous. Past research has found that anxiety is a trait of people who stutter across all severities, especially in social situations (Ezrati-Vinacour & Levin, 2004). As people who stutter are dealing with anxiety and self-consciousness, it is then difficult to have society confirm their thoughts by placing negative stereotypes on them. People with a communication disorder can be viewed as “generally quiet, reticent, guarded, avoiding, introverted, passive, self-derogatory, anxious, tense, nervous, and afraid” (Snyder, 2001, p. 150).

Stuttering and Discrimination

In 1983, it was found that 85% of employers in a study felt stuttering decreased a person’s employability and opportunities for promotion (Hurst & Cooper, 1983). While that was many years ago and times have since changed, are employers today still biased towards hiring and later promoting a person who stutters? The current Americans with Disabilities Act and Employee Assistance Programs expect that workplace policies should indicate awareness of the fact that many workers with disabilities possess talents and skills that can improve the workplace (Chima, 2002). This does not mean, however, that all workplaces hold such policies. In recent years, there has been a lack of research on the experiences and extent to which workplace discrimination is taking place against people who stutter (Mitchell, McMahon & McKee, 2005).

Some clinicians felt that labeling someone as a stutterer would make them feel as though their behavior was linked to their self-identity (Dietrich, Jensen & Williams, 2001). Other clinicians felt that calling someone a stutterer would desensitize them to the disorder and would in turn aid them in treatment. Most clinicians and authors stick to the person-first/disability-second rule, but it was unknown as to whether stuttering falls into the same category as other disabilities that follow that rule (Dietrich, Jensen & Williams, 2001). If listening participants are told that one sample or set of samples are from “stutterers” and the other sample or samples are from “people who stutter,” would there be a difference in how negatively the samples would be rated?

The article *Person-First Labeling and Stuttering* by St. Louis (1998) suggested that there is no significant difference when someone is labeled a “stutterer” or a “person who stutters” (St. Louis, 1998). It is thought, however, that these differences in labeling could have different effects depending upon the person they are used for and the situation in which the person is stuttering. Also, it is controversial as to which label

Speech-Language Pathologists should use when providing therapy to someone who stutters. In the St. Louis study, several participants were used, including clients, parents, students, and the general public. Participants were given two questionnaires in which they rated people with disorders when person-first labeling was used and then when direct labeling was used.

Many limitations and problems are inherent in this study. The title of the study indicated the article would be focused on stuttering, but that was not so. Twelve labels were examined, many of which did not pertain to stuttering, such as “murderer”, “leper”, and “bed wetter” (St. Louis, 1998). When looking at the effect of person-first labeling in communication disorders, it seems unnecessary to compare other labels that are not related.

Also, the participant groups could be biased since 90 of them were either graduate students learning about stuttering, clients who do stutter, or parents of people who stutter. These participants may have different sensitivities to the idea of person-first versus direct labeling and also may be familiar with current standards set by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). According to this article, ASHA has a policy entitled “People First, Please” which emphasizes the need for person-first labeling, especially in therapy, and is against direct labeling (St. Louis, 1998). Clearly, even though this study said that there was no difference between using person-first and direct labeling, there was still controversy as to which was more appropriate in reducing negative attitudes towards people who stutter.

In past research, some commonly used trait pairs for listener’s perception of people who stutter included: “low intelligence/high intelligence, low self esteem/high self esteem, indecisive/highly decisive, unreliable/highly reliable, emotionally stable/emotionally unstable, socially maladjusted/socially well adjusted, extremely relaxed/highly stressed, unemployable/highly employable, and unambitious/highly ambitious” (Williams & Dietrich, 1996). Interestingly, in a study done by Williams and Dietrich in 1996, people who stutter were viewed as highly intelligent, decisive, and ambitious. On the negative side, people who stutter were also viewed to have low self-esteem and social adjustment along with high tension (Williams & Dietrich, 1996). The validity of this study’s findings comes into question though because results changed across different locations from New Hampshire to Florida. The raters in New Hampshire rated the individual as better adjusted and more employable than did the raters in Florida.

When people who stutter allow these negative feelings and thoughts to overcome them, their stutter can be labeled as a disability if it begins to limit their ability to communicate (Guitar, 2006). Further, a person

is determined to have a handicap if their disability puts limitations on the person's fulfillment of life (Guitar, 2006). In one study of 232 people who stutter, it was found that if two equally qualified people apply for a job, one who stutters and one who does not, 80% agreed, and only 8% disagreed, that the employer will judge the non-stuttering person more favorably (Klein & Hood, 2004). Clearly, the majority of people who stutter feel that they are inferior to those who do not stutter.

Past research has shown that individuals who stutter were viewed as possessing significantly lower self-esteem and social adjustment than individuals who do not (Allard & Williams, 2007). However, if listeners knew that the person who stutters was currently receiving or had received therapy, the person who stutters would be rated more positively. Simply knowing that the person who stutters is trying to get help raises the attitudes toward them (Gabel, 2006). People who stutter were also perceived more positively if they disclosed that they had a stutter either at the beginning or end of a monologue (Healey, Gabel, Daniels & Kawai, 2007). It has been found in one study that as a speech sample was simulated to have either no stuttering, a low amount of stuttering, or a high amount of stuttering, the ratings of the listeners became more negative as the stuttering increased (Susca & Healey, 2001). This shows that the severity of stuttering does play a role in listener perceptions.

In the present study, participants were asked to listen to an audio recording of a person who stuttered and a person who had fluent speech. The other option was to use audio-visual recordings. In the study *Listener Perceptions of Stuttering Across Two Presentation Modes: A Quantitative and Qualitative Approach* it was found, however, that there was little difference between using audio only and audio-visual recordings when assessing negative versus positive attitudes towards stuttering (Panico, Healey, Brouwer, & Susca, 2005). It also was found that if a person spoke with a mild stutter, listeners looked past the stutter and still recognized the speaker's confidence and competence. When listeners heard someone with a more severe stutter, they generated more negative responses to the confidence and competence of that speaker. A major limitation of the study by Panico, Healey, Brouwer, and Susca was that the stuttering samples contained a simulated stutter and not a natural stutter. Therefore, it is unknown if participants would have the same results if they listened to a sample of a person with a real stutter.

Workplace Discrimination

In the workplace, it is unfair if discrimination occurs towards a person who stutters even if they have the same qualifications as other candidates. Promotions in a workplace should be based on education, character,

and qualification, not on social acceptability. However, this is not always the case though, and those with proper qualifications who stutter can be overlooked. With workplace education, employers can be skilled in looking for the correct qualities of a candidate and look past disabilities such as stuttering. These education programs cannot be developed until research shows that these discriminations do in fact take place.

Since males have been found to be more discriminatory towards people who stutter, especially in the workplace (Williams & Dietrich, 1996; Dietrich, Jensen & Williams, 2001; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007), this demonstrates that additional education directed at males should be given. If everyone, not just men in the workplace, is educated on various disabilities including speech disorders such as stuttering, people may be more understanding and reduce their negative attitudes. People who stutter have the same rights as everyone else and deserve to be employed in a workplace that does not discriminate against them or make them feel uncomfortable.

Klein and Hood (2004) found that people who stutter believed that stuttering was a handicap in the workplace. Participants in this study were adults who stutter and they were rated on their belief of how much stuttering affected their employment opportunities and job performance. The study found that 71% of people who stutter felt that their stutter decreased results of them being hired for a job, while 70% felt that their stuttering also interfered with promotion opportunities (Klein & Hood, 2004).

In comparison of males and females, it was found that females were less likely to believe that their stuttering would have a negative effect on employability and job performance, and they also felt that they would not do better at their job if they did not stutter (Klein & Hood, 2004). This confirmed that males rated themselves more negatively because of their stutter. So will the same effect take place when males with typical speech listen to people who stutter? Along with gender differences, there were also cultural differences when people who stutter rated their employability and job performance. In this study, approximately 82% of non-Caucasian people (e.g., African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans) viewed their stuttering as more of a problem in the workplace than did Caucasians (Klein & Hood, 2004).

A major problem in this study was that most of the participants were well educated with higher status jobs than average. It would have been more beneficial to have participants from a wide variety of educational backgrounds and current job statuses, because the current data was not representative of other populations. Also, while it was stated that the importance of this study was to help clinicians when working with people who

stutter, this goal was not clearly defined or tested. Information was given about what past researchers have found in regards to clinicians helping people who stutter, but it did not clearly say how this study can aid in this goal.

Hypotheses

- If someone who stutters was being chosen for a high-status job, they would receive negative feedback and be less likely picked for the job.

For example, if listeners were given a sample of a highly qualified “stutterer” who was looking to be chosen as a company’s CEO and they were given another sample of a slightly less qualified person with normal speech, it would be expected that the listeners would more likely pick the slightly less qualified person. When looking at why the listeners chose this candidate, it would be expected that this person would have received more positive feedback and the “stutterer” would have received negative feedback in terms of personality, intellect, and likeability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

For the current study, two hundred four participants were used from a small liberal arts college in the Midwest of the United States. These participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology classes and were either required to take part in a certain number of research studies or were given extra credit for participating. Given that there are more female students attending this college than males, it was expected that more female participants would respond than male (59% female, 35% male, .5% transgender, 5.5% missing). All participants were treated in accordance with the American Psychological Association ethical guidelines.

Materials and Measures

Audio. Two audio samples of credentials of presidential candidates were played; one containing speech of someone who stuttered and one containing speech of someone with normal fluency. Both audio samples were of the exact same presidential credentials passage, word for word. Both samples contained male speakers that were brothers and had similar voices; the stuttering was simulated by the stuttering speaker.

Demographics Form. Each participant was asked to fill out a demographics form in order to obtain additional information about the participant. This form requested information about the participant’s age, estimated year of graduation, gender, cultural ethnicity, and whether or not the participant knew or was someone who stuttered.

The 25-item Semantic Differential Scale. This measure was developed by Woods and Williams (1976)

and was used to measure the attitudes of participants when listening to people who stutter (Gabel, 2006). The scale consists of 25 adjectives on a bi-polar Likert-type scale, with items such as “Nervous-Calm”, “Tense-Relaxed”, “Aggressive-Passive”, and “Intelligent-Dull”. The scale was measured with seven intervals including “Very much”, “Quite a bit”, “Slightly”, and “Neutral”. Participants completed the scale after each audio sample was presented, so the scale was completed a total of two times for each participant. This measure was found to be overall reliable and was an easy test to administer to participants (Woods & Williams, 1976).

Procedure

Participants took part in this study by accessing an online survey made available to them through the Sona-Systems website for Introduction to Psychology students. The participants each received the internet link to the survey and were able to access it at any time. Before taking the survey, a short informational passage about the study was given but did not include the hypothesis. After a short explanation of the procedure, the students were presented with a letter of consent and asked to complete an anonymous demographics form. Upon completion of all demographics forms and letters of consent, the survey was given. Participants were asked to listen to the audio sample of a candidate with normal speech and then were prompted to fill out the survey. This same procedure was repeated for the audio sample of a candidate with stuttered speech. The orders of the audio samples were not counterbalanced because there was only one large participant group. At the end of the survey, the participants were thanked for their participation and were given the researcher’s email for if they would like to be informed of the results of the study upon completion.

RESULTS

Through generating data through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the hypothesis was supported as expected that if someone who stutters was being evaluated for a high-status job, the person who stutters would receive negative feedback and be less likely picked for the job.

For each trait pair the Semantic Differential Scale was used. In this ranking, a score of 1=very much for the first trait, 2=quite a bit for the first trait, 3=slightly for the first trait, 4=neutral, 5=slightly for the second trait, 6=quite a bit for the second trait, and 7=very much for the second trait. A paired samples T-test performed with each trait pair for fluent and stuttering speakers found that 22 of the 25 trait pair items yielded significant differences between the speakers, which are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 along with all outcomes

from the fluent and stuttering speakers based on the 25-item Semantic Differential Scale. These 22 significant trait pairs demonstrate that the hypothesis was ultimately supported; the stuttering speaker received more negative trait scores.

The three most significant trait pairings were Nervous-Calm ($t(203)=26.507, p < .05$) with the stuttering speaker being more nervous, Tense-Relaxed ($t(203)=20.085, p < .05$) with the stuttering speaker being more tense, and Anxious-Composed ($t(203)=19.566, p < .05$) with the stuttering speaker being more anxious. It was interesting to find that these three significant pairings had extremely skewed data; the fluent speaker was rated exceptionally positively and the stuttering speaker was rated exceptionally negatively, skewing the data as seen in Figure 1.

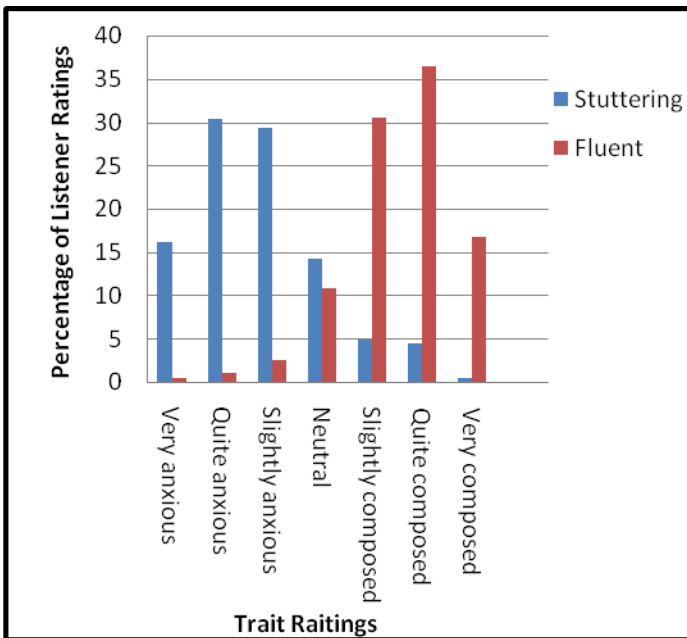


Figure 1. Anxious-composed ratings from listeners for the stuttering and fluent speakers.

One pair, Inflexible-Flexible, was found to not be statistically significant ($t(203)=.476, p < .05$) meaning that listeners found the fluent and stuttering speakers neutral in these traits. There were also two trait pair results that were reversed of what was expected (the fluent speaker was rated more negatively than the stuttering speaker), Friendly-Unfriendly ($t(203)=2.310, p < .05$) and Sensitive-Insensitive ($t(203)=3.389, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to determine if a person who stutters would actually receive

negative feedback and be less likely to be picked for a job over a person who does not stutter. In all but three of the trait pairs, the stuttering speaker was viewed more negatively by listeners than the fluent speaker. The three most significant trait pairs (Nervous-Calm, Tense-Relaxed, and Anxious-Composed) had extremely skewed data emphasizing that the stuttering speaker was perceived more negatively than the fluent speaker. Being that both of the speakers read the same passage of presidential credentials, it is obvious that the stuttering speaker was solely judged negatively based on his stutter. Similar findings have been found in past research, such as by Klein & Hood (2004) when people who stutter said that they had personally been discriminated against in the common workplace because of their stuttering. Also, in agreement with the study done by Williams & Dietrich (1996), those who have a communication disorder (stuttering in the present study) are viewed negatively by listeners.

While the results of the present study were largely significant, other factors hold possible explanations for the results. The participants fell in the direction that was expected, so it is assumed that participants did answer honestly for the most part since the results followed the experimenter's predictions. Also, the use of a stimulated stuttering sample may have led to different results than if a genuine stuttering sample was used. Since both the fluent and stuttering samples read the exact same passage, it would be believed that the simulated sample gave the same effect as a genuine sample would have.

Future research related to this topic might look at workplace discrimination with both males and females. Only male audio samples were used in the present study, and different results may occur if female fluent and stuttering samples were also heard. Additionally, it would be beneficial to do a similar study using another type of communication disorder (articulation or voice disorders) instead of stuttering. This would improve potential education on communication disorders being provided for workplaces, since many people have a variety of communication disorders other than stuttering. It also may be helpful to have more cultural and gender differences in the participation sample. The present study had mostly Caucasian females; therefore different cultures and males may have different views of people with communication disorders that the participants in the present study had.

Research on discrimination and perception of speech disorders is necessary in order for people who stutter to be provided with the best possible therapy and support. While it is known that people who stutter certainly have negative feelings about themselves and have these feelings instilled in them further by others,

Speech-Language Pathologists must know more in order to provide efficient and effective therapy. Speech-Language Pathologists may help the person who stutters overcome their emotional problems and they must know the root and extent of these problems. Communication is essential in the workplace, and if the person who stutters cannot communicate effectively, problems could arise. Speech-Language Pathologists should make sure to give focus on communication effectiveness so that the client may properly communicate in the workplace (Susca & Healey, 2002). If there was more research available about discrimination and perception of speech disorders, the Speech-Language Pathologist would have a better understanding and perspective of how to give the best therapy possible.

In the present study, it was remarkable that the person who stutters was rated negatively by listeners. This confirms the belief that education in the workplace is needed for both employers and employees. Because both of the audio sample candidates had the same credentials, there should be no reason that the fluent speaker was viewed more positively than the stuttering speaker. If employers and employees were educated on various communication disorders and how they have no impact on workers' abilities in the workplace, such discrimination may be eliminated and prevented

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