Recognizing Positive Aspects of Stuttering: A Survey of the General Public

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INTRODUCTION

Several decades of research have highlighted the negative attitudes of fluent speakers toward stuttering (e.g., Crowe & Walton, 1981; Hull & Wirtz, 1994; Woods & Williams, 1971; Gabel, Blood, Telis & Althouse, 2004). While some improvements in these attitudes have been measured (e.g., Cooper & Cooper, 1996), people who stutter (PWS) continue to be stereotyped as shy, quiet individuals who are poor communicators. The social model of disability suggests that these stereotypical views by fluent speakers prevent PWS from participating fully in social and occupational opportunities (Yaras & Quesal, 2004).

It is important to note, however, that fluent speakers rarely take an entirely negative view of stuttering. In most studies, PWS are perceived as anxious, shy, employable individuals who are nonetheless also intelligent, friendly, and cooperative (Hughes, Gabel, Iriani & Schlagheck, 2010). Personal narratives of PWS have also revealed that stuttering is not viewed as an entirely positive or negative phenomenon by PWS, and that personal opinions toward one’s stuttering may shift as a product of time, therapy, and life experiences (Daniels, Gabel & Hughes, 2012; Komпас & Ross, 2004; Plexico Manning & Dilollo, 2005; Plexico, Manning & Levitt, 2009a, b).

The nature and nuances of fluent speakers’ positive attitudes toward stuttering and PWS have not been analyzed in the stuttering literature with any great depth. Positive psychology, (see Seligman, 2002, and contributors) seems an ideal framework from which to consider otherwise, however, many fluent speakers view stuttering from a deficit perspective and focus on what PWS cannot do. These preliminary results seem to indicate that, when prompted to do so, many members of the general public readily associate stuttering with positive characteristics such as strength, motivation, compassion, and acceptance. Unless they are asked to consider otherwise, however, many fluent speakers view stuttering from a deficit perspective and focus on what PWS cannot do.

It may be beneficial for PWS and SLPs to remind fluent speakers of these positive traits in an effort to dispel their initial tendency to think of stuttering in terms of its negative effects. SLPs can encourage PWS to recognize and share the ways in which stuttering enables them to succeed.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 510 members of the general public (62% female, 38% male) served as participants in this study. Seventy-five percent of participants knew at least one person who stutters. Most participants (74.5%) were White/Caucasian and had at least a 4-year degree. Twelve participants reported that they stuttered and were removed from the data set.

Survey Instrument

An electronic questionnaire was adapted from a version developed Hughes et al. (2010). The Hughes et al. survey asked university students to answer such questions as: “How do you think people who stutter are affected by their stuttering?” “If you were a person who stutters, how would your life be different?” In addition to these open-ended questions, this study’s questionnaire asked people for their views on the positive effects of stuttering. In other words, do you think anything good can come from stuttering?” Participants who indicated that they did think stuttering was associated with positive outcomes were directed to a final question, in which they elaborated on their answer in open-ended format.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited by students in graduate fluency disorders and research methods classes. Students were told not to recruit from university classmates or practices speaking-language pathologists; furthermore, participants had to be at least 16 years of age to participate. The questionnaire was administered online via Survey Monkey. Participants were invited to participate in the study by email and all questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on questionnaire items that corresponded to whether participants believe that stuttering can have positive effects (e.g., closed-ended question analyzed with descriptive statistics). Specific, all questionnaire items were completed anonymously.

When asked “How do you think PWS are affected by their stuttering?” only 43% of participants (n=222) provided at least one positive trait, such as becoming a better listener, overcoming stuttering, or being a more compassionate person.

When asked, “Do you think that people who stutter can be positively affected by their stuttering?” in other words, do you think anything good can result from one’s stuttering?” 343 of 595 respondents (57.9%) answered “yes.” When asked to elaborate on positive aspects of stuttering, the following themes emerged:

1. PWS develop empathy and compassion for others.
2. Stuttering results in personal growth or character strength.
3. People who stutter can help others.
4. PWS work hard to compensate for stuttering.

RESULTS

DATA COLLECTION

When prompted to do so, many members of the general public readily associate stuttering with positive characteristics such as strength, motivation, compassion, and acceptance. These preliminary results seem to indicate that, when prompted to do so, many members of the general public readily associate stuttering with positive characteristics such as strength, motivation, compassion, and acceptance. Unless they are asked to consider otherwise, however, many fluent speakers view stuttering from a deficit perspective and focus on what PWS cannot do.

It may be beneficial for PWS and SLPs to remind fluent speakers of these positive traits in an effort to dispel their initial tendency to think of stuttering in terms of its negative effects. SLPs can encourage PWS to recognize and share the ways in which stuttering enables them to succeed.

Ongoing data analysis will determine if there is a correlation between familiarity with PWS and positive perceptions of the effects of stuttering. Future research may continue to examine these types of responses from fluent speakers in the context of disability theory and positive psychology perspectives. We also need more input from PWS to a holistic view of stuttering that encompasses not only the impairments and social restrictions associated with stuttering, but the personal strengths that stuttering can engender.

DISCUSSION

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REFERENCES


