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Students Who Stutter and the Basic Course: Attitudes and Communication Strategies for the College Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Many lectures in public speaking or basic courses may make reference to Demosthenes and his practice of putting pebbles in his mouth to overcome stuttering. Instructors often use this example to demonstrate to students the relevance of fluent or clear speech patterns. Often, however, instructors may not recognize the persistent social and communicative implications for persons who continually exhibit dysfluent speech and, hence, leave them unaddressed.

Stuttering is a communicative behavior that has been the focus of social ridicule and intellectual intrigue for centuries (Peters & Guitar, 1991). Such negative stereotyping results from the fact that in spite of years of speculation, debate, and conflicting research results, the cause of stuttering remains elusive. However, its definition as a "disturbance in the normal fluency and time patterning of speech" (Nicolosi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 1996, p. 251) is generally accepted. In addition, a reliable finding in the literature is that fluent speakers attribute negative traits to those who stutter (Lass, Ruscello, Schmitt, Pannbacker, Orlando, Dean, Ruziska, &

Bradshaw, 1992; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986).[1] This negative attitude toward those who stutter follows them from grammar school (Lass et al., 1992) to the workplace (M.I. Hurst & Cooper, 1983). Fluent students and professors, as well, are known to hold this uninformed and harmful view of those who stutter in college classrooms (Ruscello, Lass, & Brown, 1988; Ruscello, Lass, Schmitt, Pannbacker, Hoffmann, Miley, & Robison, 1991).

Approximately three million Americans stutter. Because this problem affects only 1% of the population and is usually seen as the province of another discipline (i.e., speech pathology), understanding stuttering may be seen as less pragmatic than focusing on more frequently occurring difficulties that affect communication (e.g., communication apprehension, foreign accents, and regional dialects). The problem nonetheless bears attention for several reasons. First, there is a void in the communication instruction literature regarding students who stutter and the negative reactions their manner of speaking elicits from peers and instructors alike. Second, because communicators who are fluent seem to have an unrelenting intolerance for those who are not, individuals who stutter may be a most harshly discriminated against and disregarded minority (Love, 1981). This may lead them to drop out of college, some believe, because they fear required communication courses, speaking in class, and the treatment they receive from fluent interactants (J. Ahlbach, National Stuttering Project, personal communication, June 16, 1994). Third, legislation mandates adapting the college classroom for those who have special educational needs. Because stuttering is considered a disability, instructors are required by law to assess the classroom experience of those who stutter and to make reasonable accommodations (Americans with Dis-

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[1] Many "stutterers" prefer to be called "those who stutter." Stuttering is a communicative pattern those who stutter DO rather than something they ARE.

abilities Act, 1990; Newburger, 1994). Instructors who have even a cursory understanding of stuttering are, therefore, better able to meet the educational needs of their dysfluent students and thus adhere to the law. This seems especially critical in the college classroom where students receive their communication education. Thus, communication instructors who have a basic knowledge of stuttering can play a paramount role not only in ensuring the quality of education of those who stutter but in their lives as well.

The problem is that very few communication instructors have this advantage. In an effort to fill a void in the communication instruction literature, this article provides information regarding three areas: the nature of stuttering, the attitudes of peers and instructors toward those who stutter, and strategies that college instructors can use to facilitate communication with students who stutter in the classroom.[2]

STUTTERING

To understand what instructors can do to enhance interactions with their students who stutter, it is necessary to address two aspects of stuttering: its specific nature; and the differing attitudes held about stuttering by fluent speakers, on one hand, and those who stutter on the other. This discussion will provide a rationale for the practical strategies that will follow.

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[2] There have been articles published in speech communication journals concerning those who stutter (e.g., Aimdon, 1958; Barbara, 1956; Knudson, 1940). However, research in the last 30 years, published in speech pathology journals, has provided new and more accurate insight into the nature of stuttering and more effectively interacting with those who stutter.

Nature of Stuttering

Stuttering can be defined as an involuntary disruption in the forward flow of speech (Perkins, 1990). While all speakers experience momentary disruptions in speech fluency at one time or other, what differentiates stuttering from these types of interruptions are their frequency and intensity and their impact on both speaker and listener. According to Perkins (1990), this can become frightening to the individual who stutters.

Many scholars have identified kernel features or core behaviors of stuttering: involuntary *repetitions, prolongations,* and *blocks* that disrupt the flow of speech (Peters & Guitar, 1991). Whereas *repetitions* entail the simple iteration of sounds, syllables and single-syllable words, *prolongations* occur when the motor activity of the articulators stops for a period that can last from half a second to several minutes. *Blocks* result when both the flow of air from the lungs and the movement of the articulators are inappropriately stopped. These core behaviors are often associated with an increase in the muscular tension of the entire speech mechanism.

In attempts to control their involuntary repetitions, prolongations, and/or blocks, individuals who stutter often develop secondary characteristics that help them either avoid or, when that fails, get out of stuttering episodes as quickly as possible (Peters & Guitar, 1991). For example, substituting words and pausing help avoid or postpone stuttering, while jerking the head or blinking can help terminate a stuttering episode.

As one's speaking style is unique to that individual, so is one's stuttering pattern. Every person who stutters develops through childhood and adolescence core behaviors and secondary characteristics that are typical of that individual and are stabilized by the end of adolescence. People who stutter are, therefore, a heterogeneous group whose dysfluent

speech ranges from the barely noticeable to a pattern which makes verbal communication almost impossible. As with fluent speakers, some conditions improve fluency while others precipitate dysfluent episodes. The former include situations such as singing, choral speaking, talking to a baby or an animal, and speaking with a close friend; the latter occur during job interviews, speaking to a superior, talking in front of a group or asking/answering a question in class (Silverman, 1992). Thus, the basic communication course creates peak conditions for triggering dysfluent episodes.

The variety of stuttering behaviors and their persistence into adulthood has been the subject of a vast body of research on both the physiological and psychological characteristics of persons who stutter. While speculations about the cause of stuttering continue to generate much debate, what is certain about stuttering can be summarized as follows. Physiologically, persons who stutter function no differently than their fluently speaking peers except during moments of stuttering when increased muscular tension, elevated heart rates, as well as breathing irregularities, are noted (Silverman, 1992; Starkweather, 1987). The literature on the psychological composition of individuals who stutter reveals no support for the contention that stuttering is symptomatic of emotional problems (Silverman, 1992). Furthermore, "while there has been considerable speculation . . . about the personality traits common to persons who stutter, their presence has not been tested empirically. There is no personality trait that almost all persons who stutter possess" (Silverman, 1992, p. 80). However, because individuals who stutter have been and are often teased, treated differently, and reacted to negatively, some tend to avoid situations where they would have to do a lot of talking (ordering by phone, making reservations, being interviewed for jobs, teaching), while others may experience depression related to coping with stuttering, and/or anxiety about speaking (Silverman, 1992).

Attitudes Toward Those Who Stutter

In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there is a persistent perception by the public that individuals who stutter are different in other ways. Their way of speaking is thought to betray mental illness, maladjustment, or extreme shyness and insecurity.

A series of studies has shown, for instance, that fluent speakers, regardless of age, gender, or education level perceive those who stutter in a negative light (e.g., Crowe & Walton, 1981; Lass et al., 1992; McKinnon, Hess, & Landry, 1986; Ruscello, Lass & Brown, 1988; Ruscello, et al., 1991: Silverman, 1982; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1981, Williams & Woods, 1976; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). Of particular interest, here, is the fact that elementary and secondary school teachers, school children, college students, and college professors possess unfounded beliefs about the personality characteristics of those who stutter in their classrooms. For example, when asked to list as many adjectives as they could think of to describe individuals who stutter, respondents from the groups listed above focused overwhelmingly on the personality of people who stutter to the exclusion of their appearance, intelligence, particular talents, or speech characteristics. Furthermore, reported personality traits were typically negative and stereotypical; people who stutter were perceived by the majority as shy, nervous, tense, anxious, guarded, fearful, introverted, embarrassed, and frustrated (Bebout & Arthur, 1992; Lass et al., 1992; Ruscello, Lass, & Brown, 1988; Ruscello et al., 1991; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1981; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986).

Those who stutter who seek employment after high school or college are likely to be viewed in a similarly negative light by prospective employers (Neal & White, 1965). For instance, M. I. Hurst and Cooper (1983) found that while employers believe that stuttering does not interfere with job performance, they (85% of 644 employers queried) see stuttering as

a factor in decreasing opportunities for employment and hindering promotion. According to Hurst and Cooper (1983) approximately 60% of bosses are uncomfortable when interacting with those who stutter, a factor which may contribute to the dysfluent speakers' employability predicament. Furthermore, if persons who stutter seek vocational rehabilitation services to search for a position, they can also expect counselors in these agencies to view them as having not only psychological problems but undesirable personality traits as well (M. A. Hurst & Cooper, 1983).

Given the aforementioned findings, researchers have suggested that the fluent public views those who stutter as possessing a "characteristic stuttering personality" (Collins & Blood, 1990; White & Collins, 1984). These authors suggest that because all fluent speakers have dysfluencies at one time or another under stressful conditions, they may attribute the feelings or responses they themselves experience during these circumstances (e.g., nervousness, tension, embarrassment) to those who stutter during their dysfluent bouts. Fluent speakers' unflattering perception of those who stutter could also be related to their uncertainty about how to interact with nonfluent persons and the discomfort that is associated with this uncertainty (Collins & Blood, 1990), a condition that is likely to occur in the college classroom.

In addition to the negative personality stereotypes that are attributed to nonfluent speakers, fluent listeners often exhibit specific reactions to stuttering, such as impatience, amusement, and minor indications of repulsion, pity, sympathy, curiosity, surprise and embarrassment (McDonald & Frick, 1954). Moreover, fluent listeners may attempt to avoid or limit conversation with stuttering partners (Rosenberg & Curtiss, 1954; Hubbard, 1965; Woods & Williams, 1976), and want more social distance between themselves and those who stutter (McKinnon, Hess, & Landry, 1986).

Self-Perceptions of Those Who Stutter

In contrast to the lay public's perceptions of dysfluent speakers, individuals who stutter have very different attitudes about themselves and how they speak. Kalinowski, Lerman, and Watt (1987) found that dysfluent speakers did not differ significantly from a group of their fluent counterparts when rating themselves on an inventory of 21 personal characteristics. Subjects who stuttered perceived themselves just as "open," "secure," "talkative," and "friendly" as their more fluent peers' self-ratings. However, those who stutter rated fluent speakers higher on such characteristics as "calm," "friendly," and "secure." Conversely, fluent subjects gave lower ratings to dysfluent speakers on the same traits (Kalinowski, Lerman, & Watt, 1987).

When people who stutter evaluate how others perceive them on the basis of the severity of their dysfluencies, several findings also emerge (Leith, Mahr, & Miller, 1993). Those who rate their stuttering as moderate or severe consider themselves as more "friendly" and "attentive" than their peers who stutter mildly. Individuals who stutter moderately also view themselves as better at leaving a good impression after social interaction than those who have a mild stuttering difficulty. Finally, those who identify themselves as stuttering severely are significantly less accepting of their dysfluency than their moderate and mild stuttering colleagues (Leith, Mahr, & Miller, 1993). It therefore appears that, in spite of common experiences with fluent speakers, individuals who stutter do not consider themselves as belonging to a homogeneous group. According to Fransella (1968), one who stutters is likely to state, "Yes, of course I stutter, but I am not like the general run of stutterers, as an individual I am unique" (p. 1533).

Students Who Stutter

Recommended Communicative Strategies

In an attempt to enhance interaction, lay persons have employed various unsuccessful, if not harmful, tactics when speaking with those who stutter. Research concerning the appropriate strategies to employ when conversing with one who stutters, although sparse, provides the basis for enhancing interaction with students who stutter.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Although fluent speakers are motivated with the best intentions to "help" those who stutter, this has been found to only exacerbate the frequently and severity of dysfluencies (Krohn & Perez, 1989). For instance, the classic admonitions to "slow down," " take deep breaths," "think before speaking," "whisper," "stop and start over," or "practice" have proven to be temporarily beneficial at best. Other strategies such as suggesting the use of distraction techniques (i.e., finger snapping, foot stomping), filling in or supplying a blocked word, and invoking the use of will power also fail to result in any noted improvement in fluency. These suggestions typically infuriate those who stutter, often aggravating the dysfluencies because of increased tension between the interactants. College instructors would therefore be well advised to avoid any of the aforementioned "techniques."

STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY

Research suggests that teachers with an accurate understanding of the nature of stuttering have more realistic attitudes about and expectations of their students who stutter (Crowe & Walton, 1981; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986). College

communication instructors are therefore encouraged to make a concerted effort to view stuttering only and simply as a lack of coordination of the movements that support fluent speech and not as a manifestation of less than desirable personality traits. Instructors are also urged to explore what beliefs they have about those who stutter and re-evaluate these perceptions in light of the information provided in this paper. Simply viewing students who stutter no differently than other students is the first step to making a rewarding experience for all. However, some specific strategies are likely to be helpful as well.

For instance, research has shown that when people with disabilities acknowledge or talk about their disability with non-disabled interactants, the parties involved feel more comfortable; furthermore, the individual with a disability is seen as a more acceptable communication partner (Thompson, 1982). This strategy also works for stuttering. Collins and Blood (1990) found that when given a choice, fluent speakers prefer to interact with individuals who acknowledge their stuttering rather than with those who make no mention of it. Collins and Blood also found that fluent speakers rate the intelligence, personality, and appearance of those who stutter more positively when dysfluencies are acknowledged than when they are ignored. According to Van Riper (1987) disclosure strategies help both dysfluent speakers and fluent listeners in that the attitude of the latter is partly determined by that of the former. In other words, "if the stutterer appears to accept his speaking disability without emotional stress, the odds are that the listener will, too" (p. 237).

In light of these data, it is suggested that communication instructors encourage students who stutter to talk about their stuttering. This has the dual advantage of helping alter instructors' perceptions of these students and of enhancing their interactions with them. However, self disclosure can be a sensitive issue — it should first be approached in the privacy of the instructor's office. If acceptable to the student,

the issue can then be addressed in the classroom, thus help-ing to modify fluent classmates' perceptions of the peer who stutters. If, however, the student prefers not to acknowledge his/her stuttering with classmates, instructors can simply ask how they can help and act accordingly.

In addition, instructors can use specific strategies when they interact with students who stutter (Krohn & Perez, 1989). For instance, they should maintain continuous eye contact with those who stutter during periods of blocking or dysfluencies and avoid facial grimaces. Essential to accom-plishing this is patience. Instructors can set the example for their students by behaving objectively toward pupils who stutter and by encouraging acceptance, both of stuttering as a speech pattern, and of the person who stutters. Instructors should also give students who stutter the same amount of praise for successful speaking as that given fluent students, using effective transmission of information, rather than speaking without stuttering as criterion for success.

It should be noted that there is disagreement as to whether a student who stutters should be given extra written assignments in place of required oral presentations. This issue will probably depend on college or university and communication department policies. Moreover, the strategies offered above should be used following consultation with a speech-language pathologist if at all possible. An easy and effective avenue both to help those who stutter learn more about their stuttering and to increase fluent speakers' knowl-edge of this disorder is to contact the National Stuttering Project or Stuttering Foundation of America.[3]

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[3] National Stuttering Project is located at 5100 E. La Palma Ave., Suite 208, Anaheim Hills, CA 92807. Stuttering Foundation of America's address is 3100 Walnut Grove Road, Suite 603, Box 11749, Memphis, TN 38111.

CONCLUSION

A glimpse of the vast literature on stuttering reveals that the public perceives those who stutter in a rather negative fashion in spite of the fact that they differ significantly from fluent speakers in *only* one aspect — communicative pattern. This information should help communication instructors understand their own perceptions of students who stutter, debunk the myths about these students, and also determine useful strategies for interacting with them in the classroom.

There is a central issue concerning students who stutter and the classroom that future communication instructors, administrators, and those who stutter should consider. Specifically, the suggestion of allowing students who stutter to take a course in interpersonal communication rather than public speaking requires serious consideration. This practice may serve to perpetuate the myth that those who stutter cannot articulate a coherent message, or cannot do so without embarrassment and pain for all parties involved. Moreover, this course substitution may serve provide those who stutter an out from addressing their fluency skills in the public speaking setting. As noted, however, this is a serious concern for all involved and should be resolved on an individual basis with input from all parties.

Finally, much more research is needed concerning interactive strategies that enhance communicative satisfaction between those whose stutter and those who do not. Specifically, understanding what communicative behaviors those who stutter prefer (and least prefer) their fluent interactants employ when interacting would bolster the literature and greatly enhance communication satisfaction. In doing so, communication and education may be just a bit more inviting for all involved.

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16