



# Associations between beliefs about and reactions toward people who stutter



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study sought to assess whether beliefs about people who stutter (PWS) predict intended behavioral and affective reactions toward them in a large and varied sample of respondents while taking into account familiarity with PWS and the demographic variables of age, education, and gender.

**Methods:** Analyses were based on 2206 residents of the United States of America. The seemingly unrelated regression (SUR) technique was used to test the relationship between beliefs about PWS and behavioral and affective reactions toward PWS. Variables such as familiarity with PWS and demographic data were also controlled in the statistical model.

**Results:** Findings indicated that, when demographic variables and familiarity were taken into account, the accuracy of participants' beliefs about PWS significantly predicted their intended behavioral and affective reactions toward PWS. The participants' gender and familiarity with PWS were also associated with these reactions toward PWS.

**Conclusion:** The finding of an association between beliefs and intended reactions validates attempts to improve public treatment of PWS through improving the accuracy of beliefs about PWS. Additionally, because familiarity with PWS is a significant predictor of helpful and positive reactions toward PWS, interventions involving PWS educating others through direct interpersonal interactions may be one effective way to improve public reactions toward individuals who stutter.

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## 1. Introduction

Public reactions toward people who stutter (PWS) are often unhelpful and negative (e.g., Boyle, Blood, & Blood, 2009; Bricker-Katz, Lincoln, & Cumming, 2013). An example of an unhelpful behavioral reaction would be recommending a person avoid a particular profession due to his or her stuttering (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). Examples of negative affective reactions would include anger and blame toward PWS (Boyle, 2014). Similarly, public beliefs about PWS are often inaccurate (e.g., Hughes, Gabel, Irani, & Schlagheck, 2010). For example, evidence indicates the public inaccurately believe that PWS are shy, self-conscious, anxious, and lacking in self-confidence (e.g., Craig, Hancock, Tran, & Craig, 2003). Although

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there is speculation that the public's unhelpful reactions toward PWS are related to their inaccurate beliefs about PWS (Boyle, 2014; Daniels, Gabel, & Hughes, 2012; Gabel, 2006; Hughes et al., 2010), this supposition has received scant empirical study (Boyle, 2014). If inaccurate beliefs about PWS predict unhelpful behavioral and negative affective reactions toward PWS, correcting beliefs about PWS could improve these public reactions and increase opportunities for PWS to fully participate in society. Additionally, efforts to improve reactions toward PWS would be aided by knowing which stuttering-related beliefs best predict helpful and positive reactions toward PWS, such as providing ample time for PWS to express themselves.

Before examining beliefs and reactions related to PWS, it is helpful to clarify what we mean by beliefs and reactions. Following Eagly and Chaiken's (1993) definition, we consider attitudes to be evaluative responses to a particular entity, or attitude object. An attitude object is a topic, behavior, or group of people that respondents evaluate. Such evaluative responding is overt or covert, and can be cognitive, affective, or behavioral. Beliefs correspond to the cognitive component of attitude (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Reactions to the attitude object consist of the affective or behavioral components of attitude (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Negative affective and behavioral public reactions to PWS, our study's attitude object, appear to negatively impact PWS in education (Blood & Blood, 2004; Blood, Blood, Maloney, Meyer, & Qualls, 2007; Davis, Howell, & Cooke, 2002; Hayhow, Cray, & Enderby, 2002) and employment (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Hurst & Cooper, 1983a, 1983b; McAllister, Collier, & Shepstone, 2012). Public reactions to PWS also negatively impact inclusion in social relationships (Boyle et al., 2009; Evans, Healey, Kawai, & Rowland, 2008; Langevin, 2009; Van Borsel, Brepoels, & Coene, 2011). Thus, adverse public reactions to PWS may contribute to their limited participation in educational, occupational, and social settings.

How might the public's beliefs about PWS relate to these reactions to PWS? Several have speculated that inaccurate beliefs about PWS negatively impact the way people react toward PWS (Boyle, 2014; Daniels et al., 2012; Gabel, 2006; Hughes et al., 2010). For example, Gabel (2006) suggested that inaccurate beliefs about PWS may lead them to be excluded from participation in educational, occupational and social settings. Similarly, in their study of college students' beliefs about PWS, Hughes et al. (2010) suggested that college students' combination of high warmth-low competence beliefs about PWS may predict unhelpful affective and behavioral reactions toward them. The authors suggested examples of negative affective reactions such as feeling pity for PWS and unhelpful behavioral reactions such as finishing sentences for PWS and minimizing opportunities for PWS to speak (Hughes et al., 2010).

Research illustrates that changes in beliefs about an attitude object are associated with improved reactions toward it (e.g., Corrigan, Morris, Michaels, Rafacz, & Rüsich, 2012; Crandall, 1994). For example, a meta-analysis of mental illness stigma-reduction interventions indicated that education aimed at improving accuracy of mental illness-related beliefs significantly improved respondents' intended behavioral reactions toward individuals with mental illness (Corrigan et al., 2012). If there is a strong association between accuracy of beliefs about PWS and reactions toward PWS, successful interventions shown to change the general public's beliefs about PWS, such as the one implemented by Flynn and St. Louis (2011), could also result in a more helpful, inclusive environment for PWS. However, we are only aware of two studies that have addressed the association between stuttering-related beliefs and reactions (Boyle, 2014; Boyle et al., 2009).

Boyle and colleagues have assessed how beliefs about disorders impacting speech, including stuttering, relate to intended reactions to people with these diagnoses. For example, Boyle et al. (2009) reported that college students' belief that a person's stuttering had a psychological cause was associated with increased social distancing of (i.e., lack of willingness to engage in relationships with) PWS. Boyle (2014) also reported that speech-language pathologists' (SLP) beliefs of clients' greater controllability over the onset or resolution of their stuttering, articulation disorders, and cerebral palsy, were related to SLPs reporting less sympathy toward, less willingness to help, and greater anger toward individuals with these diagnoses. With regard to PWS, SLPs' perceptions of controllability were correlated with increased blame of PWS. These findings in college students and SLPs suggest the likelihood that there is a positive relationship between the general public's beliefs about and reactions toward PWS.

In this study, we sought to explore a larger variety of beliefs than investigated by Boyle with a population sample more varied in age and occupation. The Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes – Stuttering (POSHA-S, St. Louis, 2012b, 2015) assesses four categories of beliefs about PWS, including those regarding traits/personality of PWS, the cause of stuttering, who should help PWS, and the potential that PWS have to succeed socially and professionally. The POSHA-S also assesses self-reactions, including affective and intended behavioral responses, toward PWS. We used this POSHA-S framework to investigate the association between beliefs about PWS and intended reactions to PWS. Considering past findings that stuttering-related beliefs and reactions are associated with familiarity with PWS (Betz, Blood, & Blood, 2008; Crowe & Cooper, 1977; Crowe & Walton, 1981; Doody, Kalinowski, Armson, & Stuart, 1993; Hurst & Cooper, 1983a; Irani & Gabel, 2008; Schlagheck, Gabel, & Hughes, 2009; Yairi & Williams, 1970; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986) and sociodemographic variables such as gender (Arnold, Li, & Goltl, 2015; Burley & Rinaldi, 1986; de Britto Pereira, Rossi, & Van Borsel, 2008; Li & Arnold, 2015; Weisel & Spektor, 1998), age (Al-Khaleedi, Lincoln, McCabe, Packman, & Alshatti, 2009; Arnold et al., 2015; de Britto Pereira et al., 2008; Ming, Jing, Wen, & Van Borsel, 2001; Van Borsel, Verniers, & Bouvry, 1999), and education (Arnold et al., 2015; de Britto Pereira et al., 2008; St. Louis et al., 2014), we added these variables as covariates in the analysis to reduce the possibility of confounds. In short, the purpose of this study was to assess the association between beliefs about and reactions to PWS while taking into account potentially influential demographic variables.

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