



Speech pathology student clinician attitudes and beliefs towards people who stutter: A mixed-method pilot study



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Stuttering is a disorder of fluency that extends beyond its physical nature and has social, emotional and vocational impacts. Research shows that individuals often exhibit negative attitudes towards people who stutter; however, there is limited research on the attitudes and beliefs of speech pathology students towards people who stutter in Australia. Existing research is predominantly quantitative; whereas this mixed-method study placed an emphasis on the qualitative component. The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and beliefs of final year Australian speech pathology students towards people who stutter.

Methods: This mixed-method study applied the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes – Stuttering (POSHA-S)* and semi-structured interviews to gather data from final year speech pathology students from a major university in Australia.

Principal results: The overall qualitative findings identified that final year Australian speech pathology students exhibit positive attitudes towards people who stutter. The results also illustrated the role of education in influencing attitudes of students as well as increasing their confidence to work with people who stutter.

Major conclusion: This research revealed that Australian final year speech pathology students exhibit positive attitudes towards people who stutter. They displayed an understanding that people who stutter may have acquired traits such as shyness as a response to their personal situation and environment, rather than those traits being endemic to them. Results also suggested that education can play a role in creating confident student clinicians in their transition to practice, and positively influence their attitudes and beliefs.

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1. Introduction and rationale

A fluency disorder, such as stuttering, is characterised by interruptions to speech fluency (Justice, 2006). It is one of the most common developmental disorders and affects approximately one to two per cent of the population at a given time (Gilman, 2012). Stuttering is most common in children, and usually begins in early childhood between two and five years of age (Howell, Davis, & Williams, 2008; Yairi & Ambrose, 2005). Moreover, stuttering is a multifaceted disorder that extends

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beyond its physical nature and has emotional, social, educational and vocational impacts (Crichton-Smith, 2002; Hartford & Leahy, 2007; Klompass & Ross, 2004; Przepiorka, Blachnio, St. Louis, & Wozniak, 2013).

People who stutter are often subjected to negative stereotyping from others (Boyle & Blood, 2015; Franck, Jackson, Pimentel, & Greenwood, 2003; Langevin, 2015; Przepiorka et al., 2013). Stereotypes of people who stutter, while common, substantially affect the individual (Snyder, 2001). For example, negative attitudes and stigma placed on a person can impact the treatment process and their view of his/her speech, behaviour and social identity (Betz, Blood, & Blood, 2008). The non-stuttering majority often labels individuals who stutter as introverted, passive, distrustful and withdrawn (McKinnon, McLeod, & Reilly, 2007; Williams, 2006). Despite the propensity of others to stereotype people who stutter, research cannot confirm that people who stutter share a basic core set of personality traits due to their stuttering, and there is no support for these stereotypical views (Guitar, 2014; Snyder, 2001). Although there is extensive international literature that has explored the attitudes towards people who stutter, Australian research in this area is limited. An early study by Craig, Tran, and Craig (2003) however, was designed to assess stereotypes by means of a randomised and stratified investigation. The study found that a large number believed that people who stutter are shy, self-conscious, anxious, and lack confidence. These results suggested that a significant portion of society continues to show little understanding of the causes of stuttering. Craig et al. (2003) concluded that there is a need for more education around stuttering and further asserted that “the lack of understanding regarding the causes of stuttering and the substantial numbers of people who were unsure about answering many of the items suggest that further effort could be invested in educating the community to offset misconceptions” (p. 243).

1.1. Stigmatisation of children who stutter

Evidence shows that children and adolescents are especially vulnerable to the experience of negative evaluation and stigmatisation (Boyle & Blood, 2015; Langevin, 2015). Children who stutter tend to be socially excluded which negatively influences their self-esteem and self-worth (Przepiorka et al., 2013). Therefore addressing stuttering at a young age is likely to reduce the cumulative and compounding negative consequences of stuttering in adolescents and adults (Betz et al., 2008; Reilly et al., 2013). Betz et al. (2008) explored perceptions of university students towards children who stutter in the United States and found through a hypothetical vignette that the students assigned significantly more negative ratings (e.g. nervous, tense, self-conscious) to children aged 3, 4, or 5, solely based on the label of ‘he stutters’, without any actual experiences with a person who stutters. This study was the first to document that the negative “stuttering stereotype” is assigned at such an early age (Betz et al., 2008). The stereotype can then lead to negative ‘social conditioning’ of children who stutter. This can increase with age as negative attitudes to communication worsen (Betz et al., 2008).

Findings from Franck et al. (2003) showed that even school-aged children respond more negatively to children who stutter compared to their peers who do not stutter. This suggests that children hold similar negative perceptions of people who stutter to adults (Franck et al., 2003). Further, Hartford and Leahy (2007) found that children who stutter were less likely to be chosen as a friend, and were less socially accepted amongst their peers. These studies demonstrated that both adults and children possess negative attitudes towards stuttering. To further understand developmental influences on stuttering attitudes, Weidner, St. Louis, Burgess, and LeMasters (2015) have newly created a *Public Opinion Survey on Human Attributes – Stuttering/Child*. The most recent results of this survey have shown that negative stuttering attitudes begin in the preschool years. This provides evidence for the need to educate children about stuttering and how to react suitably to their peers who stutter (Weidner et al., 2015).

1.2. Public attitudes towards stuttering

A large body of literature surrounds public attitudes towards stuttering (Betz et al., 2008; de Britto Pereira, Rossi, & Van Borsel, 2008; Flynn & St. Louis, 2011; Przepiorka et al., 2013; St. Louis, 2005, 2012, 2015). The study conducted by Przepiorka et al. (2013) measured general public attitudes towards stuttering in Poland and found similar negative attitudes towards people who stutter that are consistent with the “stuttering stereotype”. Flynn and St. Louis (2011) found that adolescents also exhibit similar attitudes to adults, in that they believe people who stutter are shy, nervous and have psychological issues. St. Louis (2012) also reported that males and females hold similar attitudes towards people who stutter, indicating that gender is not a significant differentiator of attitudes towards people who stutter.

1.3. Attitudes of speech pathologists and speech pathology students

Research shows that it is not solely the general public who stereotype people who stutter, but speech pathologists and speech pathology students as well (Mavis, St. Louis, Ozdemir, & Togram, 2013; St. Louis et al., 2014). Studies of attitudes utilising open-ended descriptions of hypothetical people who stutter highlighted that practising clinicians and speech pathology students were more likely to attribute negative traits to hypothetical people who stutter than those who did not (Ruscello, Lass, French, & Channel, 1990). Furthermore St. Louis et al. (2014) explored attitudes of speech pathology students in the United States and Poland and compared attitudes towards people who stutter to non-speech pathology students. Using the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes – Stuttering (POSHA-S)*, these researchers examined attitudes between American graduate and undergraduate speech pathology students and compared

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