The experience of stuttering among Ultra-Orthodox and Secular/Traditional Jews

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This groundbreaking research compares the experience of stuttering among adult male People Who Stutter (PWS) from the ultra-Orthodox (UO) Jewish community in Israel to those from Secular/Traditional (ST) backgrounds.
Methods: Participants were 32 UO and 31 ST PWS, aged 18–67 years. Self-report questionnaires utilized: Perceived Stuttering Severity (PSS); Overall Assessment of the Speaker's Experience of Stuttering (OASES-A); Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS); Situation Avoidance Behavior Checklist (SABC). Demographic, religious, and stuttering information was collected. Groups were compared on scales, and correlations between scales and the PSS.
Results: Subjective stuttering severity ratings were significantly higher among the UO. A significant group effect was found for the OASES-A quality of life subscale, but not other subscales. Significant positive correlations were found between: 1) PSS and OASES-A Total Impact; 2) PSS and 3 OASES subscales; and 3) PSS and SABC (indicating increased avoidance with increased stuttering severity rating). A significant negative correlation was found between the PSS and SLSS, indicating lower life satisfaction with higher rates of stuttering severity among the ST. Interestingly, when tested by group, significant correlations between the PSS and all other study measures were observed only among the ST.
Conclusion: UO participants showed higher subjective stuttering severity ratings, yet less impact on quality of life, and no correlation between subjective stuttering and other measures of stuttering experience. These novel findings may result from the combined protective effect of religiosity and socio-cultural characteristics on UO PWS' well-being, despite heightened concern about social consequences of stuttering within UO society.

1. Introduction

Stuttering is a speech-fluency disorder that is characterized by repetitions, prolongations, blocks of speech segments, and physical concomitants, as well as feelings and beliefs of the speaker and his/her environment, thus affecting social dynamics (Sheehan, 1958; Yairi & Seery, 2011). Therefore, it is considered an experiential disorder (Yaruss & Quesal, 2006). Indeed, the experience of stuttering has usually been studied in the context of measuring its overt characteristics (Riley, 2009; Yairi & Ambrose, 1999, 2005), and covert characteristics such as self-evaluation (e.g., Adriaensens, Beyers, & Struyf, 2015; Koedoot, Bouwmans, Franken, & Stolk, 2011; O'Brian, Packman, & Onslow, 2004; Perkins, 1983,1984), attitudes and feelings of and toward people-who-stutter (PWS) (e.g.,

Andrews & Cutler, 1974; Brutten & Shoemaker, 1974; Craig, Tran & Craig, 2003; Silverman & Paynter, 1990; Vanryckeghem & Brutten, 2011; Yairi & Carrico, 1992 and the extensive work of St. Louis in the POSHA-S studies), and avoidance (e.g., Crichton-Smith, 2002, Jensen, Markel & Beverung, 1986; Mahr & Torosian, 1999; Plexico, Manning & Levitt, 2009; Vanryckeghem, Brutten & Van Borsel, 2004). In addition, over the last decade, studies have also focused on PWS quality of life (Craig, Blumgart & Tran, 2009; Koedoot et al., 2011; Yaruss, 2010; Yaruss & Quesal, 2006). These studies demonstrate that objective severity of stuttering (and/or negative perception of stuttering severity) has a negative effect on the experience of stuttering, especially among those with moderate to severe stuttering (Craig et al., 2009; Koedoot et al., 2011).

Common social responses to stuttering are stereotypical. Not only do PWS have elevated social and trait anxiety (e.g., Craig & Tran, 2014), reports demonstrate that they are also *perceived* as being nervous, anxious, hesitant, timid, and cautious (Craig, Hancock, Tran, & Craig, 2003; Doody, Kalinowski, Armson & Stuart, 1993; Hughes, Gabel, Irani & Schlagheck, 2010; Klassen, 2002; Woods & Williams, 1976; Yairi & Williams, 1970). Consequently, since childhood and adolescence, they bear the burden of being bullied, teased, and socially excluded (Blood & Blood, 2004; Blood, Blood, Tellis & Gabel, 2003; Davis, Howell & Cooke, 2002; Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999; Langevin, Bortnick, Hammer & Wiebe, 1998). As adults, PWS experience difficulties in finding employment (e.g., Bloodstein & Bernstein-Ratner, 2008; Craig & Calver, 1991; Klein & Hood, 2004) and may have a harder time finding a partner (Zhang, Saltuklaroglu, Hough & Kalinowski, 2008). Evidently, experiences within personal, academic and professional environments play a significant role in the experience of stuttering and coping with it.

Moreover, some reports demonstrate that cultural or social belonging may also shape the experience of the PWS (Abdalla & Al-Saddah, 2009; Irani, Abdalla & Gabel, 2012; Lemert, 1952; Özdemir, St. Louis & Topbas, 2011; Platzky & Girson, 1993; Simon, 2011; Zhang & Kalinowski, 2012). According to the Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), culture is one of the outer environmental circles of the individual that includes values, customs, and laws (Berk, 2000). To start with, it has been shown that public attitudes towards stuttering may vary according to country or culture. In the recent years, the POSHA-S (Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes-Stuttering) studies demonstrated some differences in attitudes towards PWS between countries. For example, attitudes in Turkey (Özdemir et al., 2011) and Kuwait (Irani et al., 2012) were significantly more negative than the global averages.

1.1. Stuttering-culture interaction

Cultural norms impact the manner in which specific circumstances are perceived and interpreted by the individual, his peers, and his family (Magnusson, 1982). These norms may have a supportive role for the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), by providing a context for emotional support and informational guidance (Hobfoll, 1998; Holahan & Moos, 1991) in cases of problems. In contrast, they may limit the individual's personal freedom, especially in cases of closed cultures.

There are a limited number of reports about stuttering-culture interaction. Existing studies have reported on negative behaviors and attitudes towards PWS among North Pacific Indians (Lemert, 1952), Sub-Saharan Africans (Simon, 2011), and Kuwaiti school students (Abdalla & Al-Saddah, 2009). Even nonverbal behaviors, such as gaze towards the PWS's mouth, have been studied and found to differ between African-Chinese and European Americans (Zhang & Kalinowski, 2012). The stuttering-culture interaction is also manifested in the treatments offered to PWS in different cultures. For example, in South Africa, Indigenous Healers report using prayer, parental guidance, rubbing medication produced from animals' dried tongues into cuts made on the throat, herbal medication, inhaling smoke from the ashes of remedial products, and communing with ancestors, as curing methods (Platzky & Girson, 1993). Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, treatments include liquids and plants, rituals and magic, and even cruel practices, such as starvation and even killing a child if stuttering persists beyond the age of seven (Simon, 2011).

1.2. Ultra-Orthodox Jews

Among Jews, the ultra-Orthodox (UO) community, also known as the "*Haredi* Society," occupies the most religious end of the Israeli Jewish continuum (Feinson & Meir, 2014). The highest values in UO society are the strict obedience to Jewish law (*Halacha*), and, particularly for men, all-day study of Jewish texts, predominantly the *Torah* (Bible) and Babylonian *Talmud* (Shaked, 2005). These special values reinforce UO solidarity within the community (Friedman, 1991). The UO community primarily differs from the general population in four specific respects that can be particularly challenging to UO PWS:

1. Segregation and social control are practiced in order to zealously preserve their cultural principles and patterns (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael & Sharot, 1989; Lee & Tse, 1994; Orbe, 1998), using various strategies such as uniform appearance, geography (i.e., designated ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods), communal religious standards regarding food, and education (i.e., independent education system).
2. Education system and values are focused around the commitment to observe the Commandments and Jewish Law. Success for boys in OU society begins in adolescence, when they are expected to begin to learn and endorse the cultural codes expected of them as UO men. A young man's social status is related to their knowledge of the Torah (Goodman, 2001). Their success serves as a 'ticket' to society, and will influence their family's position in the UO hierarchy (Heilman & Witztum, 2000; Marx, 1993).
3. Arranged marriage occurs with no more than four or five meetings (Greenberg, Stravynski & Bilu, 2004), involving thorough enquiries to collect information about the potential match (Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2009). This creates great social pressure to achieve positive public perception (Heilman & Witztum, 2000).
4. Speech-related religious practices are an essential and frequently-used tool in the everyday learning routine, including oral reciting, discussing, and debating. Additionally, public "performance" plays a significant role in the life of UO men (Greenberg et al.,