



Impact of stuttering severity on adolescents' domain-specific and general self-esteem through cognitive and emotional mediating processes



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The theory that self-esteem is substantially constructed based on social interactions implies that having a stutter could have a negative impact on self-esteem. Specifically, self-esteem during adolescence, a period of life characterized by increased self-consciousness, could be at risk. In addition to studying mean differences between stuttering and non-stuttering adolescents, this article concentrates on the influence of stuttering severity on domain-specific and general self-esteem. Subsequently, we investigate if covert processes on negative communication attitudes, experienced stigma, non-disclosure of stuttering, and (mal)adaptive perfectionism mediate the relationship between stuttering severity and self-esteem.

Methods: Our sample comprised 55 stuttering and 76 non-stuttering adolescents. They were asked to fill in a battery of questionnaires, consisting of: Subjective Screening of Stuttering, Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents, Erickson S-24, Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, and the Stigmatization and Disclosure in Adolescents Who Stutter Scale.

Results: SEM (structural equation modeling) analyses showed that stuttering severity negatively influences adolescents' evaluations of social acceptance, school competence, the competence to experience a close friendship, and global self-esteem. Maladaptive perfectionism and especially negative communication attitudes fully mediate the negative influence of stuttering severity on self-esteem. Group comparison showed that the mediation model applies to both stuttering and non-stuttering adolescents.

Conclusion: We acknowledge the impact of having a stutter on those domains of the self in which social interactions and communication matter most. We then accentuate that negative attitudes about communication situations and excessive worries about saying things in ways they perceive as wrong are important processes to consider with regard to the self-esteem of adolescents who stutter. Moreover, we provide evidence that these covert processes also need to be addressed when helping adolescents who are insecure about their fluency in general.

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1. Introduction

Few studies have explored the relationship between cognitive and emotional processes linked to stuttering and self-esteem of adolescents who stutter (AWS). Adolescence is a turbulent emotional time, during which self-esteem can suffer due to a variety of reasons. During adolescence, both physical and cognitive maturation take place. These developments are associated with psychological and social changes (e.g. increased social comparisons, egocentric and abstract thinking (Slot & van Aken, 2013)). As a consequence, this period of life is characterized by increased self-consciousness. Adolescents try to diminish the attention on qualities they perceive to be negative (Santrock, 2011). With this in mind, AWS are likely to consider their stuttering a negative aspect that should be hidden.

In addition to involuntary speech disruptions, the concept of stuttering includes more covert social, cognitive and affective dimensions that must be considered. Different definitions of stuttering refer to specific emotions such as fear, anxiety, embarrassment and irritation (American Psychiatric Association, 2012; Wingate, 2001; Yaruss & Quesal, 2004). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that people who stutter (PWS) often show cognitive distortions such as perfectionistic thinking and report negative speech-related attitudes and difficulties in communicating with others, leading to avoidance behavior to hide from possible negative reactions (Amster & Klein, 2004; Boey, 2008). These cognitive and emotional processes related to stuttering complicate career choices and social life, and affect the quality of life of PWS (Boey, 2008; Shapiro, 2011; Tran, Blumgart, & Craig, 2011).

Taking into account the physical and emotional changes of adolescence and the additional stress due to stuttering, it can be expected that AWS have an increased risk of low self-esteem. The current study takes a closer look at the association between stuttering severity, and domain-specific and global self-esteem in adolescents. We then study the mediating role of covert processes related to stuttering, that is communication attitudes, perfectionistic thinking, perceived stigma and non-disclosure practices of stuttering, thereby unraveling the mechanisms of more hidden stuttering behavior.

1.1. Stuttering and self-esteem

Someone's self-esteem is his or her answer to the question 'How much do I value, like and accept myself', a 'looking-glass self' through which experiences are perceived. As explained by Yeung and Martin (2003), it is the result of a social process through which we learn to see ourselves through the eyes of others. In particular, significant others' opinions are critical for developing a person's self-esteem. In other words, self-esteem is substantially developed through social interactions and feedback, next to other non-communication related sources (McCroskey, Richmond, Daly, & Falcione, 1977; Schacter, Gilbert, & Wegner, 2009).

What if someone's communication experiences have been unrewarding due to stuttering? Negative communication experiences may result in lower self-esteem and doubts about the ability to enact the role of a competent communicator (Pearson, Child, DeGreeff, Semlak, & Burnett, 2011). Janssen (1985) stated that thoughts about stuttering occupy a central place in the cognitive system of PWS, allowing their stuttering to determine their self-esteem to a large extent. Different studies of adults who stutter report adverse effects of stuttering on self-esteem (e.g. Bajina, 1995; Klompas & Ross, 2004). Studying children who stutter, Yovetich, Leschied, and Flicht (2000), however, found no evidence of low self-esteem as compared to normative data. They concluded that stuttering is not the main factor that determines the self-esteem of children who stutter, and referred to the 'lack-of-experience' hypothesis; children who stutter probably do not have enough exposure to verbal experiences for their self-esteem to be affected. Moreover, children who stutter, unlike adults, probably have not yet developed a self-image of 'stuttering', in a way that implies compulsive deviancy (Green, 1998). As a result, their concerns about their stuttering are not yet reflected in their self-esteem. Consequently, Yovetich et al. (2000) wondered how long children that stutter could discount the importance of verbal communication in order to maintain their self-esteem. Zückner (2011) observed that self-esteem of children and adolescents who stutter continuously declines with age (based on a study with children aged 8–15 years). Nevertheless, in the studies of Blood, Blood, Tellis, and Gabel (2003) and Blood, Blood, Maloney, Meyer, and Qualls (2007), the majority of participating AWS (secondary school-age) reported a normal to positive self-esteem, comparable with their non-stuttering peers. Whereas the latter studies only evaluated global self-esteem, Zückner (2011) studied multiple domains of self-esteem.

Scientists agree on a domain-specific approach of self-esteem, in addition to a sense of global self-esteem (Harter, 1983). Children already differentiate between different aspects of competence (cognitive, physical) and adequacy (appearance, conduct, social acceptance). From the age of eight these discrete evaluations are combined to form a more global sense of self-esteem (Harter, 1983). Moreover, personality theorists have long underlined the importance of considering domains of functioning with particular developmental relevance. For example, social acceptance and behaving in conformity with their peers seem to be of extra importance in adolescence (King, Naylor, Segal, Evans, & Shain, 1993). Yovetich et al. (2000) included a domain-specific measure studying the self-esteem of children who stutter, that is the Culture Free Self-Esteem Inventory (Battie, 1992). Their study showed different outcomes for domain-specific and global self-esteem. The current study takes into account domain-specific and global self-esteem of AWS.

1.2. Cognitive and emotional processes related to stuttering and self-esteem

Because of the difficulty of covering all aspects of this multifaceted speech disorder, the metaphor of the 'iceberg of stuttering' is often used (Sheehan, 1970). This metaphor emphasizes covert processes, such as cognitions and emotions

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