



Personality attributes of Iranian people who stutter



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ABSTRACT

Two recent studies from Australia and Germany have both shown that people who stutter (PWS) have elevated Neuroticism scores on the widely used NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) compared to individuals in a control sample. The two studies showed opposite results, however, for the personality traits Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. One reason for these opposing findings could be that the two studies were conducted in different cultural settings. Given that the effect of different cultural background on the relationship between the NEO-FFI and stuttering remains an open question, we investigated the NEO-FFI scores from 98 PWS and an age- and sex-matched control-group from a less widely studied cultural background (Iran). Overall, the present study showed, in line with a study from Germany, higher Agreeableness, but not Neuroticism, in PWS compared to normally fluent controls. To get further insights into these findings, we also contrasted both samples from Iran with a healthy matched sample from Germany. The resulting cross-cultural differences from these analyses are also discussed in the present paper. Although the present study is limited by a cross-sectional design, and so no causal conclusions can be drawn, the authors discuss whether the replicated elevated Agreeableness scores in PWS might represent a self-defense mechanism to cope with one's own speech handicap.

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1. Introduction

Stuttering is a speech disorder with a prevalence of about one percent in the population (Bloodstein & Bernstein Ratner, 2008). In order to better understand this speech disorder, Guitar (2006) proposed addressing three specific components of stuttering. These components are core behaviors underlying stuttering, secondary behaviors related to stuttering, and finally feelings and attitudes in the context of this speech disorder. Core behaviors of stuttering include repetitions, prolongations, and blocks. In contrast, secondary behaviors result from attempts to escape or avoid core behaviors related to stuttering, including physical side effects such as eye blinks, or verbal concomitants such as word substitutions. Finally, feelings and attitudes accompanying the speech handicap reflect the emotional reaction to the experience of being unable to speak fluently, and to the listener's response to their own stuttering (Guitar, 2006).

One essential approach to studying individual differences in the feelings/attitudes mentioned above stems from personality psychology. Personality refers to stable characteristics of a person across time, resulting in typical thought

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patterns, attitudes and emotional reactions to a wide range of situational demands (see our review studies on the biological basis of personality, with a short introduction to several personality theories; Montag, Jurkiewicz, & Reuter, 2012; Montag, Reuter, Jurkiewicz, Markett, & Panksepp, 2013). Despite years of research attempting to disentangle and elucidate the nature of the relationship between personality and psychopathology, this remains a challenging task. It is still a matter of debate whether certain personality characteristics represent a disposition toward, or a consequence of, experiencing psychopathology (Trull, 2011). As personality stabilizes around the age of 30 (McCrae & Costa, 1994), experiences at a younger age might have a particularly profound influence on an individual's personality development. Therefore, it is possible that the communication difficulties involved in stuttering, and their widely shown negative social and emotional consequences (e.g. Craig, Blumgart, & Tran, 2009; Sheehan, 1970; Tran, Blumgart, & Craig, 2011; Van Riper, 1982; Yaruss, 2001, 2010), affect personality development in the early years, perhaps even across the lifespan.

Although personality is a classic topic in stuttering research (e.g. Bender, 1939; Prins, 1972; for a very good overview, see Bloodstein & Bernstein Ratner, 2008), the use of modern psychometric approaches to assessing the personality of people who stutter (PWS) reflects a relatively new research endeavor (Iverach et al., 2010). One of the most prominent models to understand and describe human personality is the Five Factor Model of Personality. The Five Factor Model stems from a lexical approach, which means that factorial analyses of words describing personality characteristics led to five super factors that were confirmed in cross-cultural studies. These dimensions are called Neuroticism, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness (McCrae & John, 1992). Neuroticism is associated with being moody, emotionally unstable and anxious. Extraverted people are outgoing and love to socialize. Openness describes people who are intellectually curious and willing to try new experiences. People scoring high on Agreeableness are team-players, tend to be cooperative, and are inclined to avoid conflict. Conscientiousness is associated with being reliable, careful and orderly. Different self-report inventories to measure individual differences in these personality dimensions exist. One very efficient inventory is the NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which is widely administered in both basic research and applied settings, such as counseling, to characterize different patient groups (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1992b; Haghsheenas, 2010).

In the context of stuttering, two recent studies have used the NEO-FFI for the first time to investigate personality traits in PWS and people who do not stutter (Bleek, Montag, Faber, & Reuter, 2011; Iverach et al., 2010). A key finding in both studies is that the personality trait Neuroticism was elevated in PWS compared to individuals in a control sample. In addition, a follow-up study by Bleek et al. (2012) provided evidence that PWS with higher Neuroticism scores, as well as PWS with lower Extraversion scores, suffer more from their speech handicap. Again, it is not clear if the personality differences between PWS and control samples are a consequence of, or a predisposition toward, stuttering. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Neuroticism is discussed as an important personality trait for a wide range of public health issues (Lahey, 2009). Therefore, Neuroticism is not specifically related to stuttering.

Besides the clear results relating to Neuroticism and stuttering mentioned above, the studies by Iverach et al. (2010) and Bleek et al. (2011) showed opposite results with respect to the personality traits Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. Whereas Iverach et al. (2010) observed lower Agreeableness and lower Conscientiousness scores in PWS, Bleek et al. (2011) reported the contrary effects.

One reason for the different results could be that the study by Bleek et al. (2011) was characterized by a more robust research design, as they used a sex- and age-matched control sample of individuals who had no personal or family history of stuttering. Iverach et al. (2010) compared the group of PWS with two normative samples from Australia and the United States, therefore they did not use a yoked case-control design, and so were not able to match the important variables of sex and age across groups. Moreover, they could not rule out that there were also people who stutter in their control samples.

Another reason for the opposing results could be that the two studies were conducted in different cultural settings. Therefore, it is essential to account for potential cross-cultural personality differences (McCrae and Terracciano, 2006). Bleek et al. (2011) tried to consider this to some extent by comparing their stuttering sample from Germany with the stuttering sample from Australia/New Zealand in the Iverach et al. study. The samples did not differ significantly, with the exception of Openness, which is not of importance with respect to the observed stuttering related differences across both studies. A comparison between the control groups of the two studies would also be of great interest in order to make an initial estimate of potential cultural differences in these samples. Such an analysis would not be meaningful, however, because the two control groups are not comparable, as described above.

Based on the mixed research findings described above, and given that the effect of different cultural background on the relationship between the NEO-FFI and stuttering remains an open question, we investigated NEO-FFI scores from 98 PWS and an age- and sex-matched control-group from a less widely studied cultural background – namely Iran.

Following the previous findings, it is hypothesized that PWS from Iran will also demonstrate elevated Neuroticism scores in comparison to an Iranian control group. Moreover, we were interested in gaining deeper insights into the inconsistencies reported for the personality traits Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

There were $N = 204$ persons, ranging in age from 16 to 41 years of age, for the present study from Iran. More specifically, 98 PWS (mean age: 24.10; $SD = 4.857$; age information is missing from $n = 2$ PWS), including 76 men and 22 women,

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