



## Stuttering attitudes of students: Professional, intracultural, and international comparisons



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The study sought to identify major-specific, training, and cultural factors affecting attitudes toward stuttering of speech-language pathology (SLP) students.

**Method:** Eight convenience samples of 50 students each from universities in the USA and Poland filled out the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes-Stuttering (POSHA-S)* in English or Polish, respectively. USA samples included undergraduate and graduate students in SLP majors or non-SLP majors as well as a sample of non-SLP students who were Native Americans. Polish samples included SLP (logopedics), psychology, and mixed majors.

**Results:** SLP students held more positive attitudes than non-SLP students in both countries. Graduate students held more positive attitudes than undergraduate students in the USA, and this effect was stronger for SLP than for non-SLP students. Native American students' stuttering attitudes were similar to other American non-SLP students' attitudes. Polish student attitudes were less positive overall than those of their American student counterparts. **Conclusion:** SLP students' attitudes toward stuttering are affected by a "halo effect" of being in that major, by specific training in fluency disorders, and by various cultural factors, yet to be clearly understood.

**Educational objectives:** The reader will be able to: (a) describe major factors affecting SLP students' attitudes toward stuttering; (b) describe similarities and differences in attitudes toward stuttering of students from the USA and Poland; (c) describe similarities and differences in attitudes toward stuttering of Native American students from the USA and non-Native American students.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Stuttering stereotype among SLPs

A number of reports have appeared over the years clearly documenting that, in addition to the general public, many speech-language pathologists (SLPs) hold the so-called “stuttering stereotype,” i.e., that people who stutter are frustrated, anxious, shy, nervous, weak, involved or affected psychologically, and so on. Much of this work emanated from Dean Williams’ and his students’ research with semantic differential scales (Woods & Williams, 1971, 1976; Yairi & Williams, 1970). Other studies of attitudes using open-ended descriptions of hypothetical “stutterers” showed that both practicing SLPs and SLP students generated vastly more negative personality descriptions of those who stutter than positive or neutral descriptions (e.g., Lass, Ruscello, Pannbacker, Schmitt, & Everly-Myers, 1989; Ruscello, Lass, French, & Channel, 1989–1990). One carefully done mixed-method study that explored attitudes of university students who were not SLP majors concluded that many respondents were aware that it was the stuttering—not some underlying personality difference—that might be responsible for the “stuttering stereotype” (Hughes, Gabel, Irani, & Schlagheck, 2010).

### 1.2. Training, preferences, and bias among SLPs

Other commonly reported findings are that SLPs or SLP students lack training in, are uncertain about, prefer not to treat, and/or are biased toward individuals who stutter (e.g., Brisk, Healey, & Hux, 1997; Cooper, 1975; Ragsdale & Ashby, 1982; St. Louis & Durrenberger, 1993; Tellis, Bressler, & Emerick, 2008; Yaruss & Quesal, 2002). These studies used varied survey instruments. One example is Cooper’s (1975) *Clinician Attitudes Toward Stuttering (CATS)* scale developed in the 1970s to explore SLPs’ beliefs and approaches to understanding and treating stuttering. Using the CATS with SLP students across the USA, St. Louis and Lass (1981) found that many of the students reported similar deficiencies in training and biases in attitudes reported earlier by experienced SLP clinicians (Cooper, 1975). Moreover, students’ attitudes in this cross-sectional study became more pessimistic as they progressed through their undergraduate and subsequent graduate programs (St. Louis & Lass, 1981). In contrast to these results, a few studies demonstrated some improvement in practicing SLPs’ attitudes over time (e.g., Cooper & Cooper, 1985, 1996). Similarly, using a semantic differential scale that was quite different from the ones used in early research, a recent study showed that American SLPs with considerable experience actually reported more positive reactions to a hypothetical adult who stuttered versus an adult who did not (Swartz, Gabel, & Irani, 2009).

Other investigations have sought to determine the extent to which SLPs lack appropriate training or positive regard for people who stutter in different cultures such as the UK (Cooper & Rustin, 1985; Crichton-Smith, Wright, & Stackhouse, 2003) and Turkey (Maviş, St. Louis, Özdemir, & Toğram, 2013). These studies, using the CATS, have documented many of the same aforementioned problems observed in the USA, e.g., feeling less comfortable working with people who stutter than with clients who have articulation disorders (Maviş et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the results have been far from uniform internationally, likely due in part to cultural differences and different experiences in stuttering treatment.

### 1.3. Issues in attitude measurement

An obvious weakness in all of this research is that different measures have been utilized to measure attitudes. The open-ended descriptions and semantic differential scales focus primarily on perceived personality differences between people who stutter or not, but little on what they actually can or cannot do. Moreover, scales that identify specific diagnostic and therapy strategies are based on specific coursework and/or clinical experience. The CATS has been modified to fit either new or emerging clinical strategies, as have some semantic differential scales (e.g. Crichton-Smith et al., 2003; Maviş et al., 2013), further compromising comparisons among investigations. This lack of uniformity in measures of attitudes constitutes a threat to the validity of estimates of stuttering attitudes.

Stemming from an attempt to provide a standard, interculturally appropriate measure of public attitudes toward stuttering anywhere in the world, St. Louis and his colleagues have developed the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes–Stuttering (POSHA–S)* (St. Louis, 2005, 2011a, 2011b). The POSHA–S (described below) has been shown to provide valid and reliable estimates of attitudes both in its English version and in numerous translations to other languages such as Turkish, Arabic, Chinese, Polish, Russian, Bulgarian, Brazilian Portuguese, and French (Abdalla & St. Louis, 2012; Ip, St. Louis, Myers, & An Xue, 2012; Przepiorka, Blachnio, St. Louis, & Wozniak, 2013; St. Louis, 2012c; St. Louis & Roberts, 2010; St. Louis, Andrade, Georgieva, & Trout, 2005; St. Louis et al., 2011).

### 1.4. Potential factors affecting SLP attitudes

Using the POSHA–S, the principle objective of the current study was to shed more light on factors that affect the attitudes of SLPs toward stuttering. College students were the targeted population because we sought to measure attitudes before the vast majority of respondents had long-term clinical experiences that might affect their attitudes. Our intention was to isolate and measure three overlapping factors that could influence attitudes of SLP students toward stuttering. The first was a conscious or unconscious predisposition of SLP students to regard stuttering in a more positive light than those with other majors. For lack of a better term, we refer to it here as a “halo effect.” The second factor was specific information and/or

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