



# A dialogue among various cultures and its manifestation in stuttering therapy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historical retrospective of the evolution of the clinical aspects of stuttering, and refers to social, cultural, political, and economic variables that might have exerted an influence on this evolution, particularly in relation to the authors' experience in Israel. The retrospective commences in the early decades of the 20th century, when speech and language pathology did not exist as a profession, and presents the major approaches to therapy in children and adults employed by clinicians throughout the century. We focused on the impact of the change that occurred in religious society vis-à-vis stuttering on the various aspects of stuttering therapy and research. The Israeli Stuttering Organization – AMBI – is discussed in order to explore the possible influence of social, cultural, and political variables. In addition, we devoted special attention to the changes that occurred in the therapist–client relationship since they are indicative of the change in the nature of the treatment. We elaborated on the need for dialogue as a major component in the therapy and as an important contributor to a successful outcome. The dialogue is also discussed in terms of Eastern philosophy. Future developments in the understanding of stuttering and its implications for therapy are presented and discussed.

**Educational objectives:** The reader will be able to: (1) summarize the history of the clinical development of stuttering and explore the possible influence of social, cultural, political, and economic variables particularly in relation to Israel; (2) provide a new definition of stuttering; and (3) contrast the model of a dialogue as opposed to a monologue and explain its use in the therapist–client relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

Although a few individuals have expressed interest in stuttering over the course of thousands of years (see review by Wingate, 1997), the beginning of the 20th century was still unremarkable as regards indications of Western society's concern about the disorder. Stuttering was not a disorder that was deemed worthy of attention in terms of allocating public or even private resources for research, preparing expert clinicians, or offering treatment programs. This might be the reason for the fact that among the pioneers of the modern era of speech pathology and its interest in stuttering, there were people who stuttered—for example, Wendell Johnson and Charles Van Riper. With the availability of public and private resources for research, many researchers and clinicians who are not PWS (people who stutter) have joined the ranks of the ones who are PWS. A broad spectrum of treatment programs is offered.

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From the end of the 20th century until the present, we have witnessed a meaningful change regarding the phenomenon of stuttering, the treatment process, and as a result the quality of life of the PWS. We shall attempt to explore these changes by following the development of the therapist–client relationship as well as the influence of Buddhism on Western philosophy and therapy. We shall describe more specifically Israeli phenomena such as the Israeli Stuttering Organization – AMBI – and the changes in the attitude of Orthodox society as a result of social, cultural, political, and economic variables.

## 2. The implications of social, cultural, political, and economic changes on the perception of stuttering

Speech is the most distinctive of all human behaviors. In the past, verbal competence was considered an asset from the social and cultural points of view. Great philosophers and leaders were aware of this powerful medium and exploited it in order to influence their societies. For example, both Demosthenes, who suffered from speech problems such as low volume, disfluency, and articulation disorders, and Churchill, who was a PWS, were prepared to grapple with these problems in order to express their ideas and thoughts (Yairi & Seery, 2011).

Previously, stuttering was viewed as a major impairment that inhibited the social adjustment and economic participation of PWS. The general population viewed stuttering as a peculiar, but not dangerous, speech phenomenon that was occasionally stigmatized (Yairi & Seery, 2011).

Today, social and cultural processes demand “political correctness” and the acceptance of diversity and disability without prejudgment. To exemplify this, a leading Israeli radio station recently hired a basketball coach who stutters as a sports reporter. This is in contrast with 20 years ago, when radio reporters were forbidden to interview PWS. Society's attitude toward speech competence has changed. With the advent of visual channels, the media no longer rely solely on the auditory channel. Oratory does not have the same impact as it had in the past. During the 2008 and 2009 elections in the United States and Israel, for instance, the candidates made fewer speeches, opting to express themselves through statements and position papers posted on the Internet. In interpersonal relationships, there are several substitutes for speech owing to the fact that technological changes such as SMS, personal chats, chat rooms, and email afford many alternatives to verbal forms of interpersonal communication (Wallace, 1999). These changes, which provide relief to the PWS, might help to conceal the overt characteristics of stuttering and prolong the time that elapses until their stuttering is discovered. Since this might have an impact on the PWS' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, it is recommended that the broader implications of stuttering for PWS be examined by focusing not only on the stuttering but also mostly on their quality of life (Sheehan, 1970; Van Riper, 1973; Yaruss, 2010).

With regard to the present, despite the increasing use of alternative forms of communication, speech still remains the most important channel of human communication. Most interpersonal relationships originate and develop in unmediated face-to-face situations. Children learn to express themselves and to pick up cues from their environment through spoken language. Although some people employ written language to deliver emotional messages, particularly by means of electronic mail or written letters, the vast majority of emotional communication is spoken. Even PWS who establish relationships via the Internet eventually have to speak if and when they reach the point of actually meeting their online partner.

In Israel the social and cultural processes that exemplify the importance of modern technologies have been ignored by the Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector, where speech has retained its importance. It is used as a tool to transfer knowledge, values, and Jewish philosophy in the framework of the family and in different learning settings. The fact that yeshiva students focus on studying Torah in pairs or groups, since learning is best acquired through dialogue (Nave & Yogev, 2002), stresses the importance of speech as their main tool for study and debate, with rapid speech being considered an advantage. It is very difficult for PWS to take part in a study setting of this kind.

It is our belief that therapeutic needs might have triggered the onset of stuttering research and therapy by motivating society to furnish solutions to practical problems. An example of the process whereby social, cultural, and therapeutic needs influence the attitude toward a particular problem can be found in the change in the Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector's attitude toward stuttering. In the past, individuals who identified themselves as religious sometimes regarded stuttering as the will of God. As a result, it was not socially or clinically addressed, and we did not have the opportunity to study the Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector since its members kept very much to themselves. In this sector, every individual has to consult his rabbi about any personal decision, irrespective of his personal opinion or wishes. This refers not only to the theological and traditional Jewish domains, but also to the cultural and social ones. Over time, possibly as a result of increased awareness and a change in the attitude toward therapy, the rate of referral to speech clinics from this community has substantially increased. Most of the PWS commence speech therapy after receiving their rabbi's blessing. In response to the needs of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox students and their demands to be set apart from the secular population, Tel Aviv University and Hadassah College in Jerusalem opened separate classes for them. While this enabled us to begin researching this sector, it is still very difficult to do so because of the limitations they imposed. For example, in an attempt to learn about their attitudes toward PWS and PWC (people who clutter), we planned a study that included listening to the speech stimuli of PWC or PWS on audiotape. The Jewish ultra-Orthodox sector forbade the yeshiva students to participate in this study, and, as a result, we had to conduct it in the Orthodox sector. Since the first class of Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox clinicians graduated and began to work as speech therapists only in February 2009, we have not yet witnessed the emergence of any special clinical developments from this sector. The only fact that we can relate to is that all the students are females given that males and females are forbidden to study together. Clinically, the implication of this fact is that ultra-Orthodox parents benefit from the existence of ultra-Orthodox females who are speech therapists, since they share

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