

University students' explanations for their descriptions of people who stutter: An exploratory mixed model study

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Abstract

Semantic differential instruments are often used to assess fluent speakers' attitudes toward people who stutter (PWS). Such instruments are prone to response bias and often lack the power to explain respondents' general impressions of PWS. To address these concerns 149 fluent university students completed an open-ended questionnaire in which they described PWS and provided an explanation for their descriptions. A mixed model design with a qualitative emphasis allowed for thematic as well as quantitative data analysis. The results suggest that individuals may have simultaneously positive and negative attitudes toward PWS regardless of gender or familiarity with PWS. Multiple explanations were provided and took into account personal and societal reactions to stuttering. Fluent speakers appear to perceive PWS as being likeable individuals who are poor communicators, a combination of high-warmth and low-competence that elicits pity and passive harm from listeners according to social psychologists (Cuddy et al., 2008). The implications of these findings and future research directions are discussed.

Educational objectives: After reading this article, the reader will be able to: (1) describe issues of concern related to the measurement of attitudes toward PWS; (2) describe how mixed (qualitative and quantitative) designs can contribute to a deeper understanding of fluent speakers' attitudes toward PWS; and (3) discuss how the ways in which fluent speakers' thoughts about stuttering and PWS can influence their emotions and behaviors when in the presence of someone who stutters.

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1. Introduction

Most groups of fluent speakers appear to hold negative attitudes toward people who stutter (PWS). These groups include a variety of professionals such as speech-language pathologists (Lass, Ruscello, Pannbacker, Schmitt, & Everly-Myers, 1989; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1979; Woods & Williams, 1971; Yairi & Williams, 1970), educators (Crowe & Walton, 1981; Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Lass et al., 1992, 1994; Ruscello, Lass, Schmitt, & Pannbacker, 1994), and members of the general public (Doody, Kalinowski, Armson, & Stuart, 1993; Ham, 1990; Hulit & Wirtz, 1994). These studies have concluded that although PWS are perceived as having some positive personality traits such as friendliness and cooperativeness, as compared to

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fluent speakers PWS are considered to be more shy, anxious, withdrawn, and guarded among other negative traits.

In the current study the findings of previous investigations of fluent speakers' attitudes toward PWS are examined, followed by a critical review of the methodologies that have been used in these studies. Research methods which may be helpful in better understanding attitudes toward PWS are then proposed in relation to the present investigation.

1.1. Overview of the measurement of attitudes toward PWS

A series of seminal studies that explored speech clinicians' attitudes toward PWS were conducted by Yairi and Williams (1970) and Woods and Williams (1971). These studies have served as a foundation for most of the existing research on this topic. Yairi and Williams (1970) asked school-based speech clinicians in the state of Iowa to complete an open-ended questionnaire in which they provided a written list of traits that could be used to describe elementary school-age boys who stutter. Participants most frequently provided a total of 26 traits to describe boys who stutter. Seventeen of these traits were judged by the researchers to be negative or undesirable, and only nine of the traits were judged to be positive or desirable. Most of these characteristics were related to personality traits rather than to physical or intelligence traits. The ten most cited traits, in order of the most frequently occurring, were *nervous, shy, withdrawn, tense, anxious, self-conscious, insecure, sensitive, quiet, and intelligent*. Similar adjectives were provided in a follow-up study in which respondents were asked to list traits that described men who stutter, leading Woods and Williams (1971) to conclude that speech clinicians tend to believe that “a stutterer is a stutterer is a stutterer” (p. 232).

The adjectives that speech clinicians provided to describe boys and men who stutter were arranged as semantic differential (SD) scales by Woods and Williams (1976). The SD method (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) allows researchers to measure attitudes via bipolar Likert scales in which contrasting adjectives are placed at opposite ends of each scale. The Woods and Williams SD scales consisted of 25 paired items (e.g., open-guarded, friendly–unfriendly, fearful–fearless, etc.). These scales were administered to groups of respondents which included college students, teachers, speech clinicians, parents of PWS, and PWS. Participants used the scales to rate each of four hypothetical people, including a typical eight-year-old male, a typical eight-year-old male who stutters, a typical adult male, and a typical adult male who stutters. The results of this study indicated that 95% of traits that were judged as negative were applied to males who stutter versus typical males who do not stutter. Significant differences in ratings were not observed based on the age of the hypothetical person who stutters (child versus adult). Woods and Williams (1976) concluded that these negative attitudes indicated the presence of a pervasive negative stereotype towards PWS by most groups of listeners. Decades of research in which SD scales have been used to investigate attitudes toward PWS have supported this conclusion (e.g., Collins & Blood, 1990; Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Doody et al., 1993; Gabel, 2006; Kalinowski, Armson, Stuart, & Lerman, 1993; White & Collins, 1984).

1.2. Effects of diverse variables on attitudes toward PWS

Numerous researchers have used the SD method to investigate variables associated with stuttering, PWS, and fluent speakers. For example, SD scales have been administered to a variety of fluent speakers to assess the degree to which severity of stuttering influences positive or negative reactions from fluent speakers. In general, as stuttering severity increases, so too does the rating of negative traits assigned to the person who stutters (e.g., Collins & Blood, 1990; Turnbaugh et al., 1979). And while most fluent speakers report that they want PWS to use therapeutic techniques, SD ratings are actually less positive when these techniques are employed (Gabel, 2006; Manning, Burlison, & Thaxton, 1999). Conversely, increased eye contact (Atkins, 1988; Tatchell, van den Berg, & Lerman, 1983) and acknowledgement of stuttering (e.g., Collins & Blood, 1990; Healey, Gabel, Daniels, & Kawai, 2007) have been found to promote more positive SD ratings in some contexts. Consideration of other factors, such as gender and familiarity with PWS, has resulted in less conclusive findings which are considered below.

1.2.1. Gender

Semantic differential scales have been used to assess how the gender of PWS and fluent speakers affects ratings of personality and other traits. Burley and Rinaldi (1986) asked ten male and ten female naïve listeners who ranged in age from 15 to 35 years to rate recorded speech samples of both male and female PWS on a variety of traits. Significant differences were found for male and female listener ratings, with men tending to rate speech samples of PWS more

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