

Stereotypes of Stutterers and Nonstutterers in Three Rural  
Communities in Newfoundland

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Running head: STEREOTYPES OF STUTTERERS

## ABSTRACT

The existence of a negative stereotype of stutterers among residents of three small, rural communities in Newfoundland, Canada was investigated. Members of these communities ( $n=106$ ) completed a 25 item semantic differential scale developed by Woods and Williams (1976) which asked them to rate a hypothetical adult male stutterer and nonstutterer. Results indicated that community members perceived hypothetical stutterers in a negative manner in comparison to nonstutterers, despite the fact that 85% of the respondents reported knowing stutterers and 39% reported being related to stutterers. It is suggested the negative stuttering stereotype exists because nonstutterers generalize state to trait anxiety, and because of the nature of the stuttering moment itself. Since this study and previous studies appear to show that the stereotype is not modified by exposure to stutterers, familial relationships, and / or educational background, further research is needed to determine what, if any factor, can modify the pervasive negative stereotype.

### Stereotypes of Stutterers and Nonstutterers in Three Rural Communities in Newfoundland

Yairi and Williams (1970) initiated research into the stuttering stereotype in a study in which they had school speech-language pathologists list words to describe elementary school boys who stuttered. Their results indicated that most of the personality traits assigned to stuttering boys were unfavourable. Woods and Williams (1971) found similar results when they had speech clinicians compile a list of adjectives to describe boys and men who stutter.

Based on the aforementioned studies, Woods and Williams (1976) devised a 25 item semantic differential to investigate adult stutterers'; parents' of stuttering children; parents' of children with speech pathologies unrelated to fluency; parents of normally speaking children; classroom teachers' in elementary grades; public school speech clinicians'; and college students' perceptions of four hypothetical individuals: a typical eight-year-old male, typical eight-year-old male stutterer, typical adult male, and typical adult male stutterer. The results showed that all groups shared a similar negative stereotype of stutterers as compared to nonstutterers. That is, they were perceived to be quiet, reticent, guarded, avoiding, introverted, passive, self derogatory, anxious, tense, nervous, afraid, and more sensitive.

A series of studies have confirmed the presence of a negative stuttering stereotype among a number of groups. This stereotype was

shown to exist among parents (Crowe & Cooper, 1977; Fowlie & Cooper, 1978; Woods & Williams, 1976), speech language clinicians (Cooper & Cooper, 1985; Cooper & Rustin, 1985; Lass, Ruscello, Pannbacker, Schmitt, & Everly-Myers, 1989; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1979), students (St. Louis & Lass, 1981; White & Collins, 1984), store clerks (McDonald & Frick, 1954), teachers (Crowe & Cooper, 1977; Crowe & Walton, 1981; Lass, Ruscello, Schmitt, Pannbacker, Orlando, Dean, Ruziska, & Bradshaw), vocational rehabilitation counselors (Hurst & Cooper, 1983), and employers (Hurst & Cooper, 1983).

In an attempt to determine if stuttering severity affected this negative stereotype, Turnbaugh et al. (1979), employing a semantic differential personality trait scale had speech-language pathologists rate mild, moderate, and severe hypothetical stuttering individuals. They found that stutterers, regardless of stuttering severity, received negative stereotypes in comparison to nonstutterers. In addition, the attribution of these negative traits was not related to the speech language pathologists' clinical experience with stutterers. In other words, speech-language pathologists maintained a negative stereotype of stutterers regardless of their previous clinical experience and training.

Horsley and FitzGibbon (1987), investigating if a negative stereotype was governed by gender and/or age of the stutterer had clinicians, student clinicians, and teachers rate eight descriptions of hypothetical individuals. They found that a negative stereotype existed among the respondents for young stutterers and was affected by the age

and gender of the hypothetical stutterer. That is, a negative stereotype existed for school-aged stuttering boys in comparison to preschoolers of the same gender and girls of any age. Also, consistent with the findings of Turnbaugh et al's. (1979), the strength of the stereotype was not affected by the amount of exposure to stutterers.

White and Collins (1984) attempted to identify the mechanism operating behind the stuttering stereotype. They had two groups of first year undergraduate students use the 25 rating scales developed by Woods and Williams (1976) to rate either a typical male stutterer or a normally fluent male who suddenly starts to stutter for a short period of time after which he speaks fluently again. According to White and Collins, the high positive correlation between their subjects ratings of a typical stutterer and a normal speaker with an episode of disfluent behavior implies that the genesis of the stereotype originates in the simple process of generalization. That is, the stereotype is formed on the basis of making inferences about variables which accompany disfluencies or stuttering-like behaviors in normally fluent speakers. Nonstutterers infer, based on their own experiences of anxiety, tension, embarrassment, and nervousness during normal disfluencies or stuttering-like moments, how a stutterer must feel. White and Collins suggested that the generalization of state to trait anxiety eliminates the need for exposure to stutterers for the formation of a negative stuttering stereotype.

In a derivation of previous studies, Kalinowski, Lerman, and Watt (1987) asked stutterers and nonstutterers how they perceived themselves

and how they perceived each other. Somewhat surprisingly, both groups had remarkably similar self perceptions. However, the stutterers viewed the nonstutterers more positively than themselves whereas the nonstutterers viewed the stutterers more negatively. The researchers suggested that the stutterers used their stuttering behavior as a referent when assessing the nonstutterers. Kalinowski et al. (1987) hypothesized that stutterers might be saying "if I as a stutterer stand here then you as a nonstutterer should stand in a different place for I stutter and you don't" (p. 227).

Although previous studies have examined specific mainstream populations in the United States and New Zealand, such as teachers, students, and employers, none have investigated whether this stereotype exists in isolated, rural, outport communities which may have different societal norms. The primary objective of the present study therefore was to determine if the previously described negative stuttering stereotype exists in small communities, specifically three outports in Newfoundland, Canada. Each of these small communities has a number of stuttering residents, thereby increasing the likelihood that nonstuttering members of the communities have been exposed to the disorder and / or are related to a stutterer. Thus the second objective of the study was to examine the role of exposure and familial relationships to the perception of stutterers.

## Method

### Subjects

Two hundred subjects were solicited to participate in the study. Subjects were residents of three small rural fishing communities in St. Mary's Bay (O'Donnell's, St. Shotts, and Admiral's Beach), located on the east coast of Newfoundland, Canada. These closely knit communities are comparable in terms of population (when combined there are approximately 175 households) and primary employment opportunities. According to residents and the first author, there were a minimum of two and as many as ten stutterers living within these outport communities. However, the exact number of stutterers could not be determined since therapeutic services were unavailable to these communities.

### Test Instruments

The stuttering stereotype was examined with the semantic differential scale developed by Woods and Williams (1976) (see Appendix A). The 25 item, seven point bipolar Likert scale contains words found to be descriptive of someone who stutters and their antonym counterparts. Subjects were asked to evaluate a typical normal adult male speaker and a typical adult male stutterer by circling the number on the scale which identified the traits of these hypothetical individuals. Instructions were printed above each set of rating scales and were as follows for the nomal speaker and stutterer respectively:

Below you will see some rating scales each with seven points. I would like you to evaluate a typical, NORMAL ADULT MALE

speaker, someone who has normal speaking capacities when talking. On the scales provided below circle the number on the scale which identifies what YOU THINK the traits of a NORMAL ADULT MALE speaker are.

Below you will see some rating scales each with seven points. I would like you to evaluate a typical, ADULT MALE STUTTERER, someone who has difficulty when trying to speak. On the scales provided below circle the number on the scale which identifies what YOU THINK the traits of an ADULT MALE STUTTERER are.

A short biographical questionnaire was also employed examining respondents' age, sex, occupation, personal history of stuttering, and acquaintance with stutterers. If subjects knew stutterers, they were asked to identify how many, age, sex, and possible familial relationship(s).

### Procedure

Randomized sets of the two 25 item scales and the biographical questionnaire were hand-delivered by the first author to all households in the three communities. Approximately 10% of the households were not occupied during the canvassing of each community and, consequently, the residents of those households did not participate in the study. A set of the scales and the questionnaire were provided for each member in the household over the age of 16 years. Residents were instructed to mail

back the forms in a pre-addressed stamped envelope to The School of Human Communication Disorders, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

### Results

Of the 200 hand-delivered questionnaires, 109 were returned by mail. One hundred and six questionnaires ( $n=106$ ) were usable because three of respondents identified themselves as stutterers and therefore were excluded from the study. The age of the respondents ranged from 16 to 79 years old ( $M = 38$ ,  $SD = 16$ ). The majority of the respondents were female (62%). Eighty-five percent reported that they knew someone who stuttered, with 39% reporting being related to someone who stutters. Familial relations reported among the respondents included: daughter, son, brother, nephew, niece, uncle, and / or cousin. Of the 90 respondents who knew stutterers: 83 knew one to seven; stutterers; 6 knew seven to 14; and 1 knew 14 to 21 stutterers.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was employed to investigate the contribution of community, gender, and relationship towards the stuttering stereotype. The MANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences due to community [ $F(50, 82) = .8867$ ,  $p = 0.6732$ ], gender [ $F(25, 40) = .6809$ ,  $p = 0.8441$ ], or familial relationship [ $F(25, 40) = 1.0719$ ,  $p = 0.4132$ ]. These findings justified collapsing the data across community, gender, and familial relations.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Table 1 shows mean and standard deviations and results of paired two tailed t-tests for nonstutterers' perceptions of hypothetical adult male stutterers and nonstutterers. Paired two-tailed t-tests between each of the rating scales, with a significance level of  $p = 0.002$  to correct for multiple t-tests, indicated that nonstutterers' perceptions of stutterers differed significantly from their perceptions of fluent speakers for 20 of the 25 test items. That is, respondents' perception of stutterers was significantly different from nonstutterers with respect to being guarded, nervous, shy, self-conscious, tense, sensitive, anxious, withdrawn, quiet, talkative, avoiding, fearful, passive, afraid, introverted, daring, insecure, emotional, self-derogatory and inflexible. However, stutterers were not perceived as being significantly different from nonstutterers in terms of being cooperative, friendly, pleasant, intelligent, and perfectionistic. These differences are represented graphically in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### Discussion

The three principal findings of the present investigation were: (a) community members in three rural, isolated, closely knit fishing communities in Newfoundland, Canada perceived a hypothetical adult male stutterer in a negative manner, (b) the negative stereotype exists

regardless of the fact that 85% of the respondents reported knowing stutterers, and (c) the negative stuttering stereotype exists despite the fact that 39% of the respondents stated they were related to stutterers.

These results suggest that the negative stereotype of stutterers found in previous studies which examined mainstream populations, exists in small, rural communities. This finding is surprising given that the residents in these communities comprise a close interdependent social network. In other words, regardless of personal contact or familial relationship, a strong negative stereotype of stutterers exists.

What gives rise to the existence of this negative stuttering stereotype? As previously discussed, White and Collins (1984), have suggested that the stuttering stereotype may originate through inference. In other words, nonstutterers make judgments about stutterers based on their own feelings when they themselves experience disfluent or stuttering-like speaking moments. Consequently, the stuttering stereotype is based on a process of extrapolating nonstuttering state anxiety during these disfluent moments to trait anxiety.

Another factor contributing to the presence and strength of the stuttering stereotype may be the nature of the stuttering behavior itself. According to Nisbett and Ross (1980), people allocate inferential weight to physical and social data in proportion to its salience and vividness. These researchers defined salience as the distinctiveness of the behavior that is being exhibited. Vividness is defined as the amount of emotional interest in the information, and the concreteness and imaginability of the data.

Kalinowski et al. (1987) have applied this notion to stuttering behavior. Since the nature of the stuttering behavior is filled with tension, anxiety, and struggle the person who exhibits such behavior is attributed negative character traits. This inference is made on the basis of the saliency of the stuttering behavior. That is, the disfluency and apparent struggle the speaker is experiencing, as well as on its vividness. The moment of stuttering is hypothesized to be so awkward and obvious, for both the stutterer and his/her listener, that the negative feelings the situation creates are reflected in how people characterize someone who stutters. The findings from the present study lend support to the hypothesis that the salience and vividness of the stuttering behavior may indeed solidify the negative stuttering stereotype for those exposed to stutterers. Further, the negative stereotype is most likely an inevitable result of the disorder and/or stuttering moment itself.

The question remains: "Is the stuttering stereotype based in reality?" In other words, do the personality traits of the stutterers differ from nonstutterers? Bloodstein (1987), in a review of studies examining personality or character trait differences among stutterers and nonstutterers, reported that "there is little conclusive evidence of any specific kind of character structure or broad set of basic personality traits that is typical of stutterers as a group" (p. 208) and that "the evidence most stutterers perform well within the norms on adjustment inventories is too strong to support such a view" (p. 208). However a recent study by Craig (1990) proposed that stutterers may, in fact, exhibit significant differences

in their character traits. In the study, Craig examined state and trait anxiety for 102 stutterers and 110 nonstutterers. The results indicated statistically significant differences between stutterers' and nonstutterers' state and trait anxiety measures. The author qualified the results by stating that as "most studies have shown no differences, findings from the present study must be treated with caution until replication occurs" (p.293). Although the notion of a stuttering stereotype genesis resting in subtle personality or character trait differences is plausible, further contention may be moot, since exposure to stutterers is not a requisite for the formation of the stereotype (White and Collins, 1984).

Therefore, it is our hypothesis that the negative stereotype lies not in possible subtle personality differences but rather in the reality of the differences in the behavior of stutterers (e.g. physical tension and struggle). In marked contrast to personality research which, is at the very least inconclusive, the results from studies which have examined perceptions of stutterers are relatively robust. That is, given the results of the present study and most, if not all, of the previous studies related to the examination of stuttering stereotypes, there is no question as to the existence and pervasive nature of a negative stuttering stereotype. The stability of this finding suggests that those who possess the stuttering stereotype are basing their judgment not on the actual personality traits of the stutterer but on other factors (e.g., extrapolating state to trait anxiety and/or the strength and vividness of the stuttering behavior itself). We suggest that future questions should examine the strength, genesis, and

possible clinical implications of an existing and pervasive negative stereotype. Apparently, simple exposure to the disorder, familial relationships, and / or educational background (e.g., speech clinicians) is not sufficient to have an impact on modifying the negative stuttering stereotype. Consequently, future research should be directed at determining if this negative stereotype can somehow be altered.

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## APPENDIX A

Woods and William's (1976) 25 Bipolar Adjective Scale

1. Open - Guarded
2. Nervous - Calm
3. Cooperative - Uncooperative
4. Shy - Bold
5. Friendly - Unfriendly
6. Self-conscious - Self-assured
7. Tense - Relaxed
8. Sensitive - Insensitive
9. Anxious - Composed
10. Pleasant - Unpleasant
11. Withdrawn - Outgoing
12. Quiet - Loud
13. Intelligent - Dull
14. Talkative - Reticent
15. Avoiding - Approaching
16. Fearful - Fearless
17. Aggressive - Passive
18. Afraid - Confident
19. Introverted - Extroverted
20. Daring - Hesitant
21. Secure - Insecure
22. Emotional - Bland
23. Perfectionistic - Careless
24. Bragging - Self-derogatory
25. Inflexible - Flexible



Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean values of nonstutterers' perceptions of a stutterer and a nonstutterer for each of the 25 bipolar scale items.

