

# Public awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Rio de Janeiro

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## Abstract

This study reports the results of an investigation of public awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A total number of 606 street recruited respondents answered questions on various aspects of stuttering, including prevalence, onset, gender distribution, occurrence in different cultures, cause, treatment, intelligence, and hereditariness. The questionnaire used was a Portuguese version of the one by [Van Borsel, J., Verniers, I. & Bouvry, S. (1999). Public awareness of stuttering. *Folia Phoniatrica et Logopaedica*, 51, 124–132]. Although, stuttering is a disorder which is known to a majority of the participants, knowledge appears to be limited for certain aspects. Knowledge also differs among subgroups of participants according to gender, age and educational level. Comparison of the results of the current study with similar studies conducted in Belgium and in Shanghai, China shows several similarities but also some differences.

**Educational objectives:** The reader will be able to: (1) discuss public awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; (2) discuss the differences in knowledge according to gender, age and educational level and; (3) discuss similarities and differences with comparable studies run in Belgium and Shanghai, China.

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## 1. Introduction

Several studies have shown that awareness and knowledge of a given communication disorder may considerably influence one's attitude towards the individuals affected. As far as stuttering is concerned, Crowe and Walton (1981), in a study involving 100 elementary school teachers, reported significant positive correlations between knowledge of stuttering and teacher attitudes, as measured by the teacher attitudes toward stuttering inventory (Crowe & Walton, 1978). Similarly, Yeakle and Cooper (1986), in a study investigating 512 teachers in Tuscaloosa, found that teachers having experience with persons who stutter (PWS) or having had coursework in speech disorders, demonstrated much more realistic attitudes toward stuttering on the teachers perception of stuttering inventory. Promoting awareness and instructing the general public, therefore, seems tantamount for the social integration and well-being of PWS.

Little information is available, however, on the level of awareness and knowledge of the lay public on stuttering. Two parallel questionnaire studies, one conducted in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium (Van Borsel, Verniers, & Bouvry, 1999), and one conducted in Shanghai, China (Xing Ming, Jing, Yi Wen, & Van Borsel, 2001), showed that overall

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Table 1  
Number of the participants with respect to gender, age and educational level

	Gender		Total ( <i>N</i> = 606)
	Females ( <i>N</i> = 309)	Males ( <i>N</i> = 297)	
Age (years)			
< 21	95	97	192
21–55	120	110	230
> 55	94	90	184
Educational level			
Basic	113	98	211
Medium	135	125	260
High	61	74	135

stuttering is a disorder most people are somewhat familiar with but also that the knowledge of the layman of stuttering is in general limited, even in regard to basic facts. Comparison of the Belgian and the Chinese study, moreover, showed some differences. For instance, the Chinese respondents had a much more accurate view about prevalence and gender distribution of stuttering. On the other hand, the Belgian respondents were more often correct with respect to the relation between handedness and stuttering. In the Chinese study, respondents considered stuttering primarily as a learning problem or a hard to understand and hence complex problem, whereas the Belgian respondents considered stuttering more as (psycho-) medical problem. And whereas only 1.4% of the Chinese respondents indicated that they would wait rather than consult the family doctor or speech language pathologist if they had a four-year-old child who stutters, almost 7% of the Belgian respondents would prefer to wait. Some of these differences may reflect differences in cultural background. It was hypothesized, for instance, that the latter difference was related to the Chinese “Family Planning Policy”, people wanting the very best for their single child. Indeed, although stuttering is a disorder that exists worldwide (Bloodstein, 1995) and although, many countries have educational programmes that train professionals to assess and treat stuttering (Lesser, 1992), awareness and knowledge of the layperson may significantly differ from country to country. Consequently, campaigns such as the stuttering awareness day by the international stuttering association, will be most fruitful, if their actions are focused, taking into account the local situation. Apart from being helpful in directing future awareness campaigns, questioning the lay public in a given country or area may also shed light on the acceptability and congruence of various treatment approaches and may facilitate better targeting of dissemination of information about referral for stuttering treatment. With the forgoing in mind, we conducted a study to investigate public awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the second largest city of the country (after São Paulo), with over six million inhabitants.

## 2. Method

The procedure of the current study was similar to the one of Van Borsel et al. (1999) and Xing Ming et al. (2001). As in the latter studies data were collected by means of on-the-street sampling. Students in speech language pathology of the Veiga de Almeida University approached potential participants in some major shopping streets. After checking individuals were inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro they were invited to answer some questions about stuttering. Individuals were also asked if they were a physician, speech language pathologist or a person who stutters (PWS), in which case they were excluded as participants. In approaching potential participants, the interviewers took into account gender and age distribution and tried to interview a comparable number of males and females of three age categories: young: between 15 and 21 years of age, adult: from 21 to 55 years of age and older: over 55 years of age. An additional parameter introduced in the present study was educational level, distinguishing between three levels: basic (only primary school), medium (up to secondary school), and high (beyond secondary school). Age and educational level were determined by simply asking the person interviewed. A total of 606 respondents (309 females and 297 males) were thus interviewed (see Table 1 for further details).

The questionnaire that was used, a Portuguese version of the one by Van Borsel et al. (1999), was informed by a meta-analysis of research findings and theories on stuttering by Andrews et al. (1983). It consisted of 13 questions in total, most of which were closed questions with forced alternative items (see Appendix). The first two questions inquired whether the subject had ever seen or met a stutterer (question a) and whether he or she knew a stutterer among relatives,

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