



Beliefs of teachers versus non-teachers about people who stutter



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 August 2014

Received in revised form 8 December 2014

Accepted 14 December 2014

Available online 31 December 2014

Keywords:

Stuttering

Beliefs

Attitudes

Perceptions

Teachers

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Although prior research has investigated teachers' beliefs about people who stutter (PWS), this work has not indicated how these beliefs compare with those of the general public or taken into account key demographic variables that may be related to these beliefs. The main purpose of this study was to evaluate whether beliefs about PWS in teachers are different from those in the general public. The second purpose of this study was to examine whether gender is related to beliefs about PWS for teachers, who are more frequently women.

Methods: Analyses were based on questionnaire responses regarding beliefs about PWS from 269 teachers and 1388 non-teachers in the United States. Due to their potential link to beliefs about PWS, familiarity with PWS and sociodemographic variables were included in the statistical model for this study.

Results: Teachers' beliefs about PWS are no different than those of people in non-teaching professions. Findings also indicated that, regardless of whether respondents were teachers, women had more accurate beliefs about PWS than men. The statistical model tested indicated that beliefs about PWS were more accurate when the respondents were older, had more education, and had familiarity with a PWS.

Conclusion: In the first study to compare teachers' beliefs about PWS to the general public, findings indicated that teachers are no more accurate than the public in their beliefs about PWS. Associations found between these beliefs and several variables may indicate some promising mechanisms for improving beliefs, such as increased familiarity with individuals who stutter.

Educational Objectives: Readers should be able to: (a) describe stuttering's potential effects on children's participation in the school setting; (b) identify actions teachers can take to improve the school experience of their students who stutter; (c) summarize findings regarding teachers' beliefs about people who stutter (PWS); (d) identify key variables that are associated with beliefs about PWS.

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1. Introduction

Although often described according to its observable speech characteristics, the experience of stuttering may be more fully understood, as suggested by [Yaruss and Quesal \(2004\)](#), within the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) framework ([World Health Organization, 2001](#)). This framework helps, among other things, to characterize how stuttering impacts participation in society. Considering this ICF framework for a child who stutters, the experience of stuttering at school and in other settings may result in negative affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions ([Boyle, 2013](#); [Corcoran & Stewart, 1998](#); [Crichton-Smith, 2002](#); [Daniels, Gabel, & Hughes, 2012](#); [Hayhow, Cray, & Enderby, 2002](#); [Klompas & Ross, 2004](#)). Some of these reactions come internally, from the child who stutters. On the other hand, some of the negative reactions are external to the child, coming from teachers or peers in the classroom. Although both reactions, internal and external to the child, may reduce quality of life ([Yaruss, 2010](#); [Yaruss & Quesal, 2004](#)), the focus of this study is on an external component, beliefs held by others about people who stutter (PWS). Inaccurate beliefs about PWS are important because they may result in experiences of discrimination and role entrapment ([Gabel, Hughes, & Daniels, 2008](#); [Klein & Hood, 2004](#)).

For the disorder of stuttering and PWS, inaccurate beliefs by the public abound ([Craig, Tran, & Craig, 2003](#); [Doody, Kalinowski, Armson, & Stuart, 1993](#); [Hughes, Gabel, Irani, & Schlagheck, 2010](#)). For example, [Craig and his colleagues \(2003\)](#) indicated that the public believes PWS are shy,¹ self-conscious, anxious, and lacking in confidence. Similarly, in an interview study of United States (US) college students, prominent themes indicated that they believe PWS are frustrated, impatient, angry, annoying, shy, or disabled in learning ([Hughes et al., 2010](#)).

The public's inaccurate beliefs are likely to be particularly influential for the youngest PWS, children who stutter. In research on racial identity, children's beliefs about their own differences are highly susceptible to their social context ([Spencer, 1984](#); [Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990](#)). For children, part of that social context is their school setting, in which teachers are central figures. Teachers' beliefs, even when expressed in implicit, non-verbal ways, can influence the beliefs of their students ([Vezzali, Giovannini, & Capozza, 2012](#)). Ideally, teachers can counteract the potentially negative effects that inaccurate public beliefs about stuttering may have on their students who stutter. This calls for an investigation of whether teachers' beliefs about stuttering are more accurate than those of the general public.

Since at least the early 1980s, researchers have found the question of teachers' beliefs (i.e., attitudes, perceptions, etc.) about stuttering to be important ([Crowe & Walton, 1981](#); [Dorsey & Guenther, 2000](#); [Irani & Gabel, 2008](#); [Lass et al., 1994, 1992](#); [Ruscello, Lass, Schmitt, & Pannbacker, 1994](#); [Yeakle & Cooper, 1986](#)). This has likely been a topic of interest because teachers are the primary figures within the school setting, which is a place where children spend a lot of time per week ([Juster, Ono, & Stafford, 2004](#)). The years children spend in school constitute a period of many changes. For example, during adolescence there are many changes in brain structure that impact physiological and emotional functioning. The trajectory of this development can be affected by stressors along the way, which can have enduring effects on the brain (see [Eiland & Romeo, 2013](#), for review). Thus, given their developmental sensitivity during this wide time range of school attendance, children's school experiences, including interactions with teachers, are likely to be influential.

The importance of school experiences is consistent with themes that have emerged from the self-reports of PWS ([Corcoran & Stewart, 1998](#); [Crichton-Smith, 2002](#); [Daniels et al., 2012](#); [Hayhow et al., 2002](#); [Klompas & Ross, 2004](#)). [Daniels et al. \(2012\)](#), who gathered qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with PWS, reported that for 90% of their 21 respondents, stuttering impacted their classroom participation, academics, and learning, from kindergarten through twelfth grade (K–12). For example, some PWS reported that anxiety about reading aloud or speaking in class diverted their attention from learning ([Daniels et al., 2012](#)). In a mail-based questionnaire study by [Hayhow and colleagues \(2002\)](#), PWS belonging to the British Stammering Association indicated the degree to which stuttering affected their lives in school and other areas. Respondents were also asked to provide examples for how stuttering had affected these life experiences. Of the 332 PWS who responded, 95% reported that stuttering affected them at school, with 56% of the total sample indicating the extent of the effect was “a lot” and 39% indicating “a bit” ([Hayhow et al., 2002](#)).

These studies also highlight the teacher's role in children's school experiences. Most of the [Daniels et al. \(2012\)](#) respondents, who mentioned experiences with teachers in school, indicated they were either neutral or positive. However, there was at least one respondent who reported negative experiences with teachers. [Hayhow and colleagues](#) indicated that many of their respondents reported “feeling that their difficulties were not understood by teachers” (p. 5). One respondent in their study reported, “Teachers stopped asking me to read because my blocks were too long.” Negative or neutral school experiences may have long-term consequences for children who stutter. Research has shown that stuttering severity is significantly related to fewer years of educational attainment ([O'Brian, Jones, Packman, Menzies, & Onslow, 2011](#)). Although there is not enough evidence to establish a causal relationship between stuttering severity and years of educational attainment, the correlational relationship suggests the importance of examining the role the people in the educational environment play in the lives of students who stutter.

Many of the negative school experiences reported by PWS related to reading aloud or other forms of speaking in front of groups ([Daniels et al., 2012](#); [Hayhow et al., 2002](#)). Thus, it is important to note that public speaking requirements in the

¹ The interpretation of the “shy” trait as negative in some of the previous work may be the result of western society's preference for extroversion. The same trait might be interpreted as positive in other cultural contexts (see [Cain, 2012](#), for in depth discussion of this issue).

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