Stuttering on The Big Screen: Portrayals of Persons Who Stutter

Ashley Jones, B.A., University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Candace Mitchell, B.S., University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Robert Mayo, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

BACKGROUND:

Studies conducted on the perceptions of the general public towards persons who stutter have indicated that they hold negative opinions of the latter (Craig, Tran, and Craig, 2003; Franck, Jackson; Pimentel, and Greenwood, 2003; Klassen, 2001; Mayo, Mayo, Jenkins, and Graves, 2004). Examination of the opinions gleaned from these investigations suggests that non-stutterers feel that persons who stutter "have psychological problems", "could control their stuttering if they tried harder", and compared to persons who do not stutter, "are more nervous/anxious". Interestingly, it appears that these views are often based on limited real-life exposure to persons who stutter---typically a relative, an acquaintance, or from characters depicted on film/television (Craig, Tran, and Craig, 2003 ; Mayo et al. 2004; Mayo and Mayo, 2005). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the verbal and nonverbal reactions to film characters who stutter by non-stuttering major and minor characters utilizing a narrative criticism methodological approach.

METHOD:

Narrative Criticism: A narrative criticism methodology was used in this study. Narrative criticism is a type of rhetorical criticism in which the components of a narrative analysis of an artifact, such as a short story, novel, or film, assist in explaining something that is not widely understood (Foss, 2004). There are two steps for carrying out narrative criticism. The first step involves examining the narrative in detail to gain a comprehensive understanding of it as a whole. The second involves focusing on those aspects of the narrative that are of most interest to the investigator and that allow him/her to provide the best explanation for the artifact. For the purposes of this study, narrative criticism assisted use in analyzing the actions and reactions of film characters who do not stutter toward those who do.

MATERIALS:

The materials in the study consisted of ten films which featured persons who stutter. These films included, **A Family Thing (1995)**, **A Fish Called Wanda (1988)**, **A Lady in the Water (2006)**, **Liam (2007)**, **New Jack City (1991)**, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)**, **Pride (2007)**, **The Right Stuff (1983)**, **Rocket Science (2007)**, and **Talk to Me (1982)**. Each movie was evaluated with a movie documentation sheet. The movie documentation sheets included a brief synopsis of the film viewed, a character analysis of the character that stuttered in the film, and listed the verbal and non-verbal responses from normal speaking characters toward the stuttering character and vice versa.

Procedure: Each film was viewed once by each of the three authors and three assistants with the viewers paying close attention to the plotline, characters, relationship between the characters, and setting. Afterwards, a brief synopsis of the movie viewed is written. Then, the film was viewed again with the viewers focusing on the character who stutters and their surroundings. A character analysis of the character who stutters, verbal and non-verbal responses from the normal speaking characters toward the character who stutters, and the response(s) of the character who stutters to treatment from the normal speaking characters is recorded. After all of the movies were watched, data from the movie documentation sheets were collected and examined to determine the relationship between the setting, background, and treatment of the characters who stutter.

PROCEDURES:

Ten films were viewed by the authors using narrative criticism methodology (Foss, 2004):

1) Each film was viewed paying close attention to the plotline, characters, relationship between the characters, and setting.

2) Then, a brief synopsis of each was written.

3) Next, the film was then viewed a second time with the viewer focusing on the character who stutters and their surroundings. Each movie was evaluated with a movie documentation sheet which included:

   a. A character analysis of the person who stutters in the film.

   b. Verbal and non-verbal responses from the normal speaking characters toward the character who stutters.

   c. Response of the character who stutters to treatment from the normal speaking characters.

4) After all the movies were viewed, data were collected and examined to determine trends (obvious or subtle) in the setting, background, and treatment of the characters who stuttered.

RESULTS:

Results revealed that as portrayed on film, typically speaking characters perceived the stuttering characters as incompetent communicators, mentally disabled, or as buffoons (see Table1). Reactions by other characters to the character who stuttered most often included scorn, dismissal, or humor. Film reactions of non-stuttering characters may mirror real life responses toward persons who stutter. For example, Guntapalli, Everheart, Kalinowski, Nanjundeswaran, and Saltuklaroglu (2007) reported that speech disfluencies negatively affect a normally fluent person's emotional state. These researchers demonstrated that fluent listeners actually self-rated themselves as becoming more nervous, uncomfortable, sad, tense, unpleasant, avoiding, embarrassed, and annoyed as they watched and listened to speech samples of persons who stutter. Additional findings will be presented as well as suggestions for devising educational programs for the general public for the purpose of reducing discrimination against persons who stutter.

TABLE 1. Narrative Analysis of Film Portrayals of Persons Who Stutter.

RESULT CATEGORIES	SPECIFIC FINDINGS
Stuttering Characteristics	❖ *Several of the stuttering characters exhibited disfluencies characterized by: ❖ Frequent Repetitions (single-syllable/part-word) ▪ Prolongations ▪ Severe Blocks ▪ Interjections were only used by Hal Hefner in *Rocket Science*. ❖ *Behaviors secondary to the disfluencies were also exhibited, but were not focused on in this study
Character Analysis	❖ **Perception of Mental Capacity**- Several of the characters were perceived or even verbally referenced as mentally disabled/handicap. o Ex) Billy Bibbit character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* ❖ **Family Structure**-Broken or Dysfunctional Family or No mention of family (Family is limited to outside sources including teams, gangs, or peers). ❖ **Marital Status**- All single, one is divorced ❖ **Social Economic Status**- Ranged from low to mid-low class, only one was upper-middle class. ❖ **Occupation/ Education**- 2 students, 1 accountant, 1 apartment manager, 2 thief/enforcer, 1 Police Officer, 1 no mention of education ❖ **Romantic Interest**- Several of the films featured PWS with love interests; however, there was a trend that the love interests were only one-side. On the other hand, the love interests gave them to courage to do things they would have never done before.
Responses from Fluent Characters	❖ In all of the movies, except for *A Family Thing*, their stuttering was referenced as negative. ▪ Many of the verbal responses were classified as negative and mimicked stuttering characteristics. Some of the verbal included: ▪ "Stuttering is not getting any better; have you thought about surgery?" ▪ "Nnunununu-----------don't nothing me" ▪ "You have a beautiful speaking voice when it works." ▪ "I thought you might have stuck trying to say thank you" ▪ "Are you thinking or are you in mid-stutter" ▪ "Ya non-talking bastard" ❖ Some of the non-verbal responses were: ▪ Stares ▪ Facial grimaces ▪ Questionable looks
CWS Responds to NSC Responses	❖ The CWS Responded in many ways, yet a majority of the responses from the CWS were non-verbal. ❖ Non-verbal included: ▪ Lowered head in shame ▪ Stayed quiet ▪ Shows frustration ▪ Laughs with others ❖ Verbal responses included: ▪ "Man, shut tha f%&$ up!" ▪ "I wish I were dead!" ▪ "You think I use my stuttering as an excuse!"

CWS – Character Who Stutters/Stuttered
NSC – Non-Stuttering Character
PWS – Person Who Stutters

DISCUSSION:

There were discernible trends in the setting, background, and treatment of the characters who stutter. Findings suggest that caricature portrayal on film of persons who stutter may negatively effect public perceptions of them as a whole. After examining the films, we are able to demonstrate films that feature stuttering characters give inaccurate and negative accounts of people who stutter.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICIANS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC:

- Include films which feature PWS accurately and/or positively in therapy to assist with building the clients morale, positive self-concept, etc.

- Then, the clinician can have the PWS write a reflection on which characteristics of the stuttering character they can relate to, would like to possess, as well as some thing they would change.
    Ex) Talk to Me (1982)

- Findings suggest that several films, which feature PWS, <u>do portray these characters negatively</u>.

- Therefore, public awareness about the misinformation about stuttering in films very important.

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