Stuttering and work life: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Discipline of Speech Pathology
Background

“Given that most people spend more time at work than any other setting during their lifetimes, it is likely that personal development and environmental experiences in the vocational domain might be some of the stronger influences to both the transient and stable components of subjective wellbeing” (Gottfredson & Duffy, 2008, p.45).
Work and the workplace are a critical life domain for engagement.

Individuals look to work for meaning, personal development, economic viability and a subjective experience of achievement and “success”.

Work life fulfillment is a major contributor to overall life satisfaction (Lent & Brown, 2008)
Background

Studies through the years have shown that stuttering can adversely impact work life:

STIGMA

Attitudes of others (employers, vocational guidance counselors, college professors, speech pathologists, general public)

• Public Attitudes (e.g. Hulit & Wurtz, 1994)
  • Employer attitudes (e.g. Hurst & Cooper, 1983a)
  • Vocational guidance counselor attitudes (e.g. Hurst & Cooper, 1983b)
Attitudes and opinions of people who stutter (PWS)

Impact of stuttering on employment opportunities and job performance (Klein & Hood, 2004; Rice & Kroll, 1997).

Klein & Hood, (2004) surveyed 232 PWS over 18 years
Stuttering is felt to be “handicapping” in the workplace

- 71% Stuttering decreases chances of being hired
- 70% Stuttering interferes with promotional possibilities
- 65% agreed that “average person who stutters believes their stuttering interferes with job performance.”
Role entrapment in people who stutter (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, Blood & Althouse, 2004)

385 college students reported on whether PWS could perform in certain occupations

- Vocational stereotyping
- Occupational stereotyping
- Stigma bound

“The findings suggest that stuttering does limit career choices for people who stutter and that these limited career choices are related to role entrapment.”

(Gabel et al., 2004, p.40)
Qualitative studies have yielded rich insights from PWS regarding workplace experiences—themes from these studies show negative experiences are the ones that prevail.

(e.g. Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004).
Thus, findings from these studies showed that non stuttering individuals perceived negative implications for PWS in work life and that PWS confirmed that their experiences validated these perceptions.

- Limited career choice
- Stuttering frames career choice
- Promotional opportunities restricted
- Employability compromised
Motivated to

Comprehensively update research on this topic.

Current study is the qualitative dimension to a broader project with research questions about work life and stuttering.
Choosing the method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Key features</th>
<th>Suitable approach</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do people who stutter experience the impact of stuttering on their work life?</td>
<td>Focus on personal meaning of impact in a particular context for people who share a particular experience.</td>
<td>Interpretative *** Phenomenological Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the main experiential features of stuttering when talking?</td>
<td>Focus on stuttered speech as the experience.</td>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sorts of story structures do people who stutter use to describe their work life</td>
<td>Focus on how narrative relates to sense-making</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors influence how people who stutter manage in their work lives?</td>
<td>Developing an explanatory level account</td>
<td>Grounded Theory</td>
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(see Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)***
Qualitative method

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

**Phenomenological** - focus on the experience (stuttering).

**Hermeneutic** – interpretative (using interpretation to make sense of the experience).

**Ideographic** – focus on the relevance of particular experiences that capture essential features of the phenomenon.
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Current study

Research question

How do people who stutter experience the impact of stuttering on their work life?

1. What sense do they make of these experiences?
2. What sense can we make of their experiences?
Participants

Recruitment:

1. Eighty five PWS completed an on-line survey investigating work and stuttering.
2. Participants who were willing to participate in qualitative study were asked permission to be contacted.
3. Required a range of ages and occupations but necessary that all had stuttered since early childhood -Access to their perspective on phenomenon (stuttering)
4. Nineteen were contacted and nine responded affirmatively.

9 participants, 3 females, 6 males

Age range 29-61 (mean 41.5)

All stuttered since early childhood –no known neurological incident associated with onset.
## Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Researcher rating of SS</th>
<th>Treatment History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>City planner</td>
<td>severe</td>
<td>Current -maintenance activities. Toastmasters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Warehouse Manager</td>
<td>mod</td>
<td>Current -maintenance activities. Toastmasters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Electrical engineer</td>
<td>severe</td>
<td>Several speech restructuring programs spanning past 30 years Attends support group meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Bank Officer</td>
<td>mild</td>
<td>No treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>mod</td>
<td>Attended smooth speech intensive program one year previously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>mild</td>
<td>No treatment as adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>mild</td>
<td>No treatment as adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>mild</td>
<td>No treatment as adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Business Analyst</td>
<td>mod</td>
<td>Several speech restructuring treatment programs previously .Recently McGuire Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

1. Conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews.
2. Open ended questions about stuttering (impairment), and limitations and restrictions experienced in work-life (ICF framework).
3. Interviews conducted at university by first author
4. Interviews transcribed verbatim.
5. Transcripts read several times and interviews replayed.

Ethics approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee of the University of Sydney
IPA analysis

IPA can be taken to different levels of interpretation:

First level: **description**

Second level: **abstraction leading to conceptualization.**

1. Emergent themes derived through inductive and iterative process, emersion in transcripts by reading, re-reading and listening process.
2. Participant by participant thematic analysis
3. Comparative thematic analysis conducted across participants.
4. Collaboration, member checking and audit conducted for credibility.
5. Researcher reflection and supervision for interpretation.
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#### Descriptive level: Major themes & sub-themes across group

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stuttering is always there</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stuttering at work reveals a problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stuttering impacts communication-stakes are different</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stuttering impacts occupational progression: Self limit/ workplace limits</td>
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Stuttering is always there

Stuttering is already part of life experience

*But I already would know before I got there that speech was going to be an issue, definitely when I was applying for a job where I knew I'd have to deal with a lot of people.* (Martin)

*It’s really difficult because my stuttering I think has really affected who I’ve become and how outgoing I am.* (Ethan)

Work is a different context

*I think I do a lot more word avoidance at work than I do at home. Yeah, I think I do a lot more word insertions, changing, trying to laugh while I’m saying it so people – oh, hang on, sorry what was that word again? You know like that or ‘where was I?’ kind of a come-back. Yeah, I do a lot more acting to present an image than probably what I do at home.* (Alison)

Different fears – disclose or not

*and it annoys me because sometimes I think I have to come over as a bit ditzy, a bit ‘oh oh, what’s that, oh gee’ this is my way of dealing with it anyway ‘oh oh you know’ and I’m not like that because I know I’m an intelligent person but I have to sometimes, I feel, put it across that way so that people don't have to sit and listen to it really, as I’m trying to save a word.* (Pam)
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Stuttering at work reveals a problem

**Others may doubt my competence**

I don’t want them to think ‘oh she’s not normal because she’s a stutterer. That’s I suppose how I feel (Eve)

if it’s people you are trying to impress and show off to, I guess that’s where I might still feel a little bit anxious about that. I don’t want them to think that I’m some sort of jabbering idiot. (Mark)

It's actually quite easy but I just – this is my table, on the right is my boss, on the left is my boss’ boss so I fear them judging me if I stutter when answering the phone. (Kelvin)

I'd think oh God, that word and it wasn't about me it was about my impression, how that person viewed me and I hated looking like I was stupid because I couldn't say it .(Pam)

**Impacts self-confidence**

Your self-esteem about yourself isn’t very high Because of this, if I could have anything else but stuttering I would! That’s how I feel (Eve)
I felt oh my God she’s going to think that I’m an idiot. That is what she used to call him. He’s an idiot look he can’t even speak, blah, blah, blah. So that’s where I think I’ve picked up – I don’t know whether it’s right but how I feel about work and my stuttering. I suppose I’ve got that in my head, that if I stutter here I feel I am an idiot. (Eve)
I've always felt like I need to compensate in other aspects of my job. So because I stutter, because I'm not good in talking, I have to overcompensate in other areas so I have to be perfect in doing my report because that evens out that shortcoming of mine and I've always thought like that in the office, that's just how I've always done it at work. Look, in a way it's good because I always aim higher but it puts a lot of pressure on you. (Allan)
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Stuttering impacts communication

Can’t show your true ability

because of my stuttering, I might give you an answer halfway or an answer that creates the impression that I am incompetent – you get what I'm saying? (Kelvin)

Then you finally force it out and it’s nowhere near as funny as it should have been because you spent two minutes trying to get the word out. So, that’s always annoyed me. (Mark- journalist, talking about brainstorming headlines with colleagues).

Frustration – talking is hard

you lose all control of any technique, of any hope because on the speech, it's definitely a very high pressure, high anxiety half an hour and that's the worst-It's a block and you cannot get any sound out - It feels like my tongue gets caught on the top of my mouth, on the roof of my mouth. That's what it feels like” (Alison)
Stuttering impacts communication

Fear of stuttering

*I know there's a word coming what's another way I can do that? Is there another word, I'll pause and hope that they'll fill in the word for me. I know that I've got some little tricks up my sleeve that I try and get around with that.* (Mark)

*there I was answering the phone and things and I was getting work done. I– I don’t know if my stuttering was getting worse but I think because I was doing what I had to do, I couldn’t avoid words or situations, I had to say it to make sure that I was getting it right.* (Doug)
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Stuttering impacts occupational progression

Greater verbal demands if I progress

There would be more speaking and yes it’s impossible not to worry about it. I still think about it every morning and every time I go and speak to somebody and I think I always will. I’m sure I will. (Ethan)

Rather stay where I am: prospect of interviews

I don't go well at interviews, I think that's one of the things that has kept me there. (Martin)

I don't think I would do it because I would have to put myself through an interview and I don't think I would do that. That is because I would have to get across – I would have to be very precise in what I wanted to say and I would find that difficult.” (Alison)
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**Stuttering impacts occupational progression**

**Feeling Overlooked**

I found that when I was the most suitably qualified person for a position or a vacancy which had come up invariably I wouldn’t be considered for it. (Martin)

I had the title of Warehouse Manager but I don’t think I was a manager at all. I was underpaid big time. Over the years I saw warehouse managers getting company cars or if they didn’t get that they at least got their petrol paid for and I didn’t get any of that. (Doug)
Stuttering impacts occupational progression

Stay in your comfort zone

You know this role, it requires a lot of liaising with stakeholders and stuff like that, are you up for it? I knew what he was implying and I said, “Yes, I am” and he nodded. But yeah, I believe it’s holding me back a lot, in that I don’t go for other senior roles because it involves a heavy amount of talking (Allan)
For me speech and performance correlate highly. If I don’t speak well it means I’m not performing well - so its very important that I speak well - so when I speak well, I’m performing better.

When I don’t speak well then I feel that I’m not capable of anything (Kelvin)

I'm engrossed in my work and I love that. It's more like if my phone goes and then it’s like oh yeah, I stutter so there's always a reminder that you stutter and that’s always – it's kind of like this cloud that’s always hovering over you, always. It gets smaller but it's always there. (Allan)
How do participants make sense of their experience?
Different “relationships” with their stuttering

Kelvin equates “good” performance with “good” speech. He judges his own job performance by how “well” he is speaking.

Allan can become “engrossed” but “there’s always a reminder”- suggests that it is inescapable, “a cloud that’s always hovering”
It could be said that whilst stuttering involves speech being “blocked”, it also acts to “blocks” or obstructs ease of access to all activities.

Participants described their own feelings of being obstructed at work because of their stuttering. Workplace activities that involved the possibility of speaking necessitated some level of mental self preparation that also intruded on the activity or interaction.

The workplace is a different context but the stuttering experiences are not felt entirely differently from the experience of stuttering in other contexts.
Ongoing work on the stigmatizing effects of stuttering resonate with what participants told, however whilst public stigma is important the interviews told of:

**Self –Stigma and stuttering**

- Parallels with self-stigma in people with other chronic disorders
- Internalizing of external attitudes –a negative internal voice

**Impacts of self-stigma**

- Demoralizing
- Self esteem and self efficacy
- Limits goal attainment “Why try effect” (Corrigan, Larson & Rusch, 2009)
Conclusions

- Participants interviews suggested that impact of stuttering in workplace is pervasive and impacts upon self conceptions of competence.
- Themes showed that the stuttering experience is carried into the work domain but might be magnified in that context.
Implications

This analysis suggests

- Understanding how PWS “make sense” of their stuttering may provide important avenues for accessing and facilitating change to some of the beliefs and cognitions that become associated with speaking and stuttering.

- **The clinician/therapist role – on the side of the client to develop a strong self irrespective of fluency.**

- Further investigation of the nature, onset and development of self stigma in stuttering.

- What would PWS want if their workplace issues were addressed?
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References


