ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to examine university students’ perceptions of an instructor who stutters. Fifty-six undergraduate and 24 graduate students enrolled in speech-language pathology courses evaluated the instructor on a variety of speech-related and personality dimensions. Descriptive statistics for individual survey items, between-groups comparisons, and correlations between pairs of items were calculated. In general, respondents rated the instructor somewhat negatively on several speech skills but positively on most personality characteristics. No statistically significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students’ ratings of the instructor were found. Significant correlations were found between the constructs of intelligence and competence, fluency and ease of listening, and fluency and degree of handicap. Results were consistent with previous studies using an actual person who stutters rather than a hypothetical stutterer. Implications for future research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: stuttering, perceptions, attitudes, survey, students

Over the past several years, numerous studies have examined the attitudes of different populations toward individuals who stutter. Previous research suggests the presence of a pervasive negative stereotype (e.g., Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Kalinowski, Stuart, & Armson, 1996; Woods & Williams, 1976), but some studies have identified a small number of “desirable” personality traits (e.g., Burley & Rinaldi, 1986; Turnbaugh, Guitar, & Hoffman, 1979; Yairi & Williams, 1970). Researchers have examined the perceptions of the general population (e.g., Kalinowski, Lerman, & Watt, 1987), teachers (e.g., Silverman, 1990; Yeakle & Cooper, 1986), speech-language pathologists (SLPs) (e.g., Yairi & Williams, 1970), and students (e.g., Ruscello, Lass, & Brown, 1988). The majority of these studies focused on a “hypothetical stutterer” whom the participants were asked to rate on a variety of personality scales.

Yairi and Williams (1970) conducted one of the earliest studies pertaining to individuals who stutter. This study asked speech clinicians to list adjectives they considered to be descriptive of hypothetical school-age boys who stutter. The most frequently listed adjectives were undesirable personality traits and included nervous, tense, shy, withdrawn, and quiet. However, participants also included intelligent in their top 10 lists of adjectives used to describe a hypothetical boy who stutters. In a related study, speech clinicians were asked to assign adjectives to a hypothetical adult male who stutters (Woods & Williams, 1971). Many of the same adjectives were listed for both this adult and the hypothetical child who stuttered in the prior study (Yairi & Williams, 1970). The majority of the traits listed fell under the larger categories of nervous or...
fearful, although desirable traits such as intelligent and friendly were also included.

Using the adjectives previously described by speech clinicians as being characteristic of people who stutter, Woods and Williams (1976) created a 25-item semantic differential scale. In their study, parents, teachers, speech clinicians, and college students were asked to rate four hypothetical concepts of male children and adults who do and do not stutter. All groups rated the hypothetical child and adult who stutter more negatively than they did the hypothetical child and adult who do not stutter. Much of the research subsequent to this study used this scale or modified versions of it (e.g., Kalinowski et al., 1987; McGee, Kalinowski, & Stuart, 1996; Turnbaugh et al., 1979).

In a subsequent study examining the “stutterer stereotype,” Turnbaugh et al. (1979) examined stereotypical traits assigned to hypothetical individuals who stutter based on their degree of disfluency. Turnbaugh et al. asked SLPs to judge the personality traits of a hypothetical person who stutters in the mild range, the moderate range, and the severe range. In addition, participants were asked to rate a hypothetical typical person who does not stutter. There was a significant difference in the ratings between the typically fluent construct and the three stuttering constructs. The SLPs rated the hypothetical constructs of people who stutter as more nervous, self-conscious, tense, sensitive, anxious, fearful, afraid, hesitant, and insecure than a hypothetical person who does not stutter. Respondents, however, also rated the three hypothetical people who stutter as more intelligent than the hypothetical fluent speaker.

Several studies have examined college students’ perceptions of individuals who stutter. Silverman (1982) surveyed 160 SLPs and 176 undergraduate students who were enrolled in an introductory speech course. Participants were asked to rate hypothetical constructs of men, women, and children who do and do not stutter. In all cases, the person who stutters was rated more negatively—by clinicians and students—than was the same-sex, same-age person who does not stutter. In addition, university students held a stronger negative stereotype for males who stutter than for nonstuttering males. However, the SLPs held a stronger negative stereotype for females who stutter than for nonstuttering females.

In a study that surveyed the attitudes of professors and college students toward college students who stutter, participants rated a hypothetical student who stutters more negatively on several (but not all) personality traits than they did the hypothetical average student who does not stutter (Dorsey & Guenther, 2000). College students rated the hypothetical student who stutters as less open, bold, calm, self-assured, competent, and bright, as well as more nervous, shy, self-conscious, passive, dull, mediocre, and reticent than the hypothetical average college student; these findings are similar to those obtained by Kalinowski et al. (1996). However, the college students rated the hypothetical student who stutters less negatively than did the professors (Dorsey & Guenther, 2000).

Ruscello et al. (1988) instructed undergraduate college students to generate a list of adjectives that describe a hypothetical child who stutters and a hypothetical adult male who stutters. Results indicated that more than 75% of the traits used to describe a person who stutters were negative in nature. The top five traits listed for an adult who stutters were nervous, frustrated, shy, embarrassed, and self-conscious. The respondents also listed some desirable personality characteristics; however, specific traits were not included in the publication.

Dietrich, Jensen, and Williams (2001) investigated the potential for discrimination of people who stutter based on the terminology that is used when describing such a speaker. Male and female undergraduates who were enrolled in general education classes completed one of two surveys that differed only in the labels used to describe the person (i.e., stutterer or person who stutters). Participants rated the hypothetical stutterer on a list of nine personality traits. The investigators found no significant difference between the raters’ responses based on the terminology difference. However, female participants in the study rated the hypothetical person who stutters significantly more positively on intelligence, social adjustment, and employability than did male participants, regardless of the terminology presented.

St. Louis and Lass (1981) surveyed communicative disorders students’ general perceptions and attitudes toward stuttering. They asked speech-language pathology and audiology students across the United States to complete the Clinician’s Attitudes Toward Stuttering (CATS) inventory (Cooper, 1975). The CATS inventory was designed to assess a broad scope of insights and attitudes regarding the etiology of stuttering, clinical competence, therapy effectiveness, and people who stutter and their personality characteristics. More than 50% of the respondents reportedly believed that there is a set of personality traits that characterize people who stutter. In addition, more than 50% of the respondents believed that people who stutter possess psychosocial problems, and more than 70% responded with the attitude that stuttering is the most psychologically devastating of all speech disorders. St. Louis and Lass further explored the effects of exposure to and student training with people who stutter on perceptions of stuttering and found that students’ views were relatively unaffected by these two factors.

Silverman and Paynter (1990) instructed undergraduate students who were enrolled in a public speaking course to rate, using several speech and personality scales, hypothetical constructs of lawyers and factory workers who do and do not stutter. Both constructs involving a hypothetical person who stutters were rated more negatively than their hypothetical fluent counterparts. Participants judged the factory worker to be more afraid, insecure, tense, cowardly, and weak, as well as less talkative, sociable, coordinated, dominant, affluent, aggressive, and confident than his or her peers. The hypothetical factory worker’s speech was described as somewhat soft, dysrhythmic, unnatural, and hesitant. Respondents judged the hypothetical lawyer who stutters more negatively than a lawyer who does not stutter on more than 40% of the traits listed, including more afraid, confused, tense, and frightened, as well as less intelligent, employable, competent, educated, confident, and secure (Silverman & Paynter, 1990).
McGee et al. (1996) examined the effects of viewing a video documentary on high school students’ perceptions of a high school male who stutters. The video included vignettes with SLPs and showed people who stutter discussing their personal struggles with stuttering. The authors found that viewing the video did not alter the participants’ negative stereotype of stuttering. Before viewing the video presentation, the students rated a hypothetical student who stutters (using a 7-point rating scale) as more guarded, nervous, shy, tense, withdrawn, quiet, reticent, avoiding, afraid, hesitant, and insecure than fluent speakers. Following the video presentation, the respondents rated a hypothetical student who stutters more negatively on the aforementioned 11 items, plus the additional personal attributes of self-derogatory, fearful, and inflexible, suggesting that viewing the videotape reinforced the respondents’ existing negative stereotype (McGee et al., 1996).

In a study using an audio recording of an actual person who stutters, Burley and Rinaldi (1986) examined gender differences in the ratings of speakers who stutter. Male and female participants of various backgrounds and occupations listened to a recording of either a male or a female who stutters reading a weather report. Speakers were rated on 14 personality characteristics using a 7-point scale. Results revealed that the gender of the person who stutters had no significant effect on the ratings. However, there was a main effect of participant gender, as female participants rated the speaker who stutters more favorably than did male participants. In general, the female participants rated the speaker who stutters as friendly and intelligent but slightly emotionally maladjusted; in contrast, the male participants rated the speaker who stutters as less friendly and intelligent than the female participants did (Burley & Rinaldi, 1986).

In one of the first studies incorporating a live oral presentation, Wenker, Wegener, and Hart (1996) assessed the attitudes of 158 undergraduate students who were recruited from introductory psychology courses toward a fluent guest speaker who modeled stuttered speech. Wenker et al. investigated whether individuals assign personality traits differently to a speaker who stutters than to a speaker who does not stutter. Further, they examined the difference in attitudes when comparing a live lecture versus an audiotaped lecture. A normally fluent actor was trained to speak disfluently and served as the lecturer in both the fluent and disfluent conditions.

On 10 of the 22 constructs, participants rated the speaker during the disfluent lecture significantly different than during the fluent lecture. Respondents rated the speaker’s disfluent lecture more negatively on the speaker’s ability to communicate a message, understandability, fluency, and degree of impairment. However, participants also rated the lecturer during the disfluent presentation as more friendly, trustworthy, likeable, attractive, sincere, and humorous than during the fluent presentation, regardless of whether the presentation was live or audiotaped. These findings were inconsistent with previous literature on hypothetical constructs of people who stutter and may “more closely approximate the impressions that listeners have of disfluent speech in everyday life” (Wenker et al., 1996, p. 156). In addition, Wenker et al. found no significant differences between responses from male and female participants.

To summarize previous findings specifically related to students’ perceptions of stuttering (e.g., Ruscello et al., 1988; Silverman & Paynter, 1990), most of the studies reviewed presented respondents with a written story of a hypothetical stutterer. In general, prior findings suggest the presence of negative stereotypes, attitudes, and perceptions of stuttering on the part of the respondents, along with a few stereotypical “positive” traits such as intelligence, trustworthiness, and friendliness. Studies yielding exceptional findings (Burley & Rinaldi, 1986; Wenker et al., 1996) investigated the attitudes of students toward an audio sample of an actual person who stutters or an actual person modeling disfluent speech, where the speaker in the disfluent speech condition was rated more favorably on personality scales than was the speaker in the fluent speech condition.

Although these few studies used actual speakers, there is no research examining individuals’ perceptions of a university professor who stutters in the context of his or her own course. Therefore, the present study was designed to investigate speech-language pathology students’ perceptions of a course instructor who stutters. A secondary purpose was to investigate any differences between the perceptions of undergraduate and first-year graduate students. It was hypothesized that students would rate the instructor relatively favorably on the personality scales while assigning negative ratings for speech skills, as was found in the Wenker et al. (1996) study. Furthermore, it was predicted that undergraduate and first-year graduate students would rate the instructor similarly, as both groups were expected to have limited exposure to and clinical experience with people who stutter.

**METHOD**

Within the first 2 weeks of classes, students completed an 18-item survey designed to assess their perceptions of a professor who stutters. Each class received approximately 3 hr of teaching from the instructor, who is a person who stutters, before completing the survey. Students were invited to complete the survey at the end of one of the class periods, and participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. The course instructor (who is also the second author of the present article) was not present during data collection and had no knowledge of which students did and did not choose to participate. All students in attendance that day volunteered for the present study, and a total of 92 surveys were returned.

**Participants**

Participants were university students who were enrolled in one of two speech-language pathology courses: an undergraduate-level phonetics course or a graduate-level
neuroscience course. The professor whose fluency was assessed is an adult with a self-reported 35-year history of stuttering. His speech was characterized by numerous part-word repetitions and sound prolongations, as well as occasional silent blocks.

The undergraduate student population originally included 60 females and 6 males who submitted completed surveys. However, 4 females did not provide demographic information on their surveys and so were excluded from the study. Twenty-five graduate students returned completed surveys; 24 were females and 1 was male. Due to the relatively small number of male participants, gender was held constant; that is, surveys completed by males were not analyzed. As a result, surveys from 56 female undergraduate students and 24 female graduate students were included in the analysis. Of the 56 participants in the undergraduate class, 53 (95%) were speech-language pathology majors. All 24 participants in the graduate-level course were speech-language pathology majors.

Undergraduate students ranged in age from 18 to 28 years (M = 19.5 years). The racial background of these participants included 53 Caucasians, 1 non-Caucasian, 1 multiracial, and 1 participant who did not respond to this question. Forty (72%) undergraduate students were enrolled in their sophomore year, 12 (21%) were juniors, 3 (5%) were seniors, and 1 student (2%) did not answer the question. Graduate participants ranged in age from 22 to 30 years (M = 23 years). The racial background of these participants included 23 Caucasians and 1 non-Caucasian. All (100%) of the graduate students were speech-language pathology majors who were enrolled in their first year of a master’s degree program.

Additional demographic information was obtained and analyzed relative to the participants’ exposure to stuttering. Twenty-three (43%) of the undergraduate students and 7 (29%) of the graduate students reported having one or two friends who stutter. Eleven (19%) of the undergraduate students and 2 (8%) of the graduate students reported having a family member who stutters. Forty-five (80%) of the undergraduate students and 17 (70%) of the graduate students reported never having taken any course with an instructor who stutters. Only 5 (10%) of the undergraduate students had taken a course in fluency disorders; 16 (66%) of the graduate students reported having taken a full-semester course in fluency disorders, and 4 (16%) reported having taken a half-semester course in this subject. Lastly, 1 (4%) of the graduate students reported having taken two courses in fluency disorders.

**Instrument**

The questionnaire, which was designed to evaluate students’ perceptions of a professor who stutters, was based on previous research (e.g., Woods & Williams, 1976) and was modified for purposes of the present study. The first section of the instrument (see the Appendix) consisted of items that rated the instructor’s oral performance on five constructs that are specific to speech skills. Participants were asked to rate each speech skill characteristic along a 7-point scale. These items were developed by the authors and were considered to reflect general characteristics that are important for effective presentation skills. The remaining three items in the first section were qualitative follow-up questions. Previous research (e.g., Guitar, 2006; Klein & Hood, 2004) has indicated that stuttering is perceived to have a handicapping effect on individuals. Therefore, the present authors included a question, #6, addressing the students’ perception of the degree to which they believe the instructor is handicapped by his fluency disorder. In addition, one item found on university course instructor evaluation forms, #7, asking if the respondent would choose to take another course with this instructor given the opportunity, was included in the instrument. This item contained a follow-up question, #8, related to whether reluctance to take another course with the same instructor was related to the instructor’s disfluency. The purpose of these two items was to determine whether any negative perceptions that students may have had regarding the instructor were strong enough to alter their decisions to take future courses with this individual.

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of a list of 10 bipolar personality characteristics. Participants were asked to rate the instructor according to a 7-point scale for each personality characteristic. The instrument’s internal consistency was tested using Cronbach’s alpha. The alpha values obtained were 0.71 for the speech skills scales and 0.83 for the personality characteristics scales, indicating adequate reliability for the test instrument. The final section of the survey contained demographic information in which participants were asked to provide information such as gender, age, race, class rank, and exposure to individuals who stutter.

**Data Analysis**

Mean, standard deviation, and standard error values for speech skills and personality characteristics were computed. In order to compare the mean ratings between undergraduate and graduate students’ responses, two-tailed, independent-sample t tests were performed. The significance level for each comparison was adjusted to p < 0.003 (.05/18) in order to compensate for the 18 t tests that were calculated and to reduce the likelihood of a Type I error.

In order to compare the mode responses to Item #7 (“Given the opportunity, would you choose to take another course with this instructor?”) and its follow-up, Item #8 (“Is your reluctance to take another course related to the instructor’s fluency disorder?”), between the two groups of participants, two cross-tabulation procedures with chi-square tests were performed. The alpha level was set at p < .05. Pearson product–moment correlations (Pearson r) were computed to examine the relationship between responses to specific items (e.g., fluency and degree of handicap, fluency and ease of listening, fluency and competence, intelligence and competence, competence and degree of handicap). The significance level for each correlation was adjusted to p < .01 (.05/5) in order to compensate for the five planned correlations and to reduce the likelihood of a Type I error.
RESULTS

Mean, standard deviation, and standard error values for speech skills and personality characteristics for undergraduate and graduate student responses are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Overall mean composite scores for speech skills and personality characteristics were also computed. The mean composite score for the instructor’s speech skills was 2.53 for the undergraduate students and 2.58 for the graduate students. Mean composite personality scores of 1.58 and 1.52 were calculated from the undergraduate and graduate students’ responses, respectively.

The results of the independent-sample t tests revealed that undergraduate and graduate students’ responses were not significantly different on any of the scales presented (see Tables 1 and 2). That is, with a preset alpha level of $p < .003$, undergraduate and graduate students did not rate the instructor significantly differently on any of the speech skills or personality characteristics. Neither the undergraduate nor graduate students rated the instructor with a number greater than 2.4 (with a rating of 1 being most positive) on any of the personality scales, indicating relatively positive ratings. With the exception of speech fluency, the instructor was rated with a number no greater than 3.2 on the speech skills scales; this indicates ratings that were closer to the positive end of the scale than to the negative end.

Speech fluency yielded the highest mean ratings for both groups of respondents (3.63 for the undergraduate students and 4.04 for the graduate students), indicating a somewhat negative rating of the instructor’s speech fluency.

The results of the two cross-tabulation procedures with chi-square tests yielded no significant difference between the two groups with regard to the number of students who would reportedly choose to take another course with the instructor, Pearson $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = .106, p = .745$. Fifty (89%) of the undergraduate students and 22 (91%) of the graduate students reported that they would choose to take another course with this instructor. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the two groups’ responses to whether any reluctance to take another course with the instructor was related to his fluency disorder, Pearson $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .178, p = .745$. Of those respondents who answered undecided to Item #7, 4 (67%) of the 6 undergraduate students and 1 (50%) of the 2 graduate students indicated that their reluctance to take another course was related to the instructor’s fluency disorder. None of the participants responded no to Item #7.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, standard errors, and results of t tests for each of six bipolar speech scales reported for an instructor who stutters by undergraduate ($n = 56$) and graduate ($n = 24$) students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale item</th>
<th>Undergraduate student</th>
<th>Graduate student</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligible/Unintelligible</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluent/Disfluent</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate/Inappropriate Rate</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate/Inappropriate Volume</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy Listening/Difficult Listening</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Handicapped/Handicapped</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (Composite speech skills score)</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, standard errors, and results of t tests for each of 10 bipolar personality scales reported for an instructor who stutters by undergraduate ($n = 56$) and graduate ($n = 24$) students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale item</th>
<th>Undergraduate student</th>
<th>Graduate student</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm/Nervous</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable/Unreliable</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed/Tense</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unafraid/Fearful</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent/Unintelligent</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident/Insecure</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly/Unfriendly</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing/Shy</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent/Incompetent</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approachable/Unapproachable</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (Composite personality score)</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Correlation coefficients were computed among the five pairs of survey items. Results indicated that three of these correlations were statistically significant. Moderate, positive correlations existed between fluency and degree of handicap ($r = .32, p = .004$), between fluency and ease of listening ($r = .44, p < .0001$), and between intelligence and competence ($r = .35, p = .001$). The low, positive correlations between fluency and competence ($r = .12, p = .256$), and between competence and degree of handicap ($r = .20, p = .075$), were not statistically significant.

**DISCUSSION**

In the present study, university students rated an instructor who stutters using a questionnaire that was modeled on several previous speech and personality scales. In general, previous research revealed a negative personality stereotype that exists toward people who stutter (e.g., McGee et al., 1996; Silverman, 1982; Yairi & Williams, 1970). In contrast, the participants in the present study rated the instructor favorably on most of the personality characteristics presented.

In this study, the mean scores for perception of speech skills confirmed, in part, the hypothesis of the study and were somewhat consistent with findings from several previous studies (e.g., Silverman & Paynter, 1990; Wenker et al., 1996; Woods & Williams, 1971). In these prior studies, people who stutter were judged as having dysrhythmic and hesitant speech. In the present study, the instructor was rated favorably on intelligibility and appropriate speech volume, but less favorably on fluency, rate of speech, and ease of listening. The respondents were evidently able to judge the instructor’s speech skills honestly, assigning mean fluency scores that were approximately midway between completely fluent and completely disfluent. Likewise, respondents rated the instructor somewhat negatively on the degree to which he is handicapped by his fluency disorder ($M = 3.16$ for undergraduate students and $M = 2.87$ for graduate students), relative to their ratings for most of the personality scales.

In addition, the instructor’s fluency disorder and perceived degree of handicap did not appear to have a negative effect on his personality ratings. Mean scores for personality characteristics revealed an extremely positive overall perception of the instructor from both the undergraduate ($M = 1.58$) and graduate ($M = 1.52$) students. Previous research has often revealed a negative stereotype of people who stutter, including adjectives such as nervous, tense, afraid, withdrawn, and incompetent (Dorsey & Guenther, 2000; Ruscello et al., 1988). In the present study, however, the respondents judged the instructor to be generally calm, reliable, relaxed, unafraid, intelligent, confident, friendly, outgoing, competent, and approachable.

Although the present findings are in contrast to findings from much of the previous literature (e.g., Kalinowski et al., 1987; McGee et al., 1996; Silverman & Paynter, 1990), many of those studies involved presentation of a hypothetical construct rather than an actual person who stutters; this may account for the differences in perceptions. It is also important to note that even though the majority of characteristics assigned to a hypothetical person who stutters were “negative,” the assignment of “positive” traits was also reported in some previous studies. For example, studies have found characteristics such as friendly, intelligent, and trustworthy (e.g., Turnbaugh et al., 1979; Woods & Williams, 1971; Yairi & Williams, 1970) assigned to a hypothetical person who stutters; results of the present study confirm such previous findings.

Most importantly, the present findings are consistent with those of studies that also involved a real person who stutters (Burley & Rinaldi, 1986; Wenker et al., 1996). When presented with an actual person, listeners are given the opportunity to assess the person as a whole and not as a one-dimensional, hypothetical construct. Wenker et al. stated, “When considering a hypothetical stutterer, attention is focused on the person’s most perceptually salient characteristics, that is the disfluent speech, rather than on the characteristics that go into forming perceptual judgments of an individual” (p. 156). In the present study, students were asked to rate a real person who stutters; the perceptions of these students may more closely resemble individuals’ perceptions of people who stutter than the stereotypical, negative perceptions that have been reported so often in studies using hypothetical constructs.

It was also hypothesized that the respondents in each of the two groups (undergraduate students and graduate students) would rate the instructor similarly due to their equally limited clinical experience with and exposure to people who stutter. As expected, the undergraduate and graduate classes were remarkably similar in their ratings of the same instructor: There were no significant differences found between the group means for any of the instructor’s speech skills or personality characteristics. In addition, there was no significant difference found between the two groups with regard to whether they would choose to take another course with the instructor. Most of the participants had never taken a course with this instructor and, despite their less than favorable perceptions of his speech skills, 90% of the students surveyed reported that they would choose to take another course with him (all of the remaining students were undecided). Presumably, the instructor’s disfluency did not negatively impact the students’ perceptions of his teaching ability, although perceptions of teaching effectiveness were not directly measured.

To determine whether significant differences existed between the demographic characteristics of the two groups of students, a post hoc analysis was conducted. Analysis of the demographic information revealed two significant differences between these groups of respondents. One significant difference was their previous course work in stuttering ($p < .0001$); Twenty-one (88%) of the graduate students had taken at least a half-semester course, whereas only 5 (9%) of the undergraduate students had taken any course work in stuttering. Apparently, differences in stuttering course work had no effect on perceptions of the instructor, in terms of his speech skills or his personality characteristics. Similar findings were reported by St. Louis and Lass (1981), where students were asked to assess a broad scope of insights and attitudes regarding the etiology of stuttering, clinical competence, therapy effectiveness, and
personalities of people who stutter. The authors found that the students’ views were relatively unaffected by their course work and exposure to people who stutter.

There was also a significant difference (p < .0001) between the chronological ages of the participants in the present study. The mean age was 19.5 years for the undergraduate class and 23 years for the graduate class. As with previous course work in stuttering, the age difference did not appear to significantly impact the students’ perceptions of the instructor. This may be due in part to the fact that, although the graduate students were somewhat older than the undergraduate students, they were equally lacking in experience with and exposure to stuttering.

As described above, correlational analyses were performed on specific survey items. Moderate, positive correlations were found between fluency and degree of handicap, fluency and ease of listening, and intelligence and competence. As expected, the more disfluent the instructor was perceived to be, the more negatively his speech was rated for ease of listening. The instructor’s fluency was also significantly correlated with his perceived degree of handicap. However, there was no significant correlation between the instructor’s fluency and competence, or between the instructor’s competence and his degree of handicap. In other words, the instructor’s fluency disorder was generally perceived as somewhat handicapping, but it did not significantly affect the students’ perceptions of his competence or their willingness to take another course with him.

It is interesting to note that the instructor was judged to be somewhat handicapped, which Guitar (2006) defined as “a limitation on a person’s life” and “a lack of fulfillment an individual has in his social life, school, job, and community” (p. 18). An examination of the students’ interpretation of the term “handicap” was not included in the present study. Further studies are needed to examine what particular “limitations” listeners believe a fluency disorder places on a speaker’s life, as well as how listeners define the term handicap.

With regard to the assignment of positive personality characteristics by most of the respondents, it might be argued that these students were hesitant to rate their instructor negatively, thus inflating their ratings. That is, students could have been reluctant to assign negative attributes to an instructor who had authority over the administration of testing and grade assignments. However, this is unlikely considering the students’ seemingly candid responses regarding the instructor’s speech skills. The students were generally willing to assign at least somewhat unfavorable ratings of fluency, ease of listening, rate of speech, and degree of handicap. It seems unlikely that the respondents would arbitrarily rate one section of the survey unfavorably and the other favorably (i.e., speech skills and personality characteristics, respectively). Furthermore, similar results were obtained by Wenker et al. (1996), where a one-time lecturer (an individual not in a position of authority over the students) was rated positively on several personality scales and less positively on his speech. Finally, the survey used in the present study did not contain identifying information, and the respondents were explicitly informed that their responses would remain anonymous.

Study Limitations

One potential limitation of the present study was that only female students’ responses were analyzed. As mentioned previously, due to the small number of male students in both of the classes (there was only 1 male in the graduate class), only data from female students were included in the analyses. The unequal distribution of males and females did not allow for valid between-gender comparisons. Furthermore, because most speech-language pathology majors are females, it was felt that more ecologically valid results would be obtained by measuring the perceptions of female students only.

However, some of the previous literature (Burley & Rinaldi, 1986; Dietrich et al., 2001) has shown that females rate people who stutter significantly more favorably than do males. Because of this potential gender effect, the instructor in the present study may have been judged more favorably than could be expected had there been a more equal gender distribution in the class so that responses of males and females could be analyzed. However, some studies on the perceptions of people who stutter found no significant gender differences (Hult & Wirtz, 1994; Wenker et al., 1996). For example, Wenker et al. obtained similar results to the present study with a sample that included 59 male and 99 female undergraduate students and found no significant gender differences in trait assignment. Due to these mixed findings, further research investigating response differences according to gender is warranted.

Future Research

Future research in this area should continue to focus on the perceptions of actual persons who stutter and explore the inconsistency in perceptions when analyzing actual people versus hypothetical constructs. For example, researchers might compare initial perceptions of a hypothetical construct to their perceptions of a real person who stutters. Research is also needed to investigate differences in listeners’ perceptions following long-term exposure to a person who stutters and differences between initial and later perceptions to determine if negative stereotypes emerge following additional exposure. Additionally, the question of competence is an interesting one, as competence may be defined in different ways. The present study did not include direct measurements of the students’ perception of this instructor’s teaching abilities; however, most respondents rated him favorably with regard to competence. In future studies, it may be beneficial to examine students’ perception of degree of teaching effectiveness in an instructor who stutters, as opposed to simply competence, in general.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX. SURVEY OF STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AN INSTRUCTOR’S TEACHING PERFORMANCE

Speech Skills

Please circle one number on each line to show your rating of the instructor’s oral speech skills along each dimension. For example, for “Speech Intelligibility,” a rating of 1 would indicate completely intelligible speech, and 7 would indicate completely unintelligible speech.

1. Speech Intelligibility:
   - Intelligent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Unintelligible

2. Speech Fluency:
   - Fluent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Disfluent

3. Speech Rate:
   - Appropriate rate 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Inappropriate rate

If you judged speech rate to be *inappropriate* (i.e., 4 or higher), please circle one of the two choices below that most closely describes the instructor’s speech rate:

   a) too slow  
   b) too fast

4. Speech Volume:
   - Appropriate volume 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Inappropriate volume

If you judged speech volume to be *inappropriate* (i.e., 4 or higher), please circle one of the two choices below that most closely describes the instructor’s speech volume:

   a) too soft  
   b) too loud

5. Ease of Listening (i.e., how easy it is to listen to this person’s speech):
   - Easy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Difficult

6. Degree to which the instructor is handicapped by the fluency disorder:
   - Not handicapped 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Handicapped

7. Given the opportunity, would you choose to take another course with this instructor?
   Please circle one: YES NO UNDECIDED

   If you answered NO or UNDECIDED to Question 7, please answer Question 8.

8. Is your reluctance to take another course related to the instructor’s fluency disorder?
   Please circle one: YES NO

Personality Characteristics

Please circle one number on each line to show your rating of the instructor along each of the following personality characteristics. For example, for “Calm/Nervous,” a rating of 1 would indicate that the instructor is judged to be extremely calm, and 7 would indicate that the instructor is judged to be extremely nervous.

1. Calm 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. Reliable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. Relaxed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. Unafraid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. Intelligent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. Confident 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. Friendly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. Outgoing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. Competent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. Approachable 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

   Nervous  
   Unreliable  
   Tense  
   Fearful  
   Unintelligent  
   Insecure  
   Unfriendly  
   Shy  
   Incompetent  
   Unapproachable
**Demographic Information**

The following questions are OPTIONAL.

1. Gender: _________ 2. Age: _________
3. Race (please circle one): Caucasian Non-Caucasian Multiracial
4. Speech Pathology Major (please circle one): YES NO
5. Class Rank (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, or graduate student): _________
6. Number of immediate family members who stutter: _________
7. Number of extended family members who stutter: _________
8. Number of friends or acquaintances who stutter: _________
9. Number of your previous instructors who stutter: _________
10. Number of stuttering courses you have taken (a course that devoted 50% of class time to stuttering would count as .5 stuttering courses): _________