Fluent Speakers’ Perceptions of Conversations with People Who Stutter

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Abstract
University students responded to the question: If you have had a conversation with someone who stutters, what was it like? If you have not had a conversation with someone who stutters, what do you think it would be like? Qualitative analysis of the responses suggests that fluent speakers expend effort and experience both positive and negative thoughts and emotions while conversing or anticipating a conversation with people who stutter (PWS). Quantitative analysis indicated that participants’ responses did not vary on the basis of gender or familiarity with PWS.

Introduction
• Fluent speakers’ attitudes toward PWS, often measured quantitatively, have been reported in the literature as persistently negative (e.g., Woods & Williams, 1976).
• These negative attitudes presumably result in prejudicial or discriminatory behaviors toward PWS, but few studies have addressed how attitudes and behavior toward PWS are related.
• This study used qualitative methods to explore issues of concern to fluent speakers as they interact with PWS. The results may be useful to future researchers who wish to examine more closely factors that influence the outcomes of interactions between PWS and fluent speakers.

Methods
• Participants
  - 150 undergraduate and graduate students
  - 102 women (68%) and 48 men (32%)
  - Average age of 22.5 yrs (SD = 6.18); ranged from 18-58 yrs
  - No history of stuttering
  - Were not communication disorders majors
  - 37 (24.7%) did not know anyone who stutters
• Written Survey Instrument
  - Collected demographic information (e.g., gender, age, familiarity with PWS)
  - Asked the open-ended question “If you have had a conversation with someone who stutters, what was it like? If you have not had a conversation with someone who stutters, what do you think it would be like?”

Data Analysis
• General procedures for qualitative data analysis as described by Maxwell (2005) were used. The data were coded and sorted into themes which presented the broader issues represented in participants’ individual responses.
• To meet assumptions of credibility and reliability, peer reviews were conducted by two individuals who had backgrounds in fluency and qualitative research methods. Inter-rater percent agreement was 93.3% and intra-rater percent agreement was 100%.
• Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to determine if participants’ responses varied on the basis of gender or familiarity with PWS.

Results
• Two major themes emerged from participants’ responses:
  - Perceptions of effort required to speak with PWS
  - Emotions and thoughts experienced or anticipated by fluent speakers as they converse with PWS, coded by the researchers as positive, neutral, or negative statements.
• MANOVA indicated that participants’ responses did not vary on the basis of gender or familiarity with PWS at p < .05
Theme 1: Effort

- Listening more closely to PWS
  - “I felt like I had to concentrate more on their words so that I could understand what they were saying.”
  - “I might get off track by paying attention to their stuttering problem rather than paying attention to the actual meaning of the conversation.”
- Helping PWS or refraining from helping
  - “When my brother was younger we would often tell him to ‘Slow down! Think of what you want to say!’”
  - “I always felt like I should finish what she was saying…It was very hard to simply listen and not help her speak.”

Theme 1: Effort (cont.)

- Providing extra time and patience
  - “The key ingredient is patience. It is easy to become frustrated when it takes them five minutes to answer a simple question.”
  - “I felt as though I needed to be very patient with the person. The conversation took longer than a conversation without a person who stutters, but the conversation was nonetheless interesting.”

Theme 1: Effort (cont.)

- Figuring out how to act around PWS
  - “I was nervous and a bit anxious because I was waiting for them to respond and I didn’t know if they were joking or actually had a stutter.”
  - “I was unsure of whether to finish his sentences for him or let him struggle to get words out when I knew what he was going to say. I maintained eye contact and smiled, hoping to make him more comfortable.”

Theme 2: Thoughts and Emotions

- Statements expressing normality of conversing with PWS (i.e., positive statements, n = 102)
  - “I wouldn’t be bothered and would expect it to be a fairly normal conversation.”
  - “At first I was taken aback because I’ve never heard anyone with a stutter, but after a few minutes it didn’t faze me.”
- Statements expressing ambiguous thoughts or emotions (i.e., neutral statements, n = 15)
  - “It was quite similar to speaking with a person with any other speech impediment.”
  - “Talking with someone who stutters is a little difficult, but not in a harsh way.”

Theme 2: Thoughts and Emotions (cont.)

- Statements expressing unpleasant thoughts or emotions while conversing with PWS (i.e., negative statements, n = 109)
  - “I think that I might become frustrated trying to understand, which would make the person who stutters also frustrated.”
  - “I felt very bad and a little awkward just waiting for him to get it out.”
  - “I thought it was funny at first but then it got very annoying because I just wanted them to hurry up and talk.”

Conclusions

- Listeners reported expending a considerable degree of effort when speaking with PWS. This effort took many forms, including increased concentration to understand or comprehend the message of PWS.
- Stuttering was frustrating for many participants due to the amount of time required to converse with PWS. Therefore, many participants also reported needing to be more patient with PWS than they would with fluent conversational partners.
- Participants generally seemed to be unsure as to how they should act around PWS and often reported having to refrain from verbally helping PWS to finish their words.
**Conclusions (cont.)**

- The amount of effort required while conversing with PWS and uncertainty regarding how to act appeared to create negative emotions for some participants, including frustration, annoyance, and awkwardness.
- Many statements indicated that conversing with PWS was normal or no different than any other conversation, but several participants also indicated that they would feel bad for PWS or bad about their reactions to the individual and his stuttering.
- Fewer participants described how they perceived PWS to be affected by the reactions of fluent speakers. In general, PWS were perceived as thinking and feeling negatively about their stuttering.

**Discussion**

- Fluent speakers appear to experience some degree of cognitive and/or emotional stress when interacting with PWS. PWS may choose to disclose their stuttering and provide specific instructions to their listeners to alleviate some of this stress.
- The responses provided by participants were sometimes mixed (e.g., both positive and negative in nature) and did not appear to be influenced by gender or familiarity with PWS. Therefore, factors other than gender and knowing PWS may contribute to fluent speakers’ attitudes toward PWS. It is uncertain at this time what these factors may be.

**Questions for Future Research**

- Are quantitative methods, such as Woods and Williams’ (1976) semantic differential instrument, reliable predictors of fluent speakers’ behaviors toward PWS?
- What factors influence fluent speakers’ attitudes toward PWS? This study found that gender and familiarity with PWS did not influence participants’ perceptions of conversations with PWS. Could the ways in which PWS manage their stuttering be a more salient influence on the formation of fluent speakers’ attitudes toward PWS?
- Are the impressions generated from fluent speakers’ actual or anticipated conversations with PWS reflected in the perceptions of PWS as they interact with fluent speakers?