

## On becoming someone: Self-identity as Able

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### Abstract

This paper illuminates the nature of and processes shaping self-identity formation as Able for People Who Stutter (PWS). It responds to the question: How have adults who stuttered over their life courses created understanding of themselves as Able? Seven participants between 19 and 65 years shared life course stories of living with stuttering. Data was generated through biographical narrative life history interviews and analysed at two levels. The first level narrative analysis yielded seven research stories which were subjected to a secondary level inductive, cross-case analysis. The findings revealed that the genesis of self-identity as Able began early in childhood for some participants with significant others playing an important role in shaping an empowered sense of self. In addition, critical events, catalysts and turning points at different moments in life spurred the development of self-identity as Able. Self-identity trajectories were individual, non-linear and unfolded variably over the life course. Their trajectories were strengthened, reinforced and sedimented during adulthood through adopting enabling philosophies for self-development; constant resourcing and actioning; accepting stuttering; social validation and reconfiguring public narratives. As participants constructed themselves as Able they felt empowered to live successfully with stuttering. The clinical practice and research implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Self-identity formation, stuttering, agency, narrative, speech-language intervention.*

### Introduction

Although the notions of self, identity and personal experience have been considered important in speech-language pathology (SLP) literature (Manning, 2001; Sheehan, 1970; Van Riper, 1982), they have been under-researched due to the emphasis on quantitative research (Kathard, 2001; Mowrer, 1998; Pillay, 2003). In recent years however, the subjective dimensions and personal experiences of stuttering have gained gradual momentum in the SLP professional literature with studies investigating issues such as suffering (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998); experiences of therapy with prolonged speech techniques (Cream, Onslow, Packman & Llewellyn, 2003); coping strategies of adults who stutter (Crichton-Smith, 2002) and quality of life of People Who Stutter (PWS) (Klompas & Ross, 2004).

The inclusion of subjective experiences of stuttering has created an alternative perspective to the dominant professional literature around what constitutes successful management of stuttering. In dominant professional literature, the reduction of the symptomatic presentation of overt stuttering is usually considered as the primary indicator of

successful treatment of stuttering. The long-standing tradition of behavioural treatments for stuttering (Boberg & Kully, 1994; Goldiamond, 1965; Onslow, Costa, Andrews, Harrison & Packman, 1996) has aimed at achieving near-zero rating of stuttering through a variety of methods intended to improve speech fluency. These behavioural approaches prescribing symptomatic reduction for adults are being challenged by descriptive, subjective process-orientated approaches (Manning, 2001) foregrounding successful management of stuttering as a preferred outcome. Plexico, Manning and DiLillo (2005), using a phenomenological approach, investigated the successful management of stuttering from an individual, subjective perspective. Recurring themes included the continued management of stuttering throughout the life course; self-acceptance and fear reduction; unrestricted interaction; a sense of freedom and optimism.

This study shares the philosophical orientation of Plexico et al. (2005). However, it refocuses the research lens by examining self-identity formation to understand how PWS create understandings of themselves as Able as a basis for living successfully with stuttering. The insertion of self-identity into

the research frame was motivated by the researcher's need to extend the knowledge construction focus from stuttering (disorder), to that of the person living with stuttering in a social milieu. As a clinical profession charged with the responsibility of helping people, it would seem both logical and important that identity is a central issue. The minimal emphasis on identity is a consequence of the strong influence of the medical model. The profession has primarily attended to the disorder (stuttering) and placed a lesser emphasis on identity of the PWS in clinical intervention as well as research (Kathard, 2003). While it might be argued that subjective perspectives are admitted through case histories, Sacks (1995) cautioned that a clinical case history explains little about the individual and his subjective history. It traces the history of the disorder while the person and his/her experiences are seldom elucidated. Furthermore, a biomedical orientation to disorders masks its social creation by minimising the significant influence of familial, occupational and socio-cultural forces (Gergen, 1994) shaping identity.

Identity issues have been documented sporadically in stuttering literature (Bloodstein, 1995; Johnson, 1946; Petrunik & Shearing, 1983; Sheehan, 1970; Van Riper, 1982). The findings of studies thus far have illuminated negative identity formation processes in relation to stuttering. Petrunik and Shearing (1983) described the negative identity associated with stuttering and explained that participants coped with stuttering using strategies of concealment, openness and disavowal. Kathard (2004) explored the self-identity formation of participants who stuttered and uncovered the complex interplay between personal and social processes contributing to self-identity as DisOther. The term DisOther was coined to reflect the negative understanding participants have about themselves as problematically different (Other) on the basis of stuttering as a (Dis)order. Daniels and Gabel (2004) added to the identity formation literature by inserting the dimensions of race and ethnicity. They reported that stuttering had a greater influence than race on the lifestyle of Black American participants.

There has been minimal documentation about positive self-identity and stuttering. The notion of positive self-identity is grounded in a discourse of ability promoted by people with disability. Disability movements internationally have challenged medical, deficit constructions of disabled people. They have created counter narratives which offer multiple constructions of disabled people within a discourse of ability, social inclusion and equal participation (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). While the formation of negative self-identities are not denied, people with disability have also recast their identities as Able and in so doing have introduced a knowledge base which speaks of hope, agency, capacity, renewal and possibility (Watson, 2002). The stories of PWS raise similar issues but they have not been

subjected to analysis within the professional research domain.

### Theoretical frame

Self-identity responds to the question of 'Who am I?' (Castells, 1997; Somers, 1994). Self-identities only become identities when people *internalise* them (Mishler, 1999) and must be differentiated from roles and role-sets. While people may have many roles (e.g., as mother, basketball player, driver), such roles might not contribute to their identity constructions. Identities are sources of meaning that actors construct for themselves through processes of individuation. Although identities may coincide with roles, they are stronger sources of meaning (Castells, 1997). The term "identity formation" reinforces the process orientation of the self as "becoming" from past through present into the future. Identities have the capacity to be either *stable* or *flexible* over time (Valsiner, 2002). Understandings of the self may change or stabilise over time depending on personal and social dimensions of life such as bodily, cognitive, emotional, temporal, relational, macro-structural, cultural, institutional, and moral influences (Somers, 1994).

Identities are formed in the midst of multiple, fluid and changing societies in which people live (Bauman, 2001). The process of "becoming someone" unfolds in local sociocultural contexts "as each of us struggles in the process of coming to know, we struggle not as autonomous beings who single-handedly perform singular fates, but as vulnerable social subjects who produce and are being produced by culture" (Britzman, 1993, p. 24). People make sense of who they are by appreciating the multiple subject positions they occupy within their social-cultural relational matrix. Ethnicity, gender, class, age, race and geography therefore become significant influences on self-identity formation (Howard, 2000).

When individuals come to understand who they are or who they should be, they do so against the backdrop of a powerful social value system, i.e., what it means to be "good" or "bad", and "normal" or "abnormal" in society. Stuttering is predominantly understood as either *impairment* or a *disability* across many societies that have been researched (Van Riper, 1982). A recent global project to measure public attitudes about stuttering revealed that stuttering around the world was perceived negatively (St. Louis, 2005). How do PWS construct their identities in a value-driven society?

In addition to societal influences on self-identity, the personal, embodied experience of living with stuttering is also significant. Young (1989, p.152) explained that:

People are tender of their bodies as if their selves are inhered in its organs, vessels, tissues, bones and blood,

as if they were embodied. Embodying the self is an important shift in the context of understanding medical narratives because it installs a Self into the body.

PWS have described stuttering as an embodied experience in which they experience an involuntary loss of control in producing fluent speech resulting in varied negative psychosocial consequences (Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Sue-O'Brien, 1993). In the context of such embodied and intimate everyday experience of living with stuttering in a social world, the intention of this study was to discern how participants developed their self-identity as Able.

## Methodology

A life history narrative methodology was used to explore self-identity formations because it was dynamic, flexible and process-orientated. It allows an understanding of the complex interrelated personal, bodily, temporal and social dimensions of experience to emerge through story telling (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). The narrative form is a cognitive structure that uses a storied plot to draw together temporal life events and past actions into a coherent whole (Polkinghorne, 1996a), revealing the individual's self-identity.

### Aim

The aim of this research was to describe the nature of and processes of self-identity formation as Able over the life courses of adults who stutter. The exploration of self-identity formation as Able emerged during the research process as participants described their experiences of being Able.

### Participants

Participants were recruited through a local stuttering self-help group; hospital based speech-language pathology units; private practices and the university community. Through purposive sampling 10 people met the criteria for participation: they stuttered since early childhood; had information rich life stories that potentially reflected robust identity formations

as Able; used English as a functional language of communication and were able to commit to prolonged engagement with the researcher through a minimum of three in-depth interviews. Seven participants were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy (Plummer, 2001). Participants were selected because their experiences varied in relation to their gender, race, age, social circumstances, culture, severity of stuttering and self-defined success with living with stuttering. Informed consent was obtained from participants after clarifying issues of confidentiality, voluntary participation, withdrawal, risks and benefits. The study met the ethical guidelines set by the university research committee. Participant profiles at the time of initial data collection are summarised in Table I.

### Data production

In-depth interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), supported by an open-ended life history interview schedule (example of questions in Appendix A), were used to engage participants in storytelling about living with stuttering. The interview questions avoided the influences of the medical model by creating open-ended opportunities for participants to tell stories about success from multiple subject-positions. The management of power imbalances inherent in the research context was negotiated with participants with the intention of developing a respectful research relationship (Measor & Sykes, 1992). Issues such as managing the moment of the block, repair strategies and eye contact were clarified to promote easier communication. During the data production process, the researcher featured as an instrument (Harry, 1996) adopting a self-reflective, critical stance (Peshkin, 2001). This process was monitored by peer critique and reflective memo-writing (Charmaz, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A Panasonic mini-cassette tape-recorder (RQ-L30) was used to record all interviews. Prolonged engagement (Plummer, 2001) and member-checking ensured that the data was collected and analysed in a rigorous manner (Angen, 2000; Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Each interview lasted for approximately two hours and the total interview time for participants ranged from 6 to 10 hours. Contact with

Table I. Biographical summary profiles of participants.

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Severity of stuttering	Therapy	Occupation/Education
Gareth	Male	65	White	Mild	Yes	Retired architect; University
Hennie	Male	29	White	Moderate to severe	Yes	Accountant; University
Siyanda	Male	32	Black	Moderate	No	Director: Arts Association; High School: Standard Nine
Thabo	Male	19	Black	Severe	Yes	University student
Kumari	Female	36	Indian	Mild	No	Accountant; University
Sagren	Male	32	Indian	Moderate	Yes	Manager; University
Nontokoza	Female	20	Black	Severe	Yes	University student

participants extended over a year. Each participant was interviewed at least 3 times. Two additional contacts were made to clarify information and for member-checking.

### Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim from audio-tape recordings and checked for accuracy by the researcher and research assistant. Data analysis of transcribed interviews occurred at two levels. A first level representational narrative analysis (Freeman, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1996b) was done on each biography enabling a research story for each participant to emerge. The raw data were configured, by means of a plot, into a story, thereby moving from elements to stories to explain a particular end. Each research story reflected a temporal ordering of critical life events in which each part of the story was given meaning via its reciprocal relationship with other parts of the story (Appendix B).

The second level of analysis used a mixed strategy (Reddy, 2000) of grounding the analysis within the individual case as well as constant comparisons across cases. The analysis process was also iterative as the researcher moved backwards and forwards between the interview data, research stories and emerging categories on a continuous basis to generate constructs and themes that responded to the research question (Charmaz, 1995).

## Results

The nature of and processes shaping self-identity formation are described and supported by excerpts from individual research stories. Excerpts are drawn from five of the seven stories that revealed robust self-identity formations as Able. Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

### *Unfolding trajectories of self-identities as Able: Early foundations and critical junctures*

Some participants developed understandings of themselves as Able (positive self-identity) early in their lives through positive childhood experiences unrelated to stuttering (e.g., participating in sport, good academic achievement). The common thread in their stories was that their feelings of being Able were linked to inclusion, achievement and support at home and/or school.

*Gareth:* Early on in primary school I became very conscientious. I was bright, but not wildly bright and I worked really hard to do well. I did very well academically. Fortunately, there was always the other side. Playground and friends were a real joy. I had a talent and passion for soccer. We get to the field, in teams. Captain. Gareth Blake. Coach. Gareth Blake. Manager. Gareth Blake. I am the team. They played in My team. Stuttering is furthest from my mind. After

I race home with my bicycle-friends and then join my cricket-friends, lots of friends. No stuttering issues.

The role of parents, teachers, friends and significant others in laying firm foundations during the early years is of note. Participants came to understand themselves as Able through the positive responses to their stuttering from those closest to them.

*Siyanda:* My mother was so happy with her little boys she never said anything bad about the stutter. It was just part of us. Our older brothers and sisters, six in all, never seemed to bother much about it. At home, the way we spoke, with our stutter, wasn't a problem.

*Thabo:* Home was different from school. My relationship with both my parents was very solid. They are loving and understanding, especially my mother. My mother is down to earth and very sensitive, like me. She also had a stutter when she was young but that went away. She was always a very good listener, especially to me.

Besides viewing themselves as Able, participants also developed competing self-identities as DisOther (negative understandings of themselves as different and disabled) by their adolescent years (Kathard, 2004). This suggests that their self-identity formations as Able became threatened or masked during this developmental life stage. Their understandings of themselves therefore did not unfold in neat, graduated ways but developed over time through significant interweaving of understandings of themselves as Able and DisOther.

*Siyanda:* One day, when I was 14 years old when I met Bheki on my way home from school. He was running a drama project and asked us (me and my twin brother who also stuttered) to join. Maybe he thought it would help with stuttering. It looked good but this not for me. Bheki was persistent but I was resistant. I stutter. I can't do those things. He didn't make me say words. I used emotions to communicate. I didn't speak or stutter. A really good audition for someone who stutters. He taught me some important things. I had potential. I can communicate. I can communicate even if I stutter. It was a small step but a critical one, from darkness into light. Inside, I started to see things differently too and eventually started my own Drama company.

In each of their biographies participants described critical transitions through which they began to understand that they had a purpose in life grander than *just being a stutterer*. These incidents and processes occurred in their immediate contexts of home and school and were shaped by significant others including their peers, parents and teachers. Such incidents (which recurred at different points in their lives) served a catalytic function in the creation of an alternative identity which stood in opposition to and challenged the beliefs of themselves as "disabled and less than". Importantly, participants

made strategic and favourable life choices at these critical junctures.

*Siyanda:* There were many ups and downs in my life but later on another incident occurred. I did Drama on the side but had to go to work. We were oppressed workers and I felt trapped. I was involved in a fight with other workers. As I lay in the pool of blood I knew that it was a sign from my ancestors for me to change direction. What is my purpose on earth? We all were put here for some reason. What is my mission? After much thought and through the guidance of my ancestors I knew my mission was to be an educator and help to uplift the community. It was my mother, Bheki and my ancestors who really helped me to realise that there was a bigger purpose in life. You can't only change how you speak without changing who you are.

*Gareth:* The stutter was still bad as I grew up but there was always more to me than being a stutterer. I knew that on the soccer field. I was the captain. I did extremely well at University and was on my way to becoming an architect. In my first job, my boss knew I had talent. I was fortunate that life went well and I became a husband, father, a successful business partner, a joyful grandfather. There was more to life than stuttering, a grander purpose and that was important to know that at all times.

The incidents and life events which spurred participants to develop positive self-understandings were unique in each biography but shared a common thread. Therefore, although their life circumstances are vastly different, Gareth and Siyanda describe their grander purpose in life within a social context which valued certain achievements such as becoming successful businessmen, community educator, occupying leadership positions and playing a nationally recognised sport.

#### *Strengthening, reinforcing and sedimenting self-identity as Able*

Participants described a series of resourcing processes and actions which helped them to strengthen, reinforce, stabilise and sediment self-understandings as Able. These processes were constantly operational although they gathered and lost momentum as participants negotiated uncertain and complex lives. Although presented here as separate, these processes were cyclical and intertwined.

*Enabling philosophies for self-development.* Participants shared different personal enabling philosophies during late adolescence and adulthood which helped them to create understandings of themselves as Able. They appropriated socially-available philosophies from religious, spiritual, self-help entities available via religious institutions, self-help courses, the media and literature.

*Kumari:* I started reawakening, very, very gradually. I was about 30 years old then. My spiritual guide was my

brother-in law who is disabled. He opened my eyes and my heart. I started to peep at the world differently. I joined the Sai Movement, an international movement which teaches about human values, peace, trust, spiritual development. Slowly, very slowly I began to evolve, imperceptible shifts like the hands on the clock, but shifts nevertheless. I start to question what is important for me. I start to look at myself on the inside and I did not like the empty spaces left by years of childhood abuse.

I found much of this learning abstract until I attended Mind Power, a self-development workshop. After four weeks of Mind Power I started to see a new me. It gave me the tools to concretise and operationalise what I had been learning about spiritually. I learned to replace negative with positive, to replace my lenses and see the world more differently and more brightly. All my life I used my dark inner world to construct every experience. Stuttering and fear were very much part of that dark inner world. I had to build myself inside-out. My journey continues.

Enabling philosophies were not necessarily static. They changed and developed over time in particular ways as is evident in Kumari's story of self development. The nature of participants' philosophies varied. While Kumari drew on a combination of spiritual and cognitive-psychological philosophies which help to build her inside-out, Sagren relied on cognitive self-help strategies.

*Sagren:* I attended a self-help course. I learned. Enjoy life. Stop worrying and start living. Focus on NOW. Not yesterday. I know I will have to continuously re-invent myself. I must see things through new eyes. I realise the way I saw stuttering was the problem itself. I always had this idea that speaking was difficult, listeners were critical, and I was powerless. There is that famous quote that people only have power over with you with your permission. I find new ways of thinking about myself, my life and my stuttering.

*Resourcing to create advantage.* Participants consistently added to their repertoire of resources which contributed to their positive self-identity. They explained the value of enhancing their communicative resources and developing an emotional literacy as fundamental dimensions contributing to their positive self-identity formation.

*Broadening the framework of communication.* Participants understood communication in a broader context of meaning-making and did not limit their understanding of good communication to only being fluent. Their focus therefore wasn't entirely on managing the stutter but rather on establishing a meaningful exchange. Building relationships and collaborative communication, creating conducive environments, understanding cultural conventions, negotiating power, conflict management, managing emotions, social graces, using multilingualism to creative advantage, enhancing speech intelligibility and fluency became part of a larger skills

repertoire which combined to create enhanced communication.

*Siyanda:* As a member of the Youth Interaction Group I went to many workshops and training courses. I learned so many new skills. The thing that helped me with the stutter was the stage techniques and assertiveness skills. These skills helped me to communicate better with an audience. I learned how to position myself, use gesture, facial expression, change the loudness and tone of my voice, speak slower, clearer, breath control... I figured out that if I breathed a little air out and made a slight sound I could continue. I also have the benefit of using two languages. Good communication does not mean just fluent speech. It means that you must read the people and situation well. I treat everyone with love and respect from high calibre to grassroots. I listen to each one, to their inner thoughts and value their contributions.

Participants did not have prescribed ways of managing each situation. They adapted their strategies flexibly so that they could manage communication effectively.

*Siyanda:* I don't have a prescribed way of how I will interact in any situation. I use all the resources I have and choose what is suitable. It depends on the situation. The thing I do is adjust to the level of the person I am talking to, not to the stutter.

Participants created advantage by skilfully managing the power dimensions in the interaction. Careful preparation of relevant material prior to meetings, being knowledgeable, using "expert" language and terminology placed them in a position of advantage from which they felt enabled. They alluded to the importance of being knowledgeable as a means of asserting power. In societies which value knowledge and regard knowledge as powerful, this strategy proved useful for all participants. Their ability to manipulate power in a strategic way contributed to a sense of enablement.

*Gareth:* When I speak to Smarty Pants I use esoteric terms that floor him. It goes over his head. I know this stuff well. Suddenly I feel powerful, speak fluently and make my points. I will not let him get the better of me, and the words just flow.

*Sagren:* I have learned one very very important thing that helps me with my speech. Knowledge is power. When you are the master of what you are talking about, the person you are talking to will sit and listen because he wants to know what you have to say. I have the upper hand. Communication is a lot more than good fluency. It is about meaning and relationships.

*Developing emotional literacy.* Stories revealed the importance of positive emotional states contributing to and reinforcing an intimate knowing of themselves as Able. While the cognitive processes of creating selves as Able were constantly operational, the

emotional layering is emphasised here. Participants developed an emotional literacy, i.e., their ability to "learn and read" emotion. Their emotional literacy occurred at two levels. Firstly, at a personal level, their learning was associated with positive emotional states experienced through repeated life events and daily living situations, e.g., joy, happiness. Their life events vary.

*Siyanda:* It is about knowing that I am doing the right thing, educating my community. I have a powerful feeling and a driving force that makes me put my heart and soul into the performance. Then the words flow, stuttering technique included.

*Gareth:* It is a great joy in being a father. Tenting was one of the best times to develop real bonds and we did that often. Under that little tent with the rain beating down on the roof: you, your wife and three children huddled together... the rest of the world didn't matter. In that kind of relationship and situation you feel good and stuttering was furthest from my mind.

Their emotional literacy contributed to successful social exchanges. Their ability to manage emotional outbursts or disruptions successfully occurred via multiple strategies, e.g., being aware of and monitoring their emotional states, taking time out at points of extreme stress, developing strategies for rapid return to a conducive emotional state within a normative social context. Gareth, Siyanda and Sagren explained how they were constantly aware of their emotional states and managed them prior to and within social interaction. During conversations, they scanned and analysed emotional tones and actively managed them in varied ways. They steered conversations in the direction of a positive emotional experience. Over time they learned to manage anger, fear, hopelessness and explained that emotions were not suppressed but rather managed as an inextricable part of their experience. Their positive emotional well-being contributed to their overall sense of being Able which, in turn, carried over into living successfully with stuttering.

Secondly, they were sensitive to emotions of their communication partners and were attuned to subtle social signals which allowed them to read and respond to situations appropriately. Frequently, participants commented on their ability to read emotionality in interpersonal contexts. They were conscious of the need to lay positive emotional foundations to encourage relationships characterised by empathy, compassion, trust and respect. These foundations formed the basis for promoting mutual engagement and successful communication.

*Gareth:* I always lighten the air by creating little side jokes especially if there is a degree of seriousness or pomposity about the whole thing. I break the formality by lightening the atmosphere. In a strange way I have become more sensitive about communication. I can pick

up vibrations and things with people. I know what's inside peoples heads better than she does. I think I can read atmospheres. It is like a sixth sense. I can sense when there is a degree of discomfort or if there is confrontation looming. Vibrations come from people not walls. When I know the situation like this then I can act on it. I diffuse the situation or soften the reaction. I am also good at listening and so this makes me a good communication partner. It helps them to know me better too and get beyond the stutter.

*Personal acceptance and counter-narratives.* A key aspect reinforcing positive self-identity was to accept the stutter as part of who they were. The acceptance of stuttering helped to (re)construct and strengthen their self-identity as Able. They accepted stuttering as different but reinscribed it as a normal part of who they were—a paradoxical different normal.

*Sagren:* I have reached a point where I socialise easily and enjoy being with people. I speak when I have to. I accept stuttering as part of who I am, like my limbs. It is part of me. I will even tell people I stutter if I think it is necessary. I carry on with everything I have to do, with my stutter.

Acceptance was not an easy process as most participants were socialised into negative understanding of who they were as “stutterers” at an early stage in their lives. Their acceptance came through questioning what the stutter was and how it shaped who they were. The influence of the socio-political context was evident in the formation of self-identity as Able for some participants. Their narratives unfolded in a post-apartheid South Africa where constructs of difference and discrimination were being challenged. Gareth and Siyanda drew on political discourses of transformation and African Renaissance to make sense of themselves within renewed social discourses of race, impairment, normality and disability and through such interrogation began to understand themselves positively.

*Siyanda:* The first thing for me to deal with different kinds of discrimination and prejudice because of the colour of my skin and my stutter. The African Renaissance gives me the power to celebrate who I am. This includes my black skin, my African nose, and my stutter. I need to restore my pride in being human, to respect myself and to understand that we are all equal in the eyes of God. For me, now it is normal to stutter. It is part of me but it is different to you. Can we live with difference? Unity in diversity? Can society understand this I also worked out a way to use the stutter to my advantage. I integrated it into my stage technique. I developed my own special style, Siyanda style. I don't feel ashamed of who I am. I just put on my best appearance with the stutter. It is part of me.

In Siyanda's story, reconstruction of identity as Able occurred at the intersections of race, class and stuttering suggesting that reconstruction and

challenge of dominant social understanding may occur along multiple dimensions not just on the basis of impairment. Gareth by contrast, accepted that stuttering was a problem but challenged the essentialised understanding of himself as “only a stutterer”. Impairment was acknowledged as part of who they were but did not remain the prime source of self-identification.

*Gareth:* Transitions are never easy but we have a democracy in South Africa and the best constitution in the world. Human rights are currently on the agenda all over the place. It is a time when we realise that we all have our problems and we can talk about them. It is important to recognise that we all have an equal place, all people including stutterers.

Participants' personal acceptance was extended into the public space. They raised a political struggle by challenging the negative stereotype and common subordination of people with impairment in the media as well as their immediate living contexts. By foregrounding the critical tensions which had to be negotiated, they promoted a positive self-understanding in contrast to the negative public identity.

*Sagren:* I also phoned in to a radio show and gave my point of view. I think it is important for the public to understand who we really are. The self-help group did a media campaign to educate the public about stuttering.

*Gareth:* We wanted to convey the message that although PWS have a problem that is not what we're all about. Of course our veins stick up! But she just conveyed us as poor, poor people with a problem. This is what we must challenge. . . .

Critical self-reflexivity as a personal skill therefore became an important element in strengthening, reinforcing and sedimenting self-identity as Able. Participants awareness of how societal oppressions in their personal and political environments, and through the media contributed to their disabling self-identity as DisOther were in able to contest such constructions thereby creating the space for strengthening their self-identity as Able. By contrast, three participants in this study who were consumed by a meta social narrative which portrayed PWS as disabled continued to construct themselves DisOther. Although aspects of their stories indicated emerging self-identities as Able, they maintained a dominant self-identity as DisOther. An explanation of the unfolding self-identity as DisOther is documented in Kathard (2004).

Social validation as a process supporting positive self-identity formation emerged in different ways in their stories. Positive identities were strengthened, reinforced and sedimented when participants acknowledged positive feedback from people who were able to recognise their value and potential

beyond the mask of impairment i.e. when people were able to see them for who they really were.

*Gareth:* They are impressed, convinced and they accept the proposal. Nobody says anything about my speech. We talk about the drawings and future plans. I don't feel good about my speech but I get over it quickly. I wonder whether it was that bad after all. We did get the job and they were impressed with my drawings. Maybe they didn't focus only on the stutter. You must do a reality check. Even when I had my worst moments of stuttering in the practice people still came back. They didn't just turf me out after one bad stuttering affair. You must run reality checks or you imagine the worst.

While personal agency played a critical role in shaping self-identity as Able, the importance of social validation to sustain, strengthen and sediment positive self-identity formations cannot be understated.

*Siyanda:* People in my community know I stutter but they also know my talents. They often ask me to speak at their functions. The other day I was called to speak on behalf of a clan at a pre-wedding ceremony. The stutter was there but it was no problem.

*Sagren:* I honestly think that I make a bigger deal of it than they do. There is one lady at work who I speak to regularly and she even comments on how I am doing. Not long ago she said 'You are speaking well'. That makes a big difference.

In this vein, an important dimension of strengthening positive self-identity was that participants were able to reassess feedback from people in their network and they received positive social validation. Reality-checking enabled them to receive positive social validation. They questioned their assumptions that all of society held negative stereotypes of PWS and were alert to positive feedback received from their peers and colleagues. These processes, embedded in daily living, reinforced their changing beliefs about themselves and strengthened their self-identity as Able. The complex relationship between the social and personal processes in creating self-identity as Able, evident throughout the findings, is reinforced.

## Discussion

The genesis of self-identity formation as Able occurred via early positive experiences and at critical junctures at which participants begin to (re)define themselves as Able. The realization of having a grander purpose in life than "just being a stutterer" created the impetus for the unfolding processes of "Becoming Someone" who is not defined and limited by stuttering. This resistance to the entrapment of victimhood corresponded to the second phase of a transformation process described by Cochrane and Laub (1994) during which participants begin to position themselves as having a readiness for and making choices

towards active engagement. According to Plexico et al. (2005) incorporating success from other aspects of the lives of PWS contributed to managing stuttering effectively.

Participants' experience of critical life events involved risk-taking and choice-making which created the impetus for alternative self-identity formation. As they engaged with new opportunities they simultaneously resisted the role entrapment frequently experienced by PWS (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2003). Their shifting understanding of themselves as Able weakened the negative self-defining power of the stutter for PWS and created impetus for the emergence of a positive self-identity. The importance of the formation of an alternative identity as Able in this study resonated with Johnson's (1987) advice for living successfully with stuttering. He suggested that PWS need to (re)consider who they are (their self-identity) and their positioning within a grander cosmos as a basis for living successfully with stuttering. Positive self-identity is rooted in a social value system which has an expectation of positive identity formation, i.e., people should become "someone".

Participants' personal philosophies can be described as tools through which they re-inscribed themselves and hence live with stuttering more successfully. Philosophies became meaningful only when participants internalised and acted on the various precepts thereby strengthening their self-identities as Able. Hood, Chmela, Daly, Krall, Manning, Quesal, Ramig and St. Louis (1997) also described different paths to long-term recovery among people who stutter and emphasized diverse personal philosophies evident in living successfully with stuttering. Johnson (1987) reinforced a similar notion and advised working for a philosophical change and a personal philosophy to create a self that is advantaged.

Participants described multiple strategies by which they refined in their communication skills and hence felt more empowered. While they had developed strategies for managing the moments of stuttering, their attempts at enhancing communication were not limited to specific attention to fluency. Cream et al. (2003) also reported that while participants in their study used prolonged speech as a means of gaining fluency, they did not rely on it as a primary strategy to enhance communication. Strategic management of communication assisted participants in this study in occupying positions of power which they were able to manipulate to their advantage. They enhanced their communicative mastery by learning to understand conflict, managing a multitude of relationships and uncertainties, making on-line decisions to cope with unpredictable communicative contexts as well as rehearsing and preparing with intention to gain control of the communicative process. According to Kamhi (2003) effective communication should not be narrowly defined as being fluent or being able to

modify or eliminate stuttering behaviours. Cream et al. (2003) also found that participants in their study used a range of personal communication strategies to reduce the social harm commonly experienced by PWS.

The findings revealed the importance of emotional literacy, infused through personal and social exchange layers of experience, for creation of self-identity as Able. These layers of emotional literacy coalesced and gathered momentum over time to create the experience of feeling enabled. Participants positioned themselves at strategic vantage points as part of their strategy to manage situations to their advantage. In such contexts of occupying a higher status, people are likely to experience high status compatible positive emotions (Lovaglia & Houser, 1996) which served to strengthen and reinforce their self-identity as Able. These findings resonate with emotional intelligence literature (Goleman, 1995). He explained that people who are successful develop an emotional intelligence which supports their self-development. The notion of emotional literacy confirms that, while self-identity is shaped by multiple ways of knowing, the affective dimension remains critical because it draws on direct experiential knowledge. Participants' accumulation of skills in this study shares alignment with the skills development phase described by Cochrane and Laub (1994).

This study highlighted the role of personal acceptance of stuttering as well as the contestation of the public narrative in strengthening and reinforcing self-identity as Able. Although each experience was unique, self-acceptance occurred when impairment was not bracketed but embraced or included as an aspect of everyday life (Watson, 2002). In making these transitions participants created alternative self-identities which opposed the dominant biomedically-driven understanding of impairment as a social tragedy. In essence, they defined themselves on their own terms. Thomas (2004) asserted that without a counter narrative which served to challenge the social norm individuals may be trapped in the story lines of the dominant disabling narrative. Participants' personal struggles against the grand public narrative of disability were constantly at play and negotiated in their immediate circumstances. These processes, which served to sediment self-identity as Able, correspond to the fourth phase of experiencing liberation (Cochrane & Laub, 1994). During this phase participants enjoyed a sense of liberation as they understood their lives to be unrestricted and open to possibility.

## Implications

### *Clinical practice*

*Listening to the story.* While the life history interview was used as a research methodology, its potential to be applied as a clinical methodology deserves

attention. Storytelling allows insights into a multiplicity of issues such as dominant self-identity formations, personal philosophies, real concerns and the opportunities for new self-identity formation to evolve and social contexts to be challenged. Through such listening we might create interventions which aspire to be person-centred and holistic as the story, by its very nature, can only be understood as an integrated whole. The importance of narrative-based interventions with PWS has been emphasized by clinicians and researchers (Manning, 2001; Van Riper, 1982) but not yet fully incorporated into professional practices.

*Inserting identity into intervention.* This study makes a case for considering identity with adults who stutter as a core issue in intervention by shifting the focus from the stutter – the impairment – to the person living with stuttering in a social context. Identity is a dynamic, social and personal construct therefore making it a useful conduit through which to understand the thoroughfare between stuttering, self and society. According to Hagstrom and Wertsch (2004) including issues of identity into practice creates responsible socially-driven practices. It is through understanding identity that the purposeful actions of PWS can be deepened, i.e., it allows insights into “Who am I” as a basis for understanding actions that defy the intrusion of stuttering. The notion of identity affords the opportunity for “life” to be inserted into the intervention process thereby creating opportunities for agency.

*Reframing goals: Evolving as a person.* The goals of clinical interventions may vary and this study suggests that PWS do not singularly pursue a life of “getting rid of stuttering” but rather seek to develop understandings of themselves as Able. Clinical interventions could explore how identities unfold. The basis for intervention may require an exploration of critical incidents; the impact of the actions of significant others; the meaning of agency and social values. This approach will provide insights into who the person is and is becoming. The goal of focusing on the evolving person rather than exclusive focus on stuttering as a behaviour is supported by DiLollo, Manning and Niemeier (2002) who promote a narrative-based approach to intervention. They have suggested that the clinical task is to understand and help PWS to evolve a new view of the self and innate possibilities. It is critical that there is a deconstruction of the dominant narrative (negative identity) and the recreation of an alternative story as a significant intention of therapy.

*(Re)directing interventions.* Personal stories of stuttering in this study raised bigger debates about what it means to be a valued individual in society. What is normal? What is able? What are the values of society and do they need to be challenged? The stories

in this study suggest that while personal self-development is key to creating self-identity as Able, the social dimensions are equally significant. Parents, teachers, significant others, media social institutions make up an often invisible but very powerful force which shapes lives in significant ways thereby creating notions of ability and disability. While interventions traditionally place a weighty focus on the individual, the need to foreground societal interventions through changing value systems, are equally important.

*Diversity of interventions.* In this study participants chose diverse interventions, with speech therapy being one of many options. They reported benefit from different types of interventions depending on their life circumstances. They also used a wide repertoire of self-learned skills which were refined over time. The findings illuminate the potential value of self-generated strategies and encourage clinicians to consider what really helps People Who Stutter. If successful living with stuttering comes through self-development through a multitude of different strategies, what then are the implications for speech therapy interventions? Are practices which are limited to managing the communication skills sufficient when identity becomes the unit of analysis and intervention? Are practitioners sufficiently skilled to engage with social interventions and reinventions of self? Can the profession infuse a discourse of ability as a basis for practice?

#### *Research implications and limitations*

Narrative studies are not intended to generalise. However, the analysis of stories of different lives is likely to inform the work of speech-pathologists in a very meaningful way. The stories of young children, older adults and adolescents may lend very important insights into identity formations across the life span. The cultural contexts can be illuminated through analysis of personal narratives. This study proposes the nature of transitional processes in the lives of PWS. The understanding of such processes are incomplete and require further in-depth analysis along many dimensions e.g. the role of emotions, social norms, actions and choices, strength and influence of personal beliefs.

Life history methodology is limited in the types of participants it is able to attract. It relies on story telling and not all potential participants were willing to share their stories for various reasons, for example, the severity of stuttering, the resistance to sharing of private information, lack of time, motivational issues. The researcher was also at a disadvantage because she did not share a common language with many potential participants in a country which is linguistically diverse. The study was therefore limited only to those who could share their stories in English. All participants in the study were educated and

literate despite their diverse backgrounds. It would be very important to explore self-identity formations in participants who have poor literacy and formal education (which is common in South Africa) as this might render useful insights into how stuttering is lived in diverse communities.

Researchers engaged in narrative methodologies, perhaps like all other researchers, understand that interpretation is enhanced by but also limited by their own horizons and positioning. Despite the intention to hear the whole story, the researcher acknowledges that the analysis is never complete and that theory building is always in process.

#### **Conclusion**

The intertwined personal, social and temporal processes combined to support participant's transition to becoming Able and hence allowing them to live successfully with stuttering.

Their agency was supported by:

- Engagement with personal philosophies for self-development drawn from participants contexts of experience;
- Enhancing communicative skills repertoire within a broad framework of communication, developing an emotional literacy and manipulating power strategically;
- Accepting and negotiating stuttering as part of positive self-identity formation while contesting negative public social constructions of their identity. They were also supported by and responsive to social validation.

The temporal lens revealed that the formation of self-identity trajectories were not necessarily linear but appeared to unfold in cycles of progression and retrogression although moving in the direction of a purposeful, empowered or agentic (Polkinghorne, 1996b) self-identity formation. The temporal nature of personal and social processes creating, strengthening, reinforcing and sedimenting self-identity formation as Able were found to be constantly operational and cumulative in nature. The analysis of these unfolding processes, while non-linear and resisting clear separation, revealed that during the initial phase of self-identity formation participants built on existing foundations and at critical junctures made choices to pursue a trajectory of positive self-identity formation. The reinforcing and sedimenting of self-identity as Able was influenced by accumulation of varied skills and there was a significant sustained personal effort at resourcing and actioning. When participants felt enabled they experienced liberation and empowerment and were well-positioned to live successfully with stuttering.

The biographies also illustrated the influential role of society, which has multiple and competing understandings of stuttering in shaping self-identity.

Society can create enabling and disabling contexts. Participants aspired to being Someone Able by virtue of an embedded social value system which celebrated and promoted the rhetoric of ability inserted into personal lives of participants. The people in immediate daily environments played an influential role in shaping self-identity as Able by creating opportunities, possibilities and dreams for participants to "Become Someone". At another level, socio-political contexts are dynamic and through their value systems have potential to fashion self-identities (differently) given their changing value systems. As example, post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed a shifting in public discourse from that of categorisation, difference and unfair discrimination to diversity, human rights, potential and inclusion which created a discursive contextual space which for refashioning of self-identities for some participants. The study makes a strong case for the inclusion of self-identity as a central concept in clinical and research domains.

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## Appendix A

### Examples of questions from the interview schedule

These types of questions were used to guide the interview. However, the story generally unfolded and was allowed to run with exploration of events and issues as they emerged. The questions were open-ended to allow participants to share what was most significant in their lives.

- Tell me about what is significant about your life now? Any important events or issues you would like to discuss (e.g., I have just graduated from college, my father died recently, I have changed jobs).
- Let's go back to your early childhood. Tell me about your childhood.

- What was your experience of stuttering during this time?
- Which were the most significant events in your school life? How did these experience influence experience of stuttering?
- Schools attended, performance at school, pre-school, primary, secondary, post secondary.
- What were classroom experiences like? What was your relationship with teachers.
- How did they respond to you? What happened that was most significant in relation to stuttering? What activities did you participate in? What did you enjoy and what didn't you enjoy.
- Who did you spend time with?
- How did you progress academically?
- What were your most significant achievements?
- Tell me about what happened after school/ adolescent years.
- Which were your most significant experiences through adulthood?
- Tell me about stuttering during this time and how you were managing?

## Appendix B

*Siyanda's story*  
*Too good to be true?*  
*Our (Mis)fortune?*

We came into this world with a stutter. I think Xolani my twin brother and I were born with it. It's God's will. Like everything else it is God's will. My mother was so happy with her little boys she never said anything bad about the stutter. It was just part of us. Our older brothers and sisters, six in all, never seemed to bother much about it. At home, the way we spoke, with our stutter, wasn't a problem. Outside home it was a different story. Our first bad memory of stuttering was in Standard One, my third year at school, when I was about eight years old. We went to school in Umlazi, an African township, in the 1970s and the rules were strict. One of the English teachers asks a question. If you don't know the answer then you stand up. He asks me a question. I am in the process of a stutter. I am trembling and I can't get it out. He hits me. He thinks I don't know the answer. A few seconds later I cough up the answer – out through my mouth and it drops into his ear. He shouts at me "Why didn't you say the answer when I asked you?" I tell him I was in the process of a stutter. He goes back and explains that to all the other teachers. I think he felt guilty. That is my first memory when I was punished for not answering a question on time because of the stutter. I broke the rules. The only other one who knew what was happening to me was my Xolani. We have this connection. We just sit quietly in class in silence. We are very scared that we might not be able to say the words.

The children at school pick on us because of the stutter. They tease us a lot. They knew if they irritate us enough then we will stutter. They say “Siyanda, you are in love with that lady. You have to date her”. They are pointing to the ugliest one. They make me cross. I try to fight back and I stutter. That is what they are waiting for. They laugh. We play soccer and if you don’t score a goal they say “You missed because you stutter. You can’t kick the ball because the stutter goes to your leg, you miss”. “You stutter because you are twins and your mother didn’t kill one of you”. In the Zulu community in which we lived there was a story about twins which started at some time in the days of the Zulu Kings of Dingaan or Shaka. As the story went it was a bad omen when twins were born and one would have to be killed. The people in the community had this belief that stuttering was a misfortune. They thought we were not like normal children and they didn’t understand what we went through. The adults didn’t tease us but the children did.

#### *Turning around*

I continued in high school, alone, and still the Shy Guy. I still didn’t want speak, be exposed and the centre of attraction. I carried on in this way until some small things happened which started to change my life around. I grew hungry for knowledge and then I became greedy. I read everything to know more. I was playing soccer and become team captain. I started to get good marks in my tests. The children didn’t tease me. The current was starting to flow in the right again. The current was pushing me in a new direction. One day, when I was in Standard Seven I met Bheki on my way home. He was running a drama project and asked us to join. Maybe he thought it would help with stuttering. We said no. A few days later I was curious and watched from a distance. It looked good but this not for me. Bheki was persistent but I was resistant. I stutter. I can’t do those things. He begged “Just try, just once”. I tried just to show him I can’t do it but he was very, very clever. He set up the audition very differently for me. I didn’t have a script. It went something like this:

Bheki: Laugh Siyanda  
 Siyanda: How can I? There is nothing to laugh about  
 Bheki: LAUGH  
 Siyanda: I can’t  
 He slapped me a few times  
 Bheki: Now laugh  
 Siyanda: Laugh, laughter (tears rolling down my face)

Bheki: Cry  
 Siyanda: Cry, Cry (I cried)  
 Bheki: You did it. You have great potential

He didn’t make me say words. I used emotions to communicate. I didn’t speak or stutter. A really good audition for someone who stutters. He taught me some important things. I had potential. I can communicate. Communication is not just about words. I can communicate even if I stutter. It was a small step but a critical one, from darkness into light. Inside, I was a natural dramatist and maybe Bheki saw that. He saw more than the stutter. After that, I attended all the rehearsals and I started the first drama group at my school. I had a good new feeling in me. I soon became popular in school and started to enjoy it. I remember one girl saying to me “Siyanda, you are a leader”. Maybe she was right. I gained confidence and represented my school at the Youth Development Sessions. As a member of the Youth Interaction Group I went to many workshops and training courses. I learned so many new skills. The thing that helped me with the stutter was the stage techniques and assertiveness skills. These skills helped me to communicate better with an audience. I learned how to position myself, use gesture, facial expression, change the loudness and tone of my voice, speak slower, clearer, breath control. My stutter seemed less of a problem when I used these techniques. I could communicate better and I even took part in debates. The stutter is always there but I am moving away from the darkness of being the Shy Guy. Things went well at high school and I was in a position to communicate even with the stutter.

I feel confident so I start acting. Stuttering is disruptive especially when the character I am playing wasn’t meant to stutter and the whole crowd is watching. I can’t make it go away but I can make it easier by getting the airflow better. I had learned breath control as part of drama. I figured out that if I breathed a little air out and made a slight sound I could continue. I learned how to manage the breath-stream to keep it flowing. I also worked out a way to use the stutter to my advantage. I integrated it into my stage technique. Sometimes, I pause for effect and emphasis but I am really in a stutter. I developed my own special style, Siyanda style. People don’t think of it as a problem. The best part is that they really listen. When something is different it attracts attention. I can also use the techniques off stage if I choose but I generally focus on what I am saying and not the stutter and techniques.

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