



ATTITUDES OF PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS TOWARD COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO STUTTER

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Do college professors and college students have negative personality stereotypes of college students who stutter? College professors and college students filled out a questionnaire containing 20 personality items and judged, on a scale from 1 to 7, the degree to which either a hypothetical college student who stutters or a hypothetical average college student possesses the trait in question. In general, participants rated the hypothetical student who stutters more negatively on the personality traits than they rated the hypothetical average college student. However, professor participants rated the hypothetical student who stutters more negatively than did the student participants. Possible reasons for and implications of these findings are discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc.

Key Words: Attitude; Stutterers; Personality

Research suggests that personality characteristics not directly related to speech fluency are similar between stuttering and non-stuttering people (Bloodstein, 1995; Hulit, 1985; Van Riper, 1984). Yet most studies of people's attitudes toward persons who stutter find that such attitudes are generally negative, suggesting that most people believe that the typical person who stutters has a different and more negative personality than people who do not stutter. Such negative personality stereotypes toward people who stutter have been demonstrated in a number of groups, including store clerks (McDonald & Frick, 1954), elementary and secondary teachers (Lass, et al., 1992), vocational rehabilitation counselors (Hurst & Cooper, 1983), special educators (Ruscello & Lass, 1994), residents of small communities (Doody, et al., 1993), and even speech-language pathologists (Lass, et al., 1989).

Especially important to college students who stutter are the attitudes of their professors and student peers. After all, the evaluations and impressions of professors play a critical role in providing academic and career opportuni-

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Received 02 November 1998; Revised 04 October 1999; Accepted 26 July 1999.

ties for students. And other college students constitute an important source of social and academic support for most stuttering college students.

What attitudes do college professors and college students have toward students who stutter? Ruscello, et al. (1990/1991) found that professors selected predominantly negative adjectives in describing adults who stutter. On the other hand, Silverman (1990) found that college professors as a group rated the intelligence and competence of a college student who stutters at the center or positive end of intelligent/unintelligent and competent/incompetent bipolar semantic differential scales. However, neither the Silverman (1990) study nor the Ruscello et al. (1990/1991) study asked professors to rate a typical college student who does not stutter to see if professors' attitudes are any different toward the student who stutters than toward the student who does not stutter. Without such a comparison, it is unclear whether the attitudes professors have toward stuttering students are the same as or different than the attitudes they have toward non-stuttering students. Previous research has found that college students also have negative attitudes toward stuttering people (Bebout & Arthur, 1992; Ruscello, et al., 1988; Silverman, 1982), but again this research has not included a control condition in which students are asked to evaluate a non-stuttering person, nor has this research asked college students specifically to evaluate college students who stutter.

The purpose of the present study, then, was to further investigate attitudes professors and college students have toward college students who stutter by including the critical control condition in which attitudes toward the average, non-stuttering college student are also assessed. In addition, the present study examined whether attitudes toward the stuttering student differed between professors and college students.

METHOD

The questionnaires used in the present study asked participants to rate either an "average college student" or a "college student who stutters" on 20 personality traits. Participants rated only one of the two possible hypothetical students. The questionnaires instructed the participants to use their sense of how either an average college student or a college student who stutters would score on a test comparable to the MMPI or an IQ test, when rating the student on each of 20 personality traits. The instructions asked participants to circle a number between 1 and 7 to indicate the degree to which the student possessed that trait. Participants were instructed that higher the number they circled, the more they believed that the student possessed that trait. The questionnaire then presented the 20 traits and under each a list of numbers from 1 to 7. In the order presented on the questionnaire, the 20 personality traits were: open, nervous, shy, self-conscious, passive, intelligent, aggressive, guarded, bold, calm, dull, perfectionist, mediocre, self-assured, competent, reticent, reserved,

incompetent, talkative, and bright. The questionnaire included a short cover letter that explained that the questionnaire was part of a student research project and that completed questionnaires should be returned anonymously, thereby protecting the privacy of the respondents. The questionnaires were printed on one of two neutral colors of paper; questionnaires of one color were sent to professors and questionnaires of the other color were sent to the students.

Two hundred questionnaires were mailed through campus post offices at Hamline University and The University of Saint Thomas. One hundred questionnaires were sent to professors, half of which were the “average college student” version and half of which were the “college student who stutters” version. One hundred questionnaires were sent to students, half of which were the “average college student” version and half of which were the “college student who stutters” version. Thirty four professors and 57 students returned completed questionnaires. Of these 91 respondents, 31 participants returned the “average college student” version and 60 participants returned the “college student who stutters” version of the questionnaire.

A separate group of four students and two professors independently judged the desirability of each of the 20 traits by indicating for each whether the trait was positive or negative. A trait was classified as positive or negative if at least five of six people in the group agreed on its desirability, otherwise the trait was classified as neutral. The positive traits so classified were: open, intelligent, bold, calm, self-assured, competent, and bright. The negative traits so classified were: nervous, shy, self-conscious, passive, aggressive, dull, mediocre, reticent, and incompetent. The remaining four neutral traits were: guarded, perfectionist, reserved, and talkative.

RESULTS

The results were analyzed only for the 16 non-neutral traits. For each trait, the average rating score (a score between 1 and 7) was obtained for each sample of participants. For positive traits, lower scores indicated a more negative perception of the hypothetical student. For negative traits, higher scores indicated a more negative perception of the hypothetical student. The professor participants rated the hypothetical college student who stutters more negatively on 15 traits and more positively on 1 trait (the stuttering student was seen as less aggressive) than they rated the hypothetical average college student. A two-tailed sign test revealed that the tendency for professors to rate more negatively the college student who stutters was statistically significant, $p = 0.0004$. The student participants rated the hypothetical college student who stutters more negatively on 13 traits and more positively on 3 traits (the stuttering student was seen as less aggressive, less incompetent, and more intelligent) than they rated the hypothetical average college student. Again, a two-

tailed sign test revealed that the tendency for students to rate the hypothetical stuttering student more negatively was statistically significant, $p = 0.021$.

On the 16 non-neutral traits, the professors rated the hypothetical stuttering student more negatively than did the students on 11 traits, while the students rated the hypothetical stuttering student more negatively than did the professors on 5 traits. The professors rated the hypothetical average student more negatively than did the students on 2 of the traits, while the students rated the hypothetical average student more negatively than did the professors on 14 traits. The statistically significant chi-square ($\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 10.50$, $p = 0.001$) on these frequencies demonstrates that professor participants perceive the hypothetical stuttering college student more negatively than do the student participants.

DISCUSSION

A reasonable way to summarize the findings is to say that professors and college students perceive college students who stutter as being more negative on most personality traits, in comparison to how they perceive non-stuttering college students. The results also suggest that professors are even more negative in their attitudes toward stuttering students than are other students. Silverman (1990) concluded that college professors do not have negative attitudes about the intelligence and competence of their students who stutter. However, that study lacked a control condition in which professors rate the intelligence and competence of non-stuttering students. In the present study, professors rated the students who stutters lower on personality traits having to do with intelligence and competence, as well as on other personality traits, than they rated the average college student.

One possible reason that people perceive a stuttering person more negatively may be a process of generalization whereby people assume that some of the negative experiences, such as nervousness, that accompany their own normal disfluencies must chronically characterize a person who stutters (White & Collins, 1984). Negative personality stereotypes of people who stutter may also be reinforced by popular culture, such as the depiction of stuttering characters in films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *A Fish Called Wanda*.

Most of the research on attitudes toward people who stutter have asked participants to think about hypothetical people. In this hypothetical situation, perhaps attention is directed to the salient feature of the hypothetical person, namely, the stuttering, and not on other characteristics that make up the personality of an actual person (Hulit & Wirtz, 1994). In turn, perhaps the negativity associated with that salient feature is generalized to other traits, creating the generally negative stereotype upon which the evaluations of the hypothetical stutterer are based. In one of the few studies examining people's attitudes

toward an actual person, Wenker, Wegener, & Hart (1996) had participants listen to a lecture presented by an actor who exhibited either normal or disfluent speech and found that participants tended to display a more favorable attitude toward the actor when he acted like a person who stutters. Although more research like this is needed, it may be that the negative stereotypes that most people have of stuttering people do not necessarily affect their attitudes and behaviors when they actually get to know a person who stutters. Maybe this is why professors have somewhat more negative stereotypes of stuttering students than do the students' peers. Professors have fewer personal interactions with students, including stuttering students, and possibly focus more on the oral difficulties of the stuttering student. The stuttering students' peers may have more opportunities to get to know the stuttering student as a whole person and so place less emphasis on the stuttering.

It remains troubling that there is a tendency for professors and college students to hold to a negative stereotype of the student who stutters, even should it turn out that the attitudes embedded in that stereotype are discounted when they get to personally know a particular stuttering student. Just having the stereotype may have negative consequences for students who stutter (Ham, 1990). Based on the negative stereotype, students and professors may be reluctant to seek out interactions with stuttering students or may sometimes misperceive brief interactions with stuttering students as reinforcing of the stereotype. Based on the stereotype, professors may hesitate to encourage stuttering students in the students' pursuit of academic and occupational achievement. Reluctance to interact with stuttering students would undermine one way to reduce stereotypes, which is to increase the amount of exposure to individuals in the stereotyped group (e.g., Whitley, 1990). Without widespread contact, people tend to defend their stereotypes (Weber & Crocker, 1993).

The results of the present study, then, reinforce the need for educating college professors and students about negative stereotypes of people who stutter, in order to dispel the stereotypes. Perhaps such an education might focus on the need for initiating personal and professional interactions with students who stutter. Stuttering students themselves might also be encouraged to initiate such interactions and learn social strategies for interacting in ways that serve to diminish the negative impact of the stereotype. A useful source for learning such strategies may be found in Rustin & Kuhr (1999), who provide a set of small-group exercises to help speech-impaired people develop relevant social skills, such as making eye contact, initiating questions, and disclosing feelings. An example of one of their exercises requires the group members to rate their own feelings and discuss reasons for these feelings with other group members.

We conclude by striking one note of caution in our interpretation of the results of the present experiment. Only about 45% of the potential participants returned questionnaires; what's more, there was unevenness in the return rate.

Students were much more likely to return questionnaires than were professors, perhaps because the student took more seriously the research project of a fellow student. People who received the “college student who stutters” version were more likely to return questionnaires than were people who received the “average college student” version, perhaps because the latter version seemed somewhat pointless. As in any questionnaire study, but particularly one in which questionnaires are returned anonymously, as was the case in the present study, one can never be sure how the non-respondents would have responded. However, the present study revealed a more negative stereotype of the stuttering student which is consistent with other research that finds that people tend to have negative stereotypes of people who stutter.

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