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# Coming Out of the Stuttering Closet

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project delves into the lived experiences of individuals who covertly stuttered and have “come out of the stuttering closet.” Covert stuttering is a type of stuttering best explained as a person who stutters who is passing in society as fluent. Through open-ended, ethnographic interviews five adults told their “coming out of the closet” narrative; common themes emerged. The current study investigates the theme: the tipping point when hiding the stutter is no longer productive. The findings of the current study provide us insight into creating more client-centered therapy approaches, appreciation of research on other marginalized populations who “come out of the closet,” as well as increasing the understanding of what an individual may experience in coming out of the stuttering closet.

## INTRODUCTION

### Covert Stuttering:

Covert stuttering is a type of stuttering best explained as a person who stutters who is passing in society as fluent. An individual who stutters covertly potentially hides the stutter at all costs; for example, this may come in the form of taking on personality traits that are not true to the individual (e.g. acting “flakey”).

### Defining a “closet”

Any marginalized population has the risk of entering a closet. A closet is created due to shame; the shame is created due to stigma; stigma is created to a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of a difference. An individual who enters a closet is, to some extent, self-perpetuating a stigma (Goffman, 1986).

Douglass (2011) documented the “coming out of the closet” process for six individuals who stutter. The current project explores the theme “a changing event that lead to transition from covertly to overtly stuttering.” The investigation will analyze tipping point that motivated the participants to change from covertly to overtly stuttering.

### “Coming out of the closet”

As an individual sheds shame they begin to exit the darkness of the closet. The shame can decrease with education of the difference and their community increasing their support of differences (eg. diversity training; diversity campaigns).

## METHODS

### Participants:

- 5 participant narratives (3 male, 2 female)
- Early-mid adulthood (between 18-55 yrs old)
- Criteria: people who stuttered covertly in the past and at the time of the interview classified themselves as people who stuttered overtly, or people who recognized their covert stutter during the interview and were transitioning to stuttering overtly

### Interviews:

- Semi-structured, ethnographic interviews via electronic, live video
- Data transcribed for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
- Analysis identified common themes of lived experiences

## RESULTS:

### The Tipping Point

Participants came to a point where they felt that hiding wasn’t productive anymore.

Three common “tipping point” themes were identified :

### Attending Speech-Language Therapy

**Bonnie:** “I found out about another speech intensive program when I was there so I went to that. And that was **a lot of awful experiences wrapped up into one**. Making me do these things I had been trying to hide for so long and all the things that I feared the most and but at the end of it **it was really like what I needed all along**. Once I finally let myself um **confront my stuttering and let people hear my stuttering** and me become more comfortable with my stuttering then **it didn’t seem quite as bad.**”

**Chris:** “I ended up in the speech therapist’s office and I remember not wanting to look at the people in the waiting room and just sitting down and not stuttering. And I remember [the speech therapist] saying, **‘It’s okay you’re allowed to stutter here.’** And I remember him being the first one to say that and I remember him distinctly saying, ‘I understand’ and I remember telling him, ‘I’ve tried not to stutter my whole life’ and he said, ‘I understand’ he was very calm and I remember him telling me, **‘You are going to be not a good communicator you are going to be an extraordinary communicator.’** And you already are. I remember feeling totally relieved and **I remember for the first time feeling it was going to be okay.**”

## Paradigm Shift

**Annette:** “My first couple of [stuttering support group] meetings were a joke: the first meeting I cried the whole time, the second meeting I had to leave early. It took me about six months to say at a meeting that “I stutter” and you know it took me a while for me to be able to say that.

**Bonnie:** “So I found out about the [stuttering support group] and I went to that and I met a bunch of people who were just like crazy open about their stuttering and that was the first time I ever really heard anybody stutter and not really care. **They were just so proud of to speak the way they did and it really inspired me to want to be more like them.**”

**Frank:** “It took to me the age of 22 to meet another person who was, you know, like a successful like person who stuttered and it was so neat just to hear them stutter and it was almost like **indirect speech therapy**. I was never a client but these these people that I was around you know um I felt like I did my own kind of self therapy with like **observational learning** watching them do the things that they do, me learning about speech therapy learning about stuttering **applying these techniques that I’m learning to my stuttering and I felt like I became my own self.**”

## Psychological Low Point

**Annette:** “The guilt of not seeing it of thinking honestly believing that it was my fault. I had myself convinced that **if I had just told them that I stuttered they would have understood and I wouldn’t have been fired**. Which of course probably had not been the case. But I was living with that guilt and that fear of oh my god what am I going to do I don’t have a job I’m not going to have health insurance in a couple of weeks. **I was in that dark place**. Um, and **somehow I am here today and everything has completely changed** and I think it probably is I mean **that moment was definitely my defining moment.**”

**Chris:** “Within days of meeting [my SLP] my headaches and intense stomach pains went away. **All that pain just stopped** and I knew immediately that it was because **I was talking about my stuttering**. It may not be the most scientific thing to say but talking about my stuttering stopped the physical pain and I began sleeping better.”

**Doug:** “I was so so miserable at the job that I had and **I just needed to do something**. I needed to something you know. Just like get out of town. Oh, and then my girlfriend at two and a half years broke up with me too. It’s just like I just wanted to get out of town kinda. And I wanted to quit my job.”

## DISCUSSION

- The stuttering closet is real; the coming out of the stuttering closet process exists
- Individuals can conceal their stutter in such a way that even those closest to them don’t identify that person as a stutterer; doing such requires effort on the speaker’s part
- Being around others who stutter helped decrease shame

### Implications:

- Speech Therapy focused on affective and cognitive components is essential when the client presents with an impact in those areas of stuttering

### Limitations:

- All participants are involved in stuttering support groups; this will bias their experience and education on stuttering
- Due to small participant size, findings should not be generalized

## REFERENCES

Douglass, J. (2011). *An investigation of the transition process from covert stuttering to overt stuttering: An interpretive phenomenological analysis of individuals who stutter*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana.

Goffman, I. (1986). *Stigma: Notes on management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.