Coming Out of the Stuttering Closet
By Jill Douglass, PhD, CCC-SLP & Maria Schwab, B.S.
Department of Health Professions

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research project delves into the lived experiences of individuals who covertly stutter 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 “flaky”).

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 their cloak 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 (e.g. 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 Interpretive 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 I was really like what I needed all along. Once I finally let myself 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.”

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
