

Qualitative Analysis of Covert Stuttering: Workplace Implications and Saving Face

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Introduction: The current study is an investigation of persons who stutter covertly (PWSC). Previous evidence suggests the clients who report the most impact of stuttering on their life are the clients who rarely, if ever, allow others to see them stutter (Perkins, 1990). Our field is now building support for the concept that the *experiences* of the stutterer plays a key role in defining the impact of their stutter, i.e. quality of life (Craig, Blumgart & Tran, 2009; Yaruss, 2010). For this qualitative study, open-ended ethnographic interviews were conducted. The original study (Douglass, 2011) attempted to understand the transition process of six participants from covertly stuttering to openly acknowledging their stutter. For this symposium the findings will be narrowly presented, focusing on the themes associated with professional penalties and saving face. Comparisons between the disclosure process of LGBT and the current findings are made.

Current Research Question: What impact does covert stuttering have on professional and social identity?

Methodology

- Data collected as part of a broader study (Douglass, 2011)
- Audio recorded ethnographic interviews conducted via Skype
- Member checking was used for validity measures

Participants

- Participants: Six adults who identified themselves as persons who formerly covertly stuttered or were in transition of acknowledging their covert stuttering.
- Criteria for inclusion: (a) self-reported history of developmental stuttering, (b) they reported they were once primarily a PWSC and are either in the process of or have openly identifying themselves as a PWS, and (c) they are between the ages of 18 and 55.

Analysis & Results

- The transcript analyses were conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The two of the six major themes relevant to this symposium are presented and briefly discussed.
 - I. **Justifying Covert Status:** The justification of a lifestyle appeared to occur in order to make sense of such a tumultuous time in their lives.
 - a. **Sub theme: Saving Face**

Elise states: *Women who are attractive, who were like homecoming queen types, um, who were, you know, always looked up to as being attractive or popular or whatever, and they buried their stuttering because it didn't fit with that image (. . .) I*

fit into that a little bit, I mean I was a geek in high school so I don't fit that way but I was always concerned with, you know, it's not attractive to stutter (Appendix E lines 662-666).

Conclusion: In the findings of Annette, Elise, and Frank we can see they actively attempted to save face when participating in society as fluent members in order to maintain what they considered prestige in a "normal" social profile.

b. Sub theme: Professional Reputation

Annette states: *Well, I work at a school and there are some situations where I have to talk to a superintendent or a top dog and I think I have to try to not stutter. I have to think because I worry about the image I am going to project* (Appendix A lines 709-711).

Conclusion: Both Elise and Annette continue to be of the mindset that their stuttering is a reflection of their character that affects their professional reputation (Schneider & Conrad, 1980).

II. Realization that Hiding is Unproductive: One of the covert strategies that affected the participants was keeping their stuttering a secret from employers.

a. Professional Penalties

Chris states: *I had an internship at a court in [the city] and I got stuck in some really sticky situation where, uh, I had permission to be there but the judge asked me why I was in the room and I said I was volunteering with such and such a group. But I didn't say it just right and because-- I didn't say it right because I was changing words. The judge figured something out and he said, "Well, you told me x, y, and z," and he got really upset with me. And I remember thinking, "This not stuttering is getting me into some really weird places."* (Appendix C lines 270-276)

Conclusion: There was a range of direct professional penalties imposed upon Annette, Chris, Doug, and Elise in relation to their tricks and attempts to hide their stutter. The extent of the penalties include self-imposed limitations to being fired from a job.

Implications and Future Directions

- This study has highlighted connected themes among PWSC related to their attempts to save face, secure their professional reputation, and deal with professional penalties.
- Based on the participants' experiences, we note that attempting to hide stuttering from employers can negatively impact work experiences. Taking on the perception of the social stigma of stuttering impacts the individual's interactions in the workplace causing the individual to transfer their stigmatized thought process onto others (Schneider & Conrad, 1980).
- The themes of the covert stuttering population are not dissimilar to the employment and saving face experiences of the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and trans-gender (GLBT) populations. Connecting the two closeted worlds begins to validate the experiences of PWSC in a main-streamed acceptance.

- Research on LGBT individuals who disclose their sexual orientation at work suggests that a workplace with thorough diversity training and work nondiscrimination policy is likely to decrease the anxiety for disclosure in the workplace. With decreased anxiety, the individual is at ease that their coworkers and bosses are accepting of differences (Griffith & Hebl, 2002).
- In general, future research needs to continue to unveil the experiences of PWSC. On the smaller scale, future research should continue to explore disclosure and effects of stuttering in the workplace.

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