

■ University Students' Familiarity with Famous People Who Stutter

■ Les étudiants universitaires connaissent-ils les célébrités qui bégaient?

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Abstract

Historical and contemporary famous people who stutter (PWS) are oftentimes used by stuttering support groups in their public awareness campaigns. A prerequisite for this strategy to work is that these famous PWS can be recognized by the general public. The current study examined university students' familiarity with these famous PWS. A 30-item multiple-choice questionnaire was devised. Each item consisted of grey-scale facial profiles and names of one PWS and three fluent contemporaries. Sixty-nine university students (mean age = 23.25) were asked to distinguish the PWS from their fluent contemporaries in each item. The famous PWS, as a group, could not be correctly identified by university students. Only two students did better than chance, and only five famous PWS were singled out from their fluent contemporaries. Most of the famous PWS were not recognized as such. The possible pitfalls of using them as role models are discussed together with potential alternatives.

Abrégé

Les groupes de soutien pour personnes souffrant de bégaiement utilisent souvent des célébrités historiques et contemporaines qui bégaient dans les campagnes de sensibilisation du public. Afin que cette stratégie fonctionne, il faut que ces célébrités qui bégaient soient connues du grand public. La présente étude a sondé la connaissance des étudiants universitaires de ces célébrités qui bégaient. Un questionnaire de 30 questions à choix multiples a été créé. On retrouvait à chaque question quatre profils de visage de personnalités contemporaines ainsi que leur nom : une qui bégaie et trois qui sont fluentes. Nous avons demandé à soixante-neuf étudiants universitaires (moyenne d'âge de 23,25) d'identifier la personnalité qui bégaie à chaque question. Les célébrités qui bégaient, comme groupe, n'ont pu être identifiées par les élèves. Seulement deux étudiants ont réussi à identifier un total de cinq personnes connues qui bégaient. La plupart des célébrités qui bégaient n'ont pas été identifiées. Nous discutons ici des obstacles potentiels à les utiliser comme icônes ainsi que d'autres options à considérer.

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Numerous national and international support groups and associations work hard to increase public awareness about diseases such as alcoholism, AIDS, obesity, cancer, Alzheimer's and others. These organizations engage and educate the public as to the breadth and depth of problems associated with the aforementioned diseases, along with dispelling misconceptions, instilling hope and soliciting research funding. One way organizations illustrate the characteristics of a pathological condition is by addressing its incidence, prevalence, and the economic burden it places upon afflicted individuals and the society as a whole. By disseminating such information, these organizations afford to the general public the opportunity to determine the impact of a pathology or condition.

In addition to providing information, support organizations often introduce to the public individuals afflicted with the disease or who have an afflicted loved one. This strategy is employed, in an effort to 'put a face to the disorder,' so that the public may develop an emotional connection or engagement that heretofore did not exist (Bouchez, 2006; Moynihan, Heath, & Henry, 2002). For this reason, famous persons who are appealing to the target audience, seen as credible, knowledgeable and willing to commit to the message outreach often become spokespersons for the disorder (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.). Examples from the past and present include Christopher Reeves for spinal cord injury, 'Magic' Johnson for HIV/AIDS, Ronald and Nancy Regan for Alzheimer's disease and Franklin Roosevelt for polio.

In these and many other cases, the spokespersons' popularity and their stories of struggles with diseases are tied together and form an inseparable link in the eyes of the public. They serve as examples that a disease can transcend social or economic boundaries and that those with fame and fortune can empathize with others who share similar afflictions (World Health Organization Global Programme on AIDS, 1991). This personalization or humanization of a disorder may be especially important in dispelling misconceptions (e.g., when individuals with the disorder are burdened with a stigma or made to feel responsible for their affliction; Herek, Capitanio, & Widaman, 2002, 2003; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Rather than hiding or shunning a condition, an influential spokesperson can publicly admit to, and even embrace it, which is counterintuitive in cultures and societies that place high value on good health and models of perfection (Conrad, 1994). It helps to educate the general public about the disease in question and it sends messages of hope to others afflicted, telling them that they are not alone in their battle.

Overt stuttering is typically defined by the presence of syllable repetitions, sound prolongations and postural fixations, oftentimes accompanied by secondary behaviours such as tongue protrusion, lips tremor, eyes blinking, facial grimace, etc. (Kalinowski & Saltuklaroglu, 2006). Its salient

and disruptive nature makes it relatively easy to identify by adults (Bloodstein & Bernstein-Ratner, 2008) and children (Ezrati-Vinacour, Platzky, & Yairi, 2001). Stuttered speech has even been found to trigger physiological and emotional arousal in listeners (Guntupalli, Everhart, Kalinowski, Nanjundeswaran, & Saltuklaroglu, 2007).

Stuttering support groups in the United States (e.g., the Stuttering Foundation of America [SFA], National Stuttering Association, and Friends) distribute pamphlets, literature and commercials that identify clearly the prevalence and incidence of the disorder, as well as its typical progression for the stuttering population. This is important because stuttering can limit the vocational, promotional, educational and social opportunities for PWS (Craig, Tran, & Craig, 2003; Daniels, Hagstrom, & Gabel, 2006; Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004; Kathard, Pillay, Samuel, & Reddy, 2004; Klompas & Ross, 2004; MacKinnon, Hall, & MacIntyre, 2007). Negative perceptions about stuttering are held by both normal fluent individuals (Zhang, Saltuklaroglu, Hough, & Kalinowski, 2009) and PWS (e.g., Klein & Hood, 2004).

Stuttering support groups have attempted to educate the public about famous people who stutter or had a history of stuttering. References to such individuals can be found in their websites, posters and other publications (Shields, 2005), and include historical and current famous figures such as Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, Tiger Woods, Julia Roberts and others. Some of these celebrities have talked about their own history of stuttering in public, and their personal stories have inspired and motivated many PWS. But what makes a good spokesperson for stuttering? Some of the famous PWS have not displayed overt stuttering behaviours to the general public and may not have incurred many of the social penalties associated with stuttering. In the case of historic personalities, the exact diagnoses are unclear (Mather, n.d.; SFA, 2002; Sugg, 2002).

It is necessary to evaluate the strategy of stuttering support groups to emotionally engage the public by using famous figures. Can these famous individuals validly represent PWS and serve as role models for succeeding 'in spite of stuttering'? The most important prerequisite is that these famous people can be recognized as PWS. If they are not seen as PWS, then the information they deliver might fail to carry the intended message. The purpose of this study was to investigate the public's familiarity with famous PWS.

Method

Questionnaire

Thirty names of famous PWS were selected, including 16 from the SFA's famous PWS poster and 14 from the list of famous PWS on the SFA website. These famous PWS included a king, a prime minister, scientists, writers, composers, singers, actors, athletes, etc. Each of them was matched with three fluent contemporaries of the same gender and in similar field.

It was our intention to control the fame of the PWS and the contemporaries as much as possible. However, fame is not an easily quantifiable measure. The Q system quantification of fame focuses mainly on the marketing potential for current celebrities (Kahle & Kahle, 2006), and could not be applied to the current study. The matching of the PWS and their contemporaries was therefore done inductively. To match the historic PWS, the authors selected fluent individuals from a similar historical point in time, deemed to be famous for a similar reason and with similar levels of fame and public standing.

In the experiment, each name was listed under a grey-scale facial photo with the height fixed at 1 inch and the width varying from 0.64 to 1.38 inches. In total, 30 multiple choice items, each with four choices, were generated. These names were put into a 4×30 table alphabetically by the surname in each row from left to right, and by the first name in each column from top to bottom. Afterwards, they were pseudo-randomly re-arranged first in column and then in row.

The instruction section asked the participants to identify the one person out of each four shown who had a history of stuttering. Basic demographic questions, such as age, gender, place of birth, speech fluency status (PWS or not) and familiarity of stuttering, were included in the first section of the questionnaire. The questionnaire can be found online at <http://www.surveymoz.com/s/196921/famous-people-who-stutter>. Both an online and a paper version of the questionnaire were created.

Participants and Procedure

The paper version of the questionnaire was distributed and collected by teaching assistants of four university classes in their regular class time. None of the classes were in communication sciences and disorders. In total, 69 participants completed the questionnaire (57 females and 12 males, age range = 18-52, $M = 23.25$, $SD = 6.18$). Four of them were born outside the United States, and three reported to have a history of stuttering. Almost 80% of the participants had had some contact with people who stutter (i.e. knew at least 1-2 PWS).

Analysis

The responses were scored 1 for each correct answer and 0 for false. Percentage correct (%C) was calculated for each participant and for each question. Participants' observed %C was compared to the predicted %C using a one-sample t test to examine participants' familiarity with the PWS group. To further examine each individual participant's knowledge of famous PWS, binomial tests were employed. All tests were completed with SPSS (version 13, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL 60606-6307).

Results

First of all, responses were examined to determine whether the participants could distinguish the PWS from their fluent peers. Participants were predicted to

demonstrate a %C of 0.25 for the questionnaire if they answered the questions randomly (e.g., they could not distinguish the PWS). Their mean observed %C was 0.256 ($SE = 0.01$). A one-sample t test was used to compare the observed %C with the predicted %C, and the results indicated that the participants could not recognize the PWS better than chance, $t(68) = 0.602$, $p = 0.551$.

Further analyses examined the details of each question and each participant. Each participant answered 30 questions, and for each question, one's predicted %C was 0.25 if one answered randomly. Therefore, the observed %C for each participant fell into a binomial distribution of $B(30, 0.25)$. Using z approximation at a significance level of 0.05, the results would be significant only if the participant had a %C higher than 0.405, which equals to at least 13 correct answers out of 30 questions. Only two participants performed better than chance with 13 and 14 correct answers, or %C of 0.433 and 0.467, respectively. The effect sizes were modest (e.g., Cohen's $d = 0.42$ and 0.50, respectively).

The same procedure was applied to each question. The observed %C for each question fell into the binomial distribution of $B(69, 0.25)$. At a significance level of 0.05, the z approximation indicated that five questions were answered correctly at a better-than-chance level, indicating that 5 PWS, including Andrew Lloyd Webber, James Earl Jones, Bob Love, Bo Jackson and Nicholas Brendon, were recognized beyond chance. These questions were answered correctly by 25-31 participants, with %C from 0.362 to 0.450, and weak to modest effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's d ranging from 0.26 to 0.46).

Discussion

The main finding of this study was that the chosen famous PWS, as a group, could not be correctly identified by university students. Only two students did better than chance, and only five famous PWS were consistently distinguished from their fluent contemporaries. The participants failed to identify a connection between the famous PWS and stuttering.

Why are these famous PWS not associated with stuttering? It could be argued that these famous PWS were either unknown to the participants, or were not known as having stuttering in their life history. For individuals with limited fame (e.g., who were known mainly by previous generations or outside the United States), it is quite possible (if occasionally lamentable) that a typical university student in the United States may not have heard of their names. Lacking recognition, these celebrities could hardly succeed in reaching the general public for stuttering.

Alternatively, these famous people may have been known to the participants, but were not recognized for a history of stuttering. Consequently, their speech would not have shown overt stuttering when they achieved their breakthrough. Such is the case with former General Electric chair and CEO Jack Welch (Welch & Byrne, 2001), who in his book wrote that stuttering played only a peripheral role

in his childhood. ABC news anchor John Stossel claimed that his stuttering persisted into adult life, but was most likely mild to moderate in nature and could be controlled or hidden with relative ease during public speaking responsibilities (SFA, 2006a). But if these famous PWS did not display overt stuttering behaviours or prominently discuss their stuttering, how could the general public be aware of any history of stuttering?

The work of many stuttering support groups, including SFA, NSA, and Friends should be highly praised and appreciated, for their effort to promote public awareness. The results from the current study suggest that for these groups it might be better to choose their spokespersons and 'famous PWS' with more caution (e.g., to balance the potential spokespersons' familiarity, popularity and ability to deliver the correct message). Therefore, non-famous children and adults who demonstrate various aspects of stuttering behaviours might depict stuttering more realistically. This may help educate the general public and young PWS more effectively regarding the nature of the pathology and realistic outcomes of intervention.

The current research was launched within a small-size, demographically homogeneous sample. Therefore, this study is only a pilot study that surveys the possible limitations of the marketing strategy used by stuttering support groups to promote social awareness of stuttering. In the future, the general public's knowledge of famous PWS and stuttering could be studied in more varied groups, including children and adolescents, speech-language pathologists, school teachers, and children and adults who stutter. Various famous PWS could also be investigated for their potential to serve the stuttering community in the fight against negative stereotypes about stuttering.

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