

“The Stutterer”: Or What Happens When Grace Fails

On the Nature and Psychological Relevance of a Stigma

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the representation of stuttering people in the media and in society. Further, I will try to explain these images and attitudes from a psychological point of view, and finally, I will outline some general consequences regarding speech therapy and speech education.

The subtitle “When Grace Fails” alludes to a tale of the German romantic writer Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) entitled “On the Marionette Theatre” (1810). Here the author describes the trouble and confusion critical awareness may cause in the natural grace of man. In particular, he tells the story of a young man, nearly sixteen years old, who was perceived to be very graceful and who had become a little vain because of these reactions. While this young man was drying his foot after taking a bath, he looked at his own image reflected in a big mirror. He became fascinated with his own reflection. It reminded him of an ancient statue, entitled “The Spinario”². He asked his friend to confirm this. Instead of doing this, the friend, though himself impressed by the young man's graceful appearance but not wanting to increase his vanity, remarked that he had the opposite impression and that he looked very funny. The young man tried to reconstruct this posture deliberately again and again, but he failed. This was the beginning of the end of the grace of the young man. Just because of a comment, this young man lost his paradisiacal innocence, and he was not able to get it back.

I refer to Heinrich von Kleist because he himself stuttered (as is normally the case with stuttering this is mentioned by many of his biographers only incidentally) and because he committed suicide in Berlin in 1811. In my opinion, the fact of his suicide alone focuses attention on the problematic psychological and social situation of stuttering people, which is very often underestimated. Ulrich Bleidick, a professor emeritus at the University of Hamburg and a specialist for the social situation of the different groups of handicapped people, regards people who stutter as a group with a comparatively high suicide-risk (personal information, 1991; compare Bleidick 1988); so far I have not come across empirical studies concerning this issue.

Once again back to Heinrich von Kleist: it is remarkable that almost 200 years later the American writer John Updike develops similar ideas when he considers the causes and personal effects of his own stuttering. In pointing out the negative effects of critical self-awareness, he titled his autobiographic book “Self-consciousness” (1988), based on Unamuno's assertion that “consciousness is a disease”. In the chapter “On the difficulties in getting the words out” he says about his stuttering: “This defect is caused by self-

¹ This paper was published in “International Fluency Association”. Proceedings of the first world congress on fluency disorders. Vol .2; München: IFA, 1995; pp. 548-550; it is actualised and completely overworked.

² You see a young man who is believed by some to be a conscientious sheperd boy, who only after delivering a message to the Roman Senate, stopped to remove a thorn from his foot. The original Spinario (first reported in 1165) is kept at the Capitoline Museum in Rome.

consciousness, you could think - a failure to let the complicated muscular process of speaking take place unconsciously ...” (pp 117, German edition)

My own methodical approach to this issue was to make a qualitative phenomenologically oriented evaluation of a random sample of 19 (mostly internationally known) movies, 23 novels (mostly world literature), 13 children’s books, 30 jokes, some newspaper headlines, anecdotes, songs, etc. This approach is well-adjusted to complement the quantitative empirical questionnaire research about attitudes towards handicapped people (in the field of stuttering research see Cooper & Cooper, 1985; Kalinowski et al, 1987; St. Louis et. al., 1999 a, b; for general research about this see Tröster, 1990). This approach is generally seen to be more suitable than questionnaire research in giving us insight into the unconscious negative attitudes and feelings that people who stutter may evoke and are exposed to. Altogether, one must realise that sociopsychological research has not been a major research priority since the seventies (see Quesal, 1989).

The results of my evaluation were surprising and unambiguous (for details see Benecken, 1993; 1995).

2. The Image of Stuttering People

When stuttering people are presented in novels, movies, newspaper headlines etc., they are usually suspected of being neurotic or even psychopathic. Almost exclusively they are men, mostly in subordinate roles. And as a rule these men are unattractive or at least not masculine in their appearance and behaviour. Some examples are: Billy Bibitt in “One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest”, Ken in “A Fish Called Wanda”, the young Bob Wilson in the movie “The Cowboys” (comp. Bosshardt, 1998), many “Bud Spencer” films and German porno movies from the seventies. Other examples from literature are: the assistant of Doctor Cuevas in Allendes novel “The Haunted House” or Ranquileo in “Love and Shadow”, Prince Ferdinand in “Confessions of the Impostor Felix Krull” by Thomas Mann, Blothert in “Views of a Clown” by Heinrich Böll, or the father of the emperor of China in “I Was The Emperor of China” by Pu Yi, etc. An example from an opera still popular in Europe is the shy Wenzel in “The Bartered Bride” (Smetana, 1866); in popular rap music you can find the “stutter rap” from “Minus Minor; 1990.

With these and other novels (see Benecken, 1993), songs, operas and movies in mind, the “stutterer” appears as rather soft, unattractive, frail, pinched, and subordinating. He might be a sexually deprived, possibly perverted man with pimples or nibbled fingernails who could be thinking about murdering somebody. If he happens to be tall, then he probably has a baby face. This drastically negative stereotyping of stuttering people demonstrates clearly what stuttering may evoke in us and what kind of mental pictures we are prepared to project in people who stutter.

Another typical example of how popular constructions about stuttering are maintained can be found in the German newspaper “Bild-Zeitung” (read by over 15 millions persons) about the tennis player Boris Becker (1990). In big black letters the Bild-Zeitung reports about “Boris` hard stuttering attack on TV” and in smaller letters they ask: Was this attack caused by “Nerves, Women - or what”? One day later this story was continued again on the front page by asking all readers and five experts “Why does Boris stutter?” Unsurprisingly, one of the five was an expert and scientist for sexual problems. Not he, but one of the other experts, a psychologist, finally tells us what we always thought when someone stutters: “Boris is sexually overstrained”.

You must imagine what “Bildzeitung” would have written if Boris had a hearing, seeing or motor problem: no one would have thought that these disabilities are caused by “women” or by “nerves”. In the case of stuttering you must take these attributions into account.

2.1 The Situation of Stuttering Children

Let me elucidate the sociopsychological situation of children more in detail, since stuttering is regarded to be a childhood disorder. Older research in Germany (Knura, 1969; Keese, 1972) showed clearly, that even in the judgement of education students, stuttering children were considered weak, shy, retarded, fearful and in some way latently aggressive. American studies confirm this: (Cooper & Rustin, 1985; St. Louis et. al., 2000). A study of Woods & Williams (1976) indicated that from the age of nine years at the latest, boys are being stereotyped with this cliché.

The 13 randomly sampled children’s books I analysed can give us remarkable insight in the popular perception of stutterers. As a rule, they come from dysfunctional families and what is typical above all: in none of these books do they overcome their stuttering through therapy. Usually a character change is involved. Or in other stories they may experience a sense of achievement or simply a beat on the back of their head, which surprisingly enables them to speak fluently again. These results are consistent with the research of Bushey & Martin (1988), who analysed 20 books altogether. Also here a fateful attitude becomes evident:

Stuttering is considered a bad habit, a sign of defective self-discipline and self-consciousness. The children’s books suggest that psychotherapy or speech therapy would therefore not be meaningful because a good grandfather or a beat on the head are sufficient. At the latest by the age of eight, stuttering boys are confronted with these problematical attitudes. Until about 6 or 7 years the social pressure on stuttering boys is not that great; in a special sense they still have a bonus of development, but then the seriousness of social life begins. For a child - especially a boy - who still stutters at the age of 8, this means, that he or she grows into the role cliché “stutterer” in a subtle, silent, and unnoticed way. Through interactions with “others” (see Mead, 1934) the child makes the experience of being seen and treated as a “stutterer”, but this usually does not take place explicitly. So at least there is a great risk that these strange images will turn into his own self-image.

Research done mostly in the sixties about the sociometric position of stuttering children (mostly boys 7 to 14 years) in Germany (comp. Benecken, 1993) has shown that stuttering children are sociometrically isolated to a threatening extent. In these studies, 1524 pupils (from 60 regular primary and secondary school classes) were tested with the sociogramm (Moreno). Among them were 58 stuttering pupils (mostly boys from 7 to 14 years of age). Forty-three of these stuttering pupils or 75 percent were socially rejected or perceived to be unattractive by their peers. Consequently, there is a great risk for stuttering pupils to be bullied. Actually, this was reported to take place to a great extent in a retrospective analysis of interviews of 256 stuttering persons (Hugh-Jones & Smith; 1999). Benecken and Spindler (2002; 2004) could replicate these results in a study with 100 members of the German self help group.

Finally, this implies dynamic consequences in the families they live in. The children are fixed more strongly on their primary relationship with their parents, who participate in and feel responsible for their children and try to compensate for this. Often the development of autonomy is interfered with. It is no wonder that in research made on stutterers and their families after these events have taken place the family relations are described to be symbiotic to a pathological degree. In Germany, Westrich (1981) describes stuttering children as being kept in a prison of love by their mothers.

An other important aspect is that there is some evidence to assert that the significant decreased probability for remission for stuttering up from the age of eight (comp. Johannsen, 2001; Yairi, Ambrose, 1999) is also due to the social and psychological stress stuttering school children have to endure in regular school classes.

All these remarks relate to the situation of stuttering men and boys, whereas stuttering girls and women are in a different situation with their own role-specific special handicaps. There has been far too little research on these aspects.

3. Explanations from the Psychological Point of View

How do the constructions and everyday psychological prejudices outlined above come about and what are their effects? In my opinion there are three aspects to be considered:

“The comedy of stuttering”

Stuttering is a phenomenon which unconsciously reminds one of “baby talk” at least in its iterative form. There is a disparity to the real age of the speaking person and this immediately causes laughter. Even more important, it causes regressive fantasies in us and especially in psychoanalysts (comp. Coriat 1927, 1933, 1943; Glauber 1958; Heinemann & Hopf 2002). We are then easily tempted to come to the conclusion that “the stutterer” is “stuck” in his development.

The speech blocks correspond to the basic patterns of humour to the extent that someone tries to speak with such an effort that does not stand in any relation to the normal. Speaking is child’s play. The phenomenon of stuttering causes direct reactions as they are also caused by the behaviour of a drunk person uselessly trying to put the key into the keyhole with enormous energy and concentration. Clowns also use this basic pattern of comedy again and again, as Sigmund Freud points out. Psychoanalysts in particular, and this is no coincidence, see the syllable stuttering movements as an oral satisfaction act (fixed regressive) or look at the speech blocks as a sign of conflicts with anal origin. With even greater authority you can and must say that stuttering inspires such fantasies in us.

When the “non stutterer” stutters

Another important point is that stuttering in everyday life and speech almost always occurs in connection with somatic and psychic feelings of weakness (e.g. stuttering in tests, lies, fear, anxiousness, drunkenness). Unconsciously, we assume that people who stutter chronically have the same feelings we have when we fall into stuttering. So “the states turn into traits”(comp. Kelley, 1972). And thus we automatically think that somebody stutters because he *is* an inhibited, ambivalent, anxious person. Exactly this confusion of the consequences and causes is characteristic for various fields of stuttering research in the last century. For the stutterer this means that there exists a wrong “projective empathy” which in the last consequence hinders the development of a realistic view of this handicap.

A contradiction in itself: The stuttering man

A further point is that stuttering is a male problem, because it is more prevalent among men. However it is a problem of masculinity. In this sense stuttering and masculinity are two

contradictory concepts. To stutter means for a man to evoke psychological attributions like shyness, ambivalence, anxiousness, inhibition. These popular attributions to stuttering contradict the traits and qualities considered distinctive of manhood. Moreover, as mentioned above, stuttering is a form of baby talk.

In this sense it seems logical that in the media, stuttering men are presented to be less dominant; very often they are in subordinate roles. In the wide spectrum and history of stutter-therapy you can find the opinion that you have to be hard on the “stutterer”, that you have to lead and to show him the right way (comp. the movie “The Cowboys” 1972; by Mark Rydell with John Wayne; see Bosshardt 1998). Here, in my view, negative countertransference takes place, and last but not least it is this “mother’s darling” image that makes people react overprotectively or aggressively toward the “stutterer”. Consequently, there is a great risk for stuttering pupils to be bullied by their peers.

In my opinion, there is a transfer of negative emotions and impulses from other people (therapists included) to the “stutterer” which has its origin in these unconscious images stuttering evokes in us.

4. Conclusion

In summation, it can be said that:

1. The way stuttering and stutters are perceived has been distorted to a great extent by relatively obvious negative clichés and stereotypes, which are extremely fixed and resistant to change.
2. In many aspects, stuttering is perceived and interpreted as an indication of a damaged psyche in everyday life. I would go so far and say: Just as limping is a metaphor for disabled bodies in general, stuttering is used as a metaphor for the damaged psyche.
3. The development of the identity of stuttering children is influenced to a great extent by these clichés. The severity of social stigmatisation and even life-threatening isolation of stuttering children and adults is often denied or belittled. I daresay there even is some kind of silent agreement between the child, the family, the teacher, and the paediatrician to dissimulate about these social problems.
4. The negative prognosis for stuttering therapy up from the age of eight must be seen as correlated with these social stigmatising processes and the sociometric and psychological effects of this. For this stuttering therapy must leave the therapy room and try to help the child and his family to cope with these unspoken prejudices and social isolation.
5. One has to realise that stuttering unfortunately evokes the sociopsychological reactions discussed above. Sermonising will not make these reactions go away. Self-help groups are advised to deal with stuttering and its consequences in a proactive way.
6. Stuttering girls seem to have a different effect on people than stuttering men. As far as I know, gender- oriented studies of stuttering have not been undertaken.
7. The effects of reference books or television programmes on attitude change or maintenance are low compared with these of the popular media. They tell and show us stories and pictures that are stored in our unconscious mind ready to be evoked when we meet a “stutterer”. Therefore it is of great importance to inform and supervise the actual and potential authors and film directors. Often it is only a matter of ignorance.
8. Changing these attitudes will be a long and difficult process. It will even be an effort to change the attitudes of specialists as far as they themselves share and transfer these negative attitudes. A great improvement will come when somatic causes for stuttering are identified by medical research. This will be the best way to rehabilitate stuttering people socially.

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