

# Some General Aspects Concerning Stuttering Which Indicate Fields Of Research

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To consider in any detail the information that is contained in the literature on stuttering is a formidable and confusing task. It includes broadly the many and conflicting theories as to its etiology, the nature and development of the symptom itself (often theoretical), the stutterer himself in relation to his handicap and the attitudes of the audience to the stutterer and his symptom.

Much time has been spent on the constitutional (physio-neurological) concomitants that attempt to explain the phenomenon. The psychological element has also been considered in some detail. However, the writer has the impression that there is comparatively little information on stuttering that could be viewed from a cultural and sociological standpoint. The limited material that is available only seems to emphasize the neglect of this field.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly discuss, by way of the literature, some factors related to stuttering that indicate further fields of research — particularly those fields that have cultural and psycho-sociological implications.

## INCIDENCE

The greater majority of studies conducted to ascertain the incidence of stuttering have, unfortunately, been limited to the United States. There are relatively few studies from other parts of the world. The average incidence taken from 15 sources (1) is 0.80% — the highest being 3.5% and the lowest 0.55%. Apart from the United States and England, the writer has only discovered studies from Cyprus (1.85%), Denmark (0.90%), Accra, Gold Coast (3.5%) and Westphalia, Germany (1.00%). The average figure of 0.80% is probably not accurate as the data from the studies have been derived from varied approaches. The methods used, the criteria of selection, the age-groups studied etc., appear to differ from study to study.

The incidence figure itself does not appear to be very important to our understanding of the stuttering problem. What does appear highly relevant is whether stuttering is a universal

disorder, and whether the incidence varies markedly in any way in various parts of the world. Attention was first drawn to this particular aspect when Snidecor (2) in 1947 reported that no stuttering existed among the Bannock and Shoshone Indians of North America, and neither did they have a word to describe stuttering. On the other hand, Lemert (3) in 1953, reported that stuttering did exist among three Indian groups of the Northwest Pacific Coast. Words describing stuttering were found in the languages of these people. This discrepancy between groups of North American Indians is perhaps not so surprising when one considers the cultural differences between them. Sheehan (4) felt that there was more similarity between the culture of the Kwakiutl Indians (among whom stuttering was found by Lemert) and our own culture than there is between the cultures of the Bannock and Shoshone Indians and the Kwakiutls. He stated that the latter tribe has a competitive culture not unlike our own.

Morgenstern (5) has given us some information about the non-existence of stuttering among some groups. He received his information from anthropologists and other workers in various parts of the world. There appear to be six main groups that do not exhibit stuttering and neither do any of these groups have a word in their languages to describe the stuttering phenomenon. The groups are:

- 1) The Napishianas of British Guiana.
- 2) The Patamanas and Akawaio of British Guiana.
- 3) The Garia in the Territory of New Guinea.
- 4) The Kelabits, West Borneo.
- 5) The Malayan Aborigines, Malaya.
- 6) The Sonthals, Bhuyana and Gatwas, (from Behar) and the Turis and Tantis (from Orissa) Assam, India.

However, it is felt that the reports of these workers (not speech pathologists) must be taken tentatively until objective studies can be done to either corroborate or refute this information. Should it be correct, then it seems appropriate that detailed cultural and psycho-

sociological studies of these groups should be done. The results of such studies might very well throw light on factors associated with stuttering in other culture groups.

Johnson (6) considers that the non-existence of a word to describe stuttering among the Bannock and Shoshone Indians suggests a significant explanation for the absence of stuttering among these people. His semantogenic diagnosogenic theories as to the onset of stuttering account for this. The writer feels that the non-existence of a word to describe stuttering is not necessarily an etiological factor. It is feasible to argue that a disorder like stuttering must first be detected by a group of people and then a word created to describe the observation. However, it is agreed that the use of the term "stuttering" in the evaluations that people make concerning their children's speech (including the normal non-fluencies that are exhibited by children) can contribute greatly to the onset of stuttering.

Remarking on the fact that some cultures do not exhibit stuttering as we know it, Lemert (7) said

This measurably strengthens the hypothesis that cultural settings are dynamic factors in the growth of stuttering. . . . the process by which cultural values are sieved through family organization before they impinge upon the child is an important variable in any explanation of stuttering.

It would be helpful to know how other culture groups regard the development of speech in their children and the role that language plays in their various societies. This area is plainly a fertile ground for future research.

### THE SEX RATIO

The particular kind of sex ratio that occurs among stutterers continues to be a puzzle. Writers have firmly established that stuttering occurs more frequently among males than females. Some studies have reported a ratio of approximately 3:1 and others approximately 5:1 (1). Apart from the organic constitutional factors that have been put forward to explain the differences between the sexes (earlier myelinization in girls, motoric differences in favour of girls, etc), cultural factors appear to play an important role.

The most important premise to consider is that females tend to develop language at an earlier rate than males and that the co-ordination necessary for the speech act appears to be established earlier in girls. This has been explained in terms of constitutional differences. However, some have put forward the hypothesis that this difference might be due to the

different parental attitudes towards the sexes. These attitudes are a reflection of the society we live in. Our culture tends to place more responsibility on the male child in order to prepare him for manhood and the role of the bread-winner. It is conceivable that, in certain cases, the pressures that are brought to bear by our society (mirrored in the parents) become too great for the young male child who might still be constitutionally immature. The standards of speech and speech fluency might prove too high for certain children and this could possibly cause a breakdown in the very area in which the child is inadequate, namely the motor act of speech.

The sex ratio of stutterers has been dealt with in some detail by Schuell (8). The data that she found in one of her studies led her to believe that the attitudes of parents are culturally determined, rather than being based upon actual observation of behaviour of a particular child. She has said the following:

It seems clear that insecurities, anxieties and tensions would tend to be increased by the contradictory attitudes prevalent in our culture; first, the demand that the male child exhibit independence, fearlessness, self-control and a certain amount of aggressiveness; and second, that he must at the same time be submissive, orderly, and obedient; that he must conform to standards of parents and teachers derived from attitudes diametrically opposed to those which clinical psychologists consider conducive to healthful modes of behaviour.

Schuell said further that she felt that the crucial point seemed to lie in the tendency of parents and teachers to expect equal performance from children who are not developmentally equal. Her conclusion about the sex differences, she feels, suggests Johnson's theory that stuttering is a semantogenic and diagnosogenic disorder. The child, to some extent, interiorizes the negative evaluations made by his immediate adult society.

Morgenstern (5) reports that some of the data sent to him from various parts of the world indicated that the sex ratio is of the same type as that for stutterers in other communities. He found it difficult to believe that the same purely environmental (culturally determined) stimuli which might create a higher incidence of stuttering among boys than girls in our society, would be found in other culture groups, some of which differ considerably in terms of social customs and mores.

The writer believes that the sex ratio is organically rather than culturally determined. Cultural or environmental influences may "trigger-off" or aggravate inadequate physical

elements to which the male child appears to be more prone. It would be interesting to speculate whether the incidence of stuttering will be any higher for females in our civilization after a number of generations. Females are assuming fuller responsibility and independence in our society and it is possible that this may cause changes in parental attitudes towards the young female child. However, more detailed study of our culture and others in this regard may throw more light on the general problem of the sex ratio. Little has been written about the effects of our culture on the onset or originality of stuttering. Still less is known about other culture groups that do or do not stutter. Some cognizance should be taken of those society groups that do not stutter. The attitudes expressed toward the sexes, the language standards, etc., in these groups may become relevant points of departure for further analysis of the sex ratio for stutterers in those communities that do stutter.

### SCHOLASTIC RETARDATION

It has been acknowledged by writers that stutterers experience the school situation as being difficult and threatening. Some investigations have indicated that stutterers are scholastically retarded. Studies have reported retardation ranging from 6 months up to 1.6 years (1). Sources have indicated that the level of intelligence has not been found to be a causative factor for this retardation (1).

The main reason that has been put forward to explain the scholastic retardation is that the stuttering child is likely to lack a measure of concentration due to his being prone to be excitable, restless and threatened by the demands made in the classroom. Demands for oral work are frequent, and the stutterer is placed in an emotionally charged situation where he is expected to answer questions or recite before his class mates. The writer has observed that stutterers are frequently marked down because of their inability to express themselves or to recite adequately. It has also been observed that some parents of stutterers are inclined to enrol their child in school at a slightly later age. It is presumed that this is done to allow for a period of time in which the stutterer may "outgrow" his speech difficulty.

The reasons that have been suggested to explain the scholastic retardation of stutterers tend to be psychologically orientated. Children who are inclined to be withdrawn, or non-fluent (but not stuttering), or excitable when called upon to express themselves, may conceivably react adversely to the abuse and remarks that others in the classroom and playground express. The abuse offered by children,

it is felt, follows closely the nature and evaluations associated with the social customs of the particular society they live in.

The information available on this aspect still needs to be verified by further study. Insufficient data has been accumulated to make this a definite factor associated with stuttering. Late enrolment in schools and the problem of intelligence should both be investigated in fuller detail. Workers would also need to know the frequency of poor marks being given to the stutterer due to his impediment, the extent to which these poor marks contribute towards failure, the attitudes of the staff to this particular speech problem and the methods used to handle them in the class-room situation. This type of information might guide the speech therapist and lend weight to recommendations which can be made to the staff of schools as to the various methods of handling the stutterer.

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

Some mention has been made in the literature of the effects of socio-economic factors influencing the incidence of stuttering. It is thought that the particular level of socio-economic standing of a family group would affect the type of attitudes displayed towards the children and thereby affect the standards of speech in the home.

It has been observed that children from the upper social levels show a greater linguistic development, use larger sentences and have more mature sentence forms at earlier ages than the children in homes of low socio-economic standing. (9) The type of environment and attitudes displayed by parents which afford few stimulating opportunities for effective speech learning can occur, of course, at all socio-economic levels, but are more inclined to do so in the poorer and more deprived homes.

It is noted by Darely (10) that parents of stutterers came predominantly from the middle and upper socio-economic classes. These parents tended to be better educated than their control group counterparts and they "... tended to set rather high standards for themselves, their mates, their children and their neighbours." He also reported that the parents of stutterers expressed more dissatisfaction with their own abilities and accomplishments than did the control group of parents.

Johnson (11) commented on Darely's observations and said that what was probably more important than the socio-economic class was "... the degree of 'upward mobility' (drive or intensity of determination and effort to rise socio-economically) of the family." Families that are "upwardly mobile" may, suggested Johnson, be expected to experience to a greater

than usual degree the tensions attendant upon competitiveness to place high values on the absence of defects and good or superior speech in their children, which, ". . . they consider important in the competition for status."

Morgenstern (5) found similar data as reported above. A higher incidence of stuttering was noted among children of semi-skilled manual workers than among children of unskilled labourers in England. Semi-skilled workers appeared to have a better chance of 'getting ahead' and were more socially orientated as regards status level. Morgenstern felt, therefore, that the semi-skilled labourer was likely to be ambitious for his children and to prize the advantage of adequate speech. Evaluations made of a child's speech and the degree to which he is pushed to develop "good" speech, which may be beyond his capacity, may cause the child to react adversely to this strain and therefore may result in tension and stuttering.

On the other hand some writers (12, 13) have found no evidence that stuttering is influenced by social status or extremes of environmental conditions. The knowledge available concerning the influence of socio-economic levels on the incidence of stuttering is limited and comparatively recent. It appears that the main influence of a high socio-economic level in a home is that high standards will be set for children in regard to the expectations that are made for conforming behaviour and for adequate or "superior" speech. These high expectations can create tensions in the child, resulting in anxiety and a possible awareness of the speech activity that he performs. The consideration of this aspect would indicate that cultural and psychological components are operating as a possible precipitating factor. Difficulties, it is felt, will be encountered in assessing this aspect as this type of investigation involves the study of various social strata which are dynamic in nature and continually changing.

### STUTTERING AMONG THE BANTU

The above mentioned factors, among others that have been associated with stuttering and that can be considered from a cultural and sociological point of view, were taken by the writer as a basis for an investigation on the nature and incidence of stuttering among a Bantu group of school-going children. A set field programme was organised and each school in selected urban African residential areas was carefully screened for stutterers. Each stutterer was then interviewed in some detail, observed for symptoms, and where possible, home visits were made.

The data collected and evaluated indicated that the incidence of stuttering appears to be the same for any group of stutterers that we know of, namely 1.28%. The sex ratio, onset of stuttering, familial incidence of stuttering, the symptoms exhibited, the methods by which the subjects attempted to eliminate the disorder, are all similar to what other investigators have reported. No real differences were found to exist that would differentiate this group of stutterers from any other studied. There are many words, some onomatopoeic in nature, in all the languages that describe the phenomenon of stuttering.

The investigation, however, had many limitations. Due to it being an exploratory study, no experimental groups (controls) were used. The information offered as to the background of the subjects was often inconsistent and could not be checked. Parents were not always available for interviewing. The use of an African social worker trained to participate as an interpreter did not eradicate the social and language barriers that existed.

It is felt that further study of this problem must now follow. There is a vast field of research for speech therapists in this country because of the almost unique situation that exists among the Bantu. For there are large communities of Bantu still leading comparatively simple lives. On the other hand, there are groups who have been urbanized for several generations and have, to varying degrees, assimilated the demands of urban life. Further, a most fruitful situation to consider, is the almost perceptible changes that are taking place due to the transition of the rural African to urban life. These three broad types of situations could provide excellent material for the purposes of comparison — particularly in regard to the influences of these various environments on such aspects as are related to our work. The speech standards set in the homes, the influence of the many languages on individuals, the customs revolving around the general subject of language and speech all become important factors to observe in these comparative situations. We can only surmise whether the incidence of stuttering among the rural and urban Bantu would be the same.

Provision for control groups should be made, especially control groups in the various environmental strata — rural, urban and transitional. Due to the difficulties encountered it would seem necessary and relevant for a team of workers to approach this field of research. Such a team, it is envisaged, should include not only speech pathologists, but psychologists and sociologists among others.

## CONCLUSIONS

The above account clearly indicates that further study is necessary to fully understand the factors that have been associated with stuttering. Comparatively few workers have investigated the disorder in sociological terms and this field appears to be neglected as an area of research. In addition, far too few studies have dealt with groups of people in parts of the world other than America, England and a few European countries. This pertains particularly to the groups of primitive peoples that still exist. Most of the material available on stuttering seems to have originated at the desks of writers and in the laboratories attached to clinics. It might be argued that the psychological studies dealing with stuttering consider the sociological point of view. However, it is felt that the term "psychological" is becoming too broad in nature and does not take fully into account the dynamic cultural and social reactions, positive and negative, among people in any group.

It is not claimed that further data from a sociological and cultural point of view would solve the riddle of stuttering. But it is thought that we can become more aware of the influences of the social environment which could direct us in making further more positive attempts in dealing with the prophylaxis of this disorder.

It would seem a tragedy to ignore the many fields still open for study. The world is rapidly changing and primitive peoples are gradually becoming assimilated to other ways of life. Malinowski (14) one of the great anthropologists of our time, has said that within a generation or two the native communities now available for scientific study will have practically disappeared — "The need for energetic work is urgent, and the time is short."

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