

Openness about stuttering: What does it mean and how is it cultivated?

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1. Introduction

Researchers have found that people who stutter can experience stigma (i.e., internalization of public devaluation), which can negatively impact their lives (Boyle & Fearon, 2018; Gabel et al., 2004). As a result, individuals may choose to hide or conceal their stuttering to avoid the impact of stigma (Butler, 2013; Constantino et al., 2017). Hiding stuttering often leads to negative emotional impact and reduced opportunities (Gerlach et al., 2021). Therapists have long focused on increasing openness about stuttering as an important way to manage stuttering (Guitar, 2019; Sheehan, 1970; Van Riper, 1982). Researchers have found that stuttering disclosure statements are perceived positively by listeners (Byrd, McGill, et al., 2017; Healey et al., 2007), and that increased openness and self-disclosure of stuttering is linked to higher reported quality of life in people who stutter (Boyle et al., 2018).

The purpose of this piece is to provide a brief review of the literature related to openness and disclosure, highlighting our own recent qualitative work in this area, and expanding on its potential theoretical and practical implications. We conducted studies to better understand actual disclosure events (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a) and illustrate how people who stutter may become more or less open about stuttering over time (Boyle & Gabel, 2020b). In these studies, we interviewed twelve adults who stutter, recruited from self-help/support groups for stuttering.

2. Processes of Disclosure and Openness

One of the findings of this research was related to the nature of disclosure (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a). The process of disclosure includes antecedents (considerations for when and why to disclose), form and content of the disclosure, and perceived outcomes at individual, dyadic, and societal levels. These different aspects support proposed models of disclosure (e.g., Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010) that have identified different but connected elements of disclosing a stigmatized identity. The second major finding was related to the changes in openness over the course of one's life. In general, participants moved from hiding and avoidance to a turning point, and then made changes in how they perceived stuttering and how they acted in relation to it. This process progressed over time but was not totally linear, and was influenced by personal factors (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, and previous experiences) and situational context (e.g., speaking environment or task). Results supported findings of Douglass et al. (2018) that described paradigm shifts for transitioning from covert to overt stuttering.

Our findings revealed that participants identified benefits of disclosure that were divided into three categories: (1) individual; (2) dyadic; and (3) societal and contextual (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a). Individual benefits included reducing fear, promoting a feeling of authenticity, improving communication, and increasing self-respect. Dyadic benefits included that disclosure provides an invitation to discuss stuttering, reduces the listeners' worry or concerns, improves the level of trust with the listener, and enhances the connection with another person. The societal and contextual benefits were related to a feeling of connection with support organizations and helping people who stutter by giving back to the stuttering community. The participants also reported that they experienced mostly positive responses to their disclosure and some negative responses, but viewed openness as better than concealing stuttering since there are challenges to disclosure (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a; b). Challenges include that disclosure can feel awkward, inconvenient, and emotionally distressing. Dyadic challenges include risk of negative feedback from others, of others making snap judgments, of receiving unsolicited and unhelpful advice, or of observing listener skepticism about the presence or severity of stuttering. Finally, societal and contextual challenges include the possibilities of facing discrimination, not being hired or promoted for certain jobs, being fired from jobs, and facing judgment from others who are not knowledgeable about stuttering. The diagnosis of stuttering creates a stigma, which can create a situation where a person feels shame and may attempt to stutter covertly and "pass as fluent" (Constantino et al., 2017). Concealment offers temporary relief, helping bypass stress and vulnerability.

Many participants acknowledged that the benefits of disclosure outweigh the costs (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a). The participants identified some reasons for choosing to disclose stuttering, including taking control of the situation, wanting to feel better, and being “authentic.” Other reasons they identified included wanting to preempt listener confusion, identify allies or supporters, improve communication, and change listener perceptions. There were particular situations where disclosure was perceived as more important. Among these for the participants were high investment situations, such as job interviews and situations where they might be judged, or when speech might be difficult. Additionally, the participants were likely to disclose if the listener seemed confused by stuttering or if the person was someone with whom they would have future contact. Listeners might also choose not to disclose because the situation or listener might not dictate that disclosure was needed.

It is important to consider that a person who stutters engages in the process of change when adapting to stuttering. As has been reported by other researchers, continual movement through different stages of coping requires changes, not only in behavior but also of attitudes and emotions (Floyd, et. al, 2007; Zebrowski, et. al, 2021). These changes appear to include steps toward openness. For the participants in these studies, it was clear that chronic suppression and avoidance led to a turning point and realization that change was needed. The participants began to make adaptive changes in how they related to stuttering, including becoming more open. The process of change included a continued grappling with when and how to disclose stuttering.

3. Theoretical and Clinical Implications

It is important to consider that disclosure is different from openness. Disclosure is defined as “making the identity of a person who stutters known and visible to other people” (Boyle & Gabel, 2020b, p. 2). Disclosure is an action that transmits information to someone else. Disclosure is a strategy to manage stuttering and improve a communication situation. In contrast, we are defining openness as a way of being or a disposition toward stuttering that conveys willingness and comfort in talking about stuttering or showing it to other people. Therefore, a person can behave in a manner that suggests openness, for example, stuttering openly without avoidance, without providing explicit verbal disclosures on a regular basis. Similarly, there is a difference between covert characteristics and a concealed disposition toward stuttering (Boyle & Gabel, 2020b). “Covert” refers to a set of behaviors, features, or techniques used to successfully hide stuttering (e.g., anticipation of upcoming stuttering, word switching, circumlocution, etc.). A concealed disposition, on the other hand, is a way of being. It represents a closed-off stance in which stuttering is not willingly acknowledged or discussed. Beyond the theoretical value of defining terms in this way, there is also practical clinical value. For example, using these definitions, a person can have a concealed disposition toward stuttering but still demonstrate overt stuttering. Similarly, a person can have a generally open disposition but still display covert features of stuttering. Therefore, these terms allow a more flexible way of thinking about a person’s relationship to their stuttering overall.

In our research, we found the participants engaged in a number of different approaches to disclosing (Boyle & Gabel, 2020a). Some suggested that the best type of disclosure was direct and brief, though at times, the participants found that additional information was useful. Some participants used voluntary stuttering and then referenced the event as part of their disclosure. Others used social media as a means of disclosing and informing people about stuttering. Finally, some said there was no planned approach, and the methods they employed depended on the situation. Clinicians can assist clients in identifying the benefits of disclosure, and when it might be most beneficial. Additionally, clinicians can assist clients with brainstorming and preparing disclosure statements that fit their communication goals. Role-play can be used to contrast varying approaches to disclosure. This type of practice allows clients to develop a variety of different disclosure methods in a safe environment. It is also important to role-play the ways disclosure may lead to negative responses and help clients develop related coping skills and increased desensitization to stuttering.

In conclusion, it is our contention that practicing disclosure effectively not only changes client behavior but can also change their beliefs and attitudes about stuttering. Increased openness about stuttering is a result of disclosure for many people who stutter and grows when a person gives up rigid control and suppression. Openness arises from the willingness to experience anxiety and discomfort and persist in the face of uncertainty and anxiety. The benefits of taking risks reinforces the process of opening up, and ultimately the person becomes more confident and expands their comfort zone. Thus, disclosure and openness can fundamentally change the person in positive ways. It is possible that being “open” about stuttering can represent a broad approach to coping and living with stuttering that is more aligned with acceptance and can be contrasted with concealment, avoidance, defensiveness, or resignation.

Future research should continue to investigate disclosure and openness related to stuttering as a critical tool for reducing public and self-stigma related to stuttering.

Disclosures

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