

# Cluttering and Its Impact on Working Life and Career Choice: Qualitative Semi-structured Interviews with Adults with Cluttering in Norway

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## 1. Introduction

There are multiple factors which may influence communication and everyday life for people who clutter. Scaler Scott (2019) confirmed increased over-coarticulation and normal disfluencies in specific speaking contexts in persons who clutter. According to Exum et al. (2010), people who clutter may experience cluttering as frustrating and as an interference in communication settings. A recent study of Giuffre et al. (2021) confirms that lack of public awareness is a well-known theme in cluttering, and that lack of knowledge can lead others to make frequent requests for repetition, to avoid people who clutter, or to assume that people who clutter are less intelligent. Speech that is too fast and unclear will increase difficulty of understanding for others, and this may also inhibit work performance of people who clutter. There is little research on cluttering (Ward, 2018), and information regarding the impact cluttering has on working life and career choice is absent. This lack of information has informed the motivation for the present study. St. Louis et al. (2020) have demonstrated that negative, stigmatizing, or discriminatory attitudes are often shown towards people who stutter, and there is a need to explore the validity of these findings for people who clutter.

As part of a larger project, 'Living with cluttering' (DAM, 2021), experiences with cluttering within the aspects of education, work, conversation, and social occasions are investigated (Sønsterud, 2022). The aims of the present study were to investigate the impact of cluttering on the working life and career choices of adults with cluttering. Furthermore, the study sought to provide better evidence-based support for managing cluttering through career counselling and employment. Two main research questions were included:

- 1) What factors promote and what factors inhibit the positive development of working life and career for people with cluttering?
- 2) How can people who clutter be supported in achieving a positive work life?

## 2. Methods

Seven adults (five females) with cluttering, aged between 21-59 years, took part in a multiple single-case study (Gast & Ledford, 2014). The participants were recruited by announcement of the study through the Norwegian Speech and Language Therapy Association (NLL), the Norwegian Association of Stuttering and Cluttering (NIFS), and private and municipal speech therapy services offering speech therapy to people with stuttering and cluttering. Their observed speech behaviors were consistent with the lowest common denominator (LCD) definition of cluttering (St. Louis & Schulte, 2011). All participants were native Norwegian speakers with cluttering employed in several sectors: Information technology and media (n=1), health and care services (n=3), business (n=1), culture and entertainment (n=1), and transport (n=1). All participants had received speech-language therapy (SLT) for their cluttering at one or more times in their lives, even though this was not a criterion for inclusion in the study. Ethical approval was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Reference #25502). All participants provided written consent before participation, and codes were assigned to participant data to de-identify them and preserve anonymity.

All the semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed orthographically by the first author. Both authors performed the analysis of the anonymized transcriptions according to the principles of qualitative thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was conducted and structured using NVivo data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). During the initial coding phase, coding labels were created for concepts

identified in the transcriptions. Data were categorized according to semantic similarities, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analysis: Phase 1: get to know the data; Phase 2: generate initial codes; Phase 3: look for themes; Phase 4: review the themes again; Phase 5: define and name the themes; and Phase 6: produce the report/analysis. The final themes were derived jointly and are summarized in detail below.

### **3. Results**

Based on the principles of a thematic analysis outlined by Clarke and Braun (2016), a consistent finding was that all seven participants expressed satisfaction with their current working lives despite having encountered negative attitudes when choosing a course of study, in embarking upon a profession, and/or in the work environment itself. Interestingly, most participants (86%) had chosen a profession likely to involve significant communication and contact with people and expressed satisfaction about this. However, all participants confirmed that their cluttering in some situations could be a source of misunderstanding and was to some extent an inhibiting factor in communication at work, or an obstacle to work performance. See some examples of the participants' statements in the Appendix.

Personal narratives and experiences were highlighted in the study, and five main themes emerged: (a) Cluttering can cause a person to be misunderstood and misinterpreted; (b) increased knowledge about cluttering can make life easier; (c) equal opportunities for employment and in the workplace are key; (d) openness about cluttering has a positive impact; and (e) having access to SLT is of great value.

Most participants were unsure about whether cluttering had influenced their choice of profession. Only two participants (29%) said there were advantages to being supported when applying for jobs, while several highlighted that they had not needed such support at work or when applying for jobs. Most of the participants identified a trusting, authentic relation with their employer/boss as highly important, as well as the integration of written material/key words/visual support when giving oral contributions. Access to individual support through SLT was emphasized by six participants (86%), and SLT was for them associated with improved knowledge and awareness of cluttering, as well as increased self-regulation and subsequent improvement of communication.

Regarding positive impacts related to cluttering, three participants (43%) mentioned that cluttering had made it easier for them to understand the communication challenges that other people might have and made them more energetic and engaged in their own communication.

### **4. Discussion**

Even though all seven participants expressed satisfaction with their current working lives, they encountered negative attitudes during one or several phases of working life. The findings in the present study indicate that being open about cluttering, combined with improved knowledge about cluttering in society, can counteract negative attitudes and make working life easier for people who clutter. The role of transparency and information to counteract stigmatization of stuttering is well documented, and openness to changing the negative opinions or attitudes of others is an important factor (St. Louis, Węsierska et al., 2020). The findings of the present study support similar factors for cluttering.

Several participants expressed concerns about being judged less intelligent because of their cluttered speech. This finding corresponds well with those of similar studies (St. Louis, Węsierska et al., 2020; Giuffre, Scaler Scott et al., 2020), and reflects the clinical experience of both authors of the present study; clients who clutter frequently voice concerns about being thought less intelligent because of their cluttering, though their intelligence often appears to be above average.

The findings also indicate that employers would have greater understanding of employee performance in the different work-related contexts if they had knowledge about cluttering. Without such information, hiring or promotion decisions can be made on a faulty basis, as stated by Farrell et al. (2015). They note that employers who are informed about cluttering are likely to make decisions about hiring or promotion that are unaffected by cluttering provided they know what it is; therefore, employees should clearly communicate wishes or needs for personal facilitation in the workplace.

Access to SLTs was highlighted as key to improving personal function when applying for jobs and in the workplace, consistent with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, WHO, 2001). This finding highlights the need for clinicians to include open and honest discussions, not only about the person's goals

for therapy, but also goals for tasks or activities regarded as personally relevant and meaningful (Sønsterud, 2019). It is important to note that the participants in the present study have collaborated with SLTs during at least one previous phase of their lives. The findings of the present study may therefore not be representative of the experiences of people who clutter in general. For comparison and/or confirmation of the findings, themes related to career choice and work life should be explored further and include individuals who clutter who have not received any SLT. The small sample is a limitation of the study, and further research with larger samples is needed.

## 5. Conclusions

Continued improvement of general awareness and knowledge about cluttering is important. Results indicate that awareness and knowledge about cluttering are important environmental conditions for employment and workplace success for people who clutter, and that access to SLTs is also valuable in achievement of these goals.

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Appendix. Examples of statements representing the five main themes.

<b>Cluttering can cause a person to be misunderstood and misinterpreted</b>	<b>Increased knowledge about cluttering can make life easier</b>	<b>Equal opportunities for employment and in the workplace are key</b>	<b>Openness about cluttering has a positive impact</b>	<b>Having access to speech-language therapy is of great value</b>
<p>“I’m an intellectual, but from the way I speak, I can sound childish, or I talk in a way that may not always correspond to how I <i>am</i>.” (PWC-3)*</p> <p>“If you can’t express yourself properly, it can destroy the organization’s brand – and make you undesirable for high-profile roles.” (PWC-1)</p> <p>“Then I might sound a little silly, because I can’t explain the technical terms to them correctly.” (PWC-2)</p> <p>“When I clutter, I find that others think I’m stressed, but that’s not really the case. When I start talking a little too fast, I often hear ‘oh, are you stressed now?’. But I’m not stressed at all! So, it doesn’t give a proper picture of how I feel.” (PWC-5)</p>	<p>“If everyone at work knew what cluttering was, it would make it easier for them to understand why I sometimes disappear ‘into the wings’.” (PWC-6)</p> <p>“So, the speech therapist explained to everyone what cluttering was, and it turned out to be the best school year ever. It was incredibly good that everyone knew.” (PWC-2)</p> <p>“We as persons with cluttering are not considered equal. Cluttering is one thing. It’s not all of me!” (PWC-1)</p>	<p>“In the employment process I think you should be on an equal footing with the rest.” (PWC-4)</p> <p>“It doesn’t take much to facilitate someone with cluttering in the workplace, other than trust and security in the working environment.” (PWC-5)</p> <p>“No facilitation or special support should be offered. You must deliver, perform, at work!” (PWC-1)</p> <p>“So, <i>information</i> is the key word, really. More than facilitation.” (PWC-4)</p>	<p>“Openness is the solution. I have informed everyone where I work that I have cluttering and what it entails, and it has paid off very well.” (PWC-4)*</p> <p>“Transparency is best. And then to go outside the comfort zone, and just try.” (PWC-2)</p> <p>“It wasn’t until last year that I started being open about my cluttering at work. After I ‘let the cat out of the bag’, I don’t have to think about hiding it, and it’s just been so nice and such a relief.” (PWC-5)</p> <p>“Finding out I had a clutter explained a lot. It wasn’t just that I’m insecure or shy, but that I actually had something that makes it a little difficult to talk. Then I could explain it to my family and friends, and the teachers at the school, so they all knew what it was.” (PWC-2)</p>	<p>“Primary school should catch children with speech difficulties – not just the fact that the child can’t say ‘r’. Adults should realize this is something this boy will struggle with for the rest of his life if he doesn’t get help early.” (PWC-1)</p> <p>“The speech therapist can put into words the things I’ve been struggling with. Going to a speech therapist has helped me a lot in terms of not being so affected by comments in the workplace.” (PWC-5)</p> <p>“Already in early youth I would have invested time in increasing my awareness, to be able to speak properly as an adult.” (PWC-1)</p> <p>“Speech therapist treatment has made me more aware of what cluttering is, and I consciously try to use speech training techniques in my everyday work.” (PWC-7)</p>

\*Participant codes (PWC=Person who clutters)