Stuttering Attitudes Research Symposium: Reflecting on a Landmark Event

Kenneth O. St. Louis

Mary E. Weidner
Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV

Rodney M. Gabel

Stephanie Hughes
Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Speech-Language Pathology Program,
University of Toledo
Toledo, OH

Craig E. Coleman
Department of Communication Disorders, Marshall University
Huntington, WV

Abstract

The first ever symposium devoted entirely to the study of attitudes toward stuttering was held September 4–7, 2013 in Morgantown, WV. Identified as the “Stuttering Attitudes Research Symposium,” the event brought together scientists, clinicians, and stakeholders to document the current state of the art and science in all the areas of inquiry related to this topic. The symposium drew leading experts in stuttering attitudes worldwide, in addition to local clinicians and students.

Featured speakers included Kenneth St. Louis, Gordon Blood with Michael Boyle, Marilyn Langevin, Rodney Gabel, and Fauzia Abdalla. Their presentations focused, respectively, on public or peer attitudes as they relate to the epidemiology of stuttering attitudes internationally, stigma, teasing and bullying, job discrimination, and changing attitudes. Lively group discussions followed each featured presentation.

In addition, the symposium included 20 short research presentations, each in both poster and oral formats, with four following each of the featured speakers over 3 days. These research presentations covered the range of topics related to stuttering attitudes in various populations, including measuring and changing them. Several attendees presented global perspectives of stuttering attitudes representing the countries of Sudan, Poland, Sri Lanka, Germany, Kuwait, and Iran.

The structure of the symposium made it easy and natural for attendees to engage in thoughtful dialogue, collaboration, and networking. For example, after each featured speaker and a question-answer period, four 15-minute oral summaries of posters were delivered by the authors, followed by a poster session featuring only those four posters. Social events such as a picnic and closing banquet allowed attendees to network informally and to share personal experiences and insights.

On the last day, the symposium culminated with an opportunity for attendees to collaborate and discuss future directions in stuttering attitudes research. Working groups were developed to examine (a) epidemiology and the nature of stigma, (b) changing public attitudes, and (c) mitigating teasing and bullying in children.
Overall, the Stuttering Attitudes Research Symposium was a landmark event. Evaluations were almost uniformly positive. One attendee wrote, "[High points included] the keynote speakers discussing areas that they are passionate about [and that the] speakers’ topics flowed into the poster topics seamlessly." Another wrote, "I felt that the entire symposium was a high point. I learned a great deal and feel inspired by the motivations and passions of all who participated.” A clinician wrote, “I plan to engage in more informative/educational activities with the public school teachers with whom I work.”

Handouts for most of the presentations at the symposium are posted on the IPATHA (International Project on Attitudes Toward Human Attributes) website at www.stutteringattitudes.com (St. Louis, 2014). A book, preliminarily entitled, Public Attitudes Toward Stuttering: Past Accomplishments and Future Challenges, has been prepared from presentations at the symposium, with all chapters undergoing additional peer review. Edited by the symposium organizer and host, Kenneth St. Louis, the book contains major chapters from the six featured speakers, an annotated bibliography of literature on stuttering attitudes by Stephanie Hughes, and short research report chapters from 14 of the research presentations. It is expected that that the book will be available either late 2014 or early 2015. A few other presentations will be or have been submitted for publication in communication sciences and disorders journals.

Importantly, plans are underway for a second stuttering attitudes research symposium to be held at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio in 2015 or 2016. This, along with the three working groups, will hopefully sustain the momentum. We hope that the potential research initiatives that have taken root from the symposium will help to provide a better understanding of stuttering attitudes in various populations and cultures, as well as to identify ways in which attitudes might be changed. Accordingly, such efforts will move society closer to the long-term goal of improving the lives of all people affected by stuttering. Until then, each working group is actively engaged in short-term initiatives, which are further outlined in the reports below.

The dialogue and brainstorming initiated at the symposium has continued and has already stimulated initiatives and research projects, some already underway. “Point persons” volunteered to represent each of the three working groups. The first group of researchers and clinicians at the symposium chose to discuss the nature and origin of negative attitudes towards stuttering and people who stutter. This group discussed a variety of questions and issues related to this broad topic, but focused on epidemiological factors related to attitudes towards stuttering and people who stutter, possible underlying factors that may contribute to the development of attitudes towards stuttering and people who stutter, and how attitudes lead to stigma and prejudice. The group also discussed areas for further investigation using mixed-methods in measuring stuttering attitudes and promoting development of large datasets related to attitudes towards stuttering and people who stutter. The group set a goal to design a study that would address many of these questions and issues.

Subsequently, several researchers and clinicians are collecting data for this initial study. Its purpose is to develop a large dataset of people who stutter that focuses on their attitudes towards stuttering and their experience of being a person who stutters. This multisite study utilizes graduate students in fluency disorders classes as researchers. The strategy is for a large proportion of the students to identify an adult who stutters who is not currently in speech therapy or attending a support group for people who stutter. The graduate students will administer a qualitative interview, the Public Opinion Survey on Human Attributes–Stuttering (POSHA–S; St. Louis, 2011), and the St. Louis Inventory of the Life Perspectives–Stuttering (St. Louis, 2001). This research study has begun with three to five university classes, and it is expected that the study will expand during subsequent years to include several more universities. The data will be analyzed by a team of researchers across several institutions. Persons interested in this group can contact Rodney Gabel (rodney.gabel@utoledo.edu).
The second working group focused on changing public attitudes. Their discussion highlighted the fact that researchers have measured and attempted to change negative attitudes toward stuttering for many decades, yet relatively little seems to be known about the process of attitude change in general. Other disciplines, such as public and mental health, have a history of success in systematically changing public attitudes. The group agreed that using the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the work of such disciplines may also be beneficial to stuttering researchers. Thus, the goal of the group is to identify and disseminate well recognized theories of attitude change in the hopes that researchers and clinicians may better understand and successfully change negative attitudes toward stuttering. Plans include bringing in a nationally recognized expert on attitude change to serve as a keynote speaker at a future symposium and publishing works on attitude change in the stuttering literature. Researchers and clinicians who are interested in this topic are invited to contact Stephanie Hughes (stephanie.hughes@utoledo.edu) for more information.

The third working group focused on civility in the classroom that would result in reduced teasing and bullying of children who stutter. Largest of the three working groups, participants at the symposium discussed ways that researchers can collaborate to improve overall communication among children in school settings. Many of the participants in the working group are actively involved in research and clinical activities designed to educate teachers and peers about stuttering and other communication disorders. In addition, several members have worked on developing intervention programs and materials to reduce bullying.

This group’s initial goal is to create a database that will allow members to track research progress among fellow group members. Furthermore, the database will allow group members to remain updated on what projects undertaken by others for possible collaborations. Ultimately, the goal of this group is to develop materials and programs that will lead to improved communication among children in school settings, reduced bullying, increased understanding of individual differences, and improved understanding of communication disorders. Anyone interested in this working group can contact Craig Coleman (craig.coleman@marshall.edu) for additional information.

References