

Introduction

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Back in 1974, the Canadian rock group Bachman-Turner Overdrive were compiling their third album. Charlie Fach, a producer for Mercury Records, reviewed their proposed collection of eight songs. Fach was not convinced. He thought it lacked a potential hit song and, in particular, he ‘couldn’t hear the magic’. The band had another song recorded. An instrumental piece with lyrics written on the fly, it was sung in stammered vocals to poke fun at the band’s former manager who stammered. Out of other ideas, they played it to Fach. Fach liked it. “That’s the track! It’s got a brightness to it. It kind of floats a foot higher than the other songs when you listen to it.”

Bachman-Turner Overdrive re-recorded the song to include it in the album, but sung with fluent vocals. It did not work. With the stammering removed, the magic was lost. They decided to keep the stammering and the rest is history. What was once a joke became a chart-topper in six different countries and can still be heard on the airwaves today.

Stammering is often seen as a joke and it is taken for granted in our society that fluency is better than stammering. But, as the story of ‘You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet’ reminds us, this is not necessarily true. Stammering can benefit both people who stammer and society if we let it.

This book is a collection of voices that live and breathe this idea. It has been a long time coming.

Beginnings

Stammering Pride and Prejudice was born out of our shared frustration with the thin and negative understandings of stammering available to people who stammer. We live in a society which stigmatizes stammering. Sometimes this stigma becomes active discrimination, such as when a stammerer is mocked or denied a job. However, often it is more insidious. At its most potent, it operates as taken-for-granted assumptions about the inferiority of stammering; that

being fluent is somehow *better* than stammering. If you told your neighbour you were going to stammering therapy to become fluent, they would not think anything of it. But if you told them you were going to therapy to stammer more, likely they would be rather confused. Stigma makes the sentence “I wish I was more fluent” banal and the sentence “I wish I stammered more” absurd. You might be reading this wondering how anyone could possibly desire stammering? We hope this book will open your eyes to the many reasons why.

In addition to society’s stereotypes and prejudices, our frustration as stammerers and professionals working in the field of stammering has as much to do with the beliefs of the professionals aiming to support people who stammer. Speech and language therapists can hold the same views as the rest of society, but under the cloak of ‘medical expertise’. Stammering is understood in medicine, as in society, as a defect to be ‘fixed’ or ‘overcome’. This medical model perspective attributes difficulties in life caused by impairments (such as visual loss, deafness, or stammering) to defective bodies. Consequently, it has led to the development of many medical and therapeutic approaches to remedy and cure these defects. However, all is not as simple as it appears: the medical model makes the person the problem, creates assumptions about ‘normality’, and promotes judgements about what society considers ‘defective’.

The medical model has led to the development of therapy approaches that aim to correct stammered speech back to fluent norms. Consequently, stammerers often come to believe that fluency is a panacea and the gold standard against which their speech should be judged. Rather than enable stammerers to learn to identify, navigate, and challenge the discrimination that makes their lives difficult, they are taught to capitulate to it by doing everything they can to make their speech fluent. Therapy for young children who stammer sets out to facilitate fluency. For adolescents and adults, typically a ‘cure’ is no longer deemed possible. Instead, the focus shifts to speech management strategies and encouraging psychological and social adaptation to being a person who stammers. Certainly, some people who stammer have benefited from these interventions. However, at best these attempts put a sticking plaster over the real issue of society’s deep-seated insecurities around difference and at worst they can become complicit in further pedalling prejudice.

Even when people who stammer themselves have attempted to develop and drive new understandings of stammering, they have for the most part remained tethered to the medical model. Charles Van Riper and Joseph Sheehan are two notable examples. Both were speech and language therapists who stammered. They used their own experiences of stammering to redefine

clinical practice, in particular encouraging the profession to appreciate the nuanced and profound psychological impact stammering can have. Their therapy approaches abandoned the goal of fluency and encouraged people to stammer well. While the psychological depth and breadth of therapy advocated by Van Riper and Sheehan were positive developments, the overriding aims of these approaches still sought to effect change at the level of the individual and not society. This book looks beyond the narrow confines of therapy to structural, attitudinal, and physical barriers present in society affecting people who stammer.

Stammering Pride and Prejudice draws upon a different set of theories and concepts to understand stammering. These come from the disability rights movement in the 1970s, that later became formalized into the social model by Vic Finkelstein and Michael Oliver. In short, these views see the way society is structured as disabling rather than physical impairment itself. The person with a spinal injury who is unable to walk is disabled by the fact there is no ramp access to a building rather than their spinal injury. These ideas, which were so transformative for physical impairments, had passed the stammering community by until the last decade. Yet, as Michael Oliver himself points out in his heartfelt foreword, the social model is as applicable to stammering. It just requires us to think more creatively. People who stammer may not need ramp access; however, we do need a society willing to listen to and respect our stammered voices. We consider this a basic human right.

Stammering – perhaps as usual – has been reluctant to join in the conversation. Indeed, many people who stammer hesitate to identify as ‘disabled’. This hesitation can come from a place of misunderstanding and stigma. Disability, as defined by the social model, is a dynamic process, not an inherent characteristic. Therefore, disability is experienced when a person is unable to participate fully in society due to a mismatch between their body and the environment around them. It is not simply a descriptive term for people with significant physical or cognitive impairments, like an inability to walk or a lower IQ. People who stammer may not define themselves as disabled for fear of offending people with more ‘significant’ disabilities or, more disconcertingly, for fear of becoming associated with people who are often seen as ‘broken’, ‘defective’, and ‘other’ by society. Whether people who stammer consider themselves disabled or not does not stop them from being disabled by society. As long as society views stammered speech as inferior, they will be disabled by societal norms. We ask people who stammer to embrace the socially-constructed concept of disability; we gain strength by aligning ourselves

with others who also experience daily barriers, prejudice, and discrimination because their bodies do not meet society's expectations of normality.

The nature of stammering, its variability and hideability, can make it more challenging to understand as disabling. People who stammer are sometimes disabled a lot; sometimes a little. Fluctuations in frequency of stammering may alter how disabled we feel; this may also be altered by the perceived and actual hostility of the speaking environment. A person who chooses silence because of fear of stigma, one who is silenced by their effortful blocks, and one who speaks but is ignored through prejudice are all disabled, albeit in different ways.

Prejudice

Our society is dominated by the story, or narrative, of smooth-talking fluency as the preferred way to speak. Newscasters, politicians, actors are universally fluent. Job vacancies ask for excellent communication and voice-automated systems are unable to understand stammering. Fluency as the 'right' way to speak; stammering as the 'wrong' way to speak is the dominant narrative of our society. This is powerful. These narratives become blueprints for all stories and, as such, the vehicles through which we come to understand the stories of others and ourselves. Knowingly or unknowingly, we adopt the narratives that are familiar to us, thereby replicating the master societal story.

People who stammer are conditioned by society to think it is ugly to stammer and therefore often share this point of view too. Wendell Johnson famously defined stammering as what we do trying not to stammer. While a bit of a tautology, the definition has proven useful for describing the wide range of behaviours we use to avoid stammering. However, little attention has been given to why we are ubiquitously trying not to stammer. Our stammering may make speech effortful and it can be unsettling to experience its loss of control. But these experiences do not justify the wide-ranging avoidance strategies we often use to escape moments of stammering and the lengths to which we sometimes go to pass as fluent.

In the past, our inclination to hide stammering has been framed as a personal failing: we are socially anxious, timid, or just too weak to be open about who we are. The truth is, we often try not to stammer for good reasons. We are punished for stammering; it goes against the dominant societal narrative. We experience teasing and bullying as children and discrimination and prejudice as adults. As some of the authors document, even society's best

attempts at helping us when we are young can further this prejudice. Therapy can reinforce that stammering is not a legitimate way of speaking and that if we want to be taken seriously we must try to be fluent. We are taught from a young age, by the adults whom we trust, that fluent speech is more valuable than stammered speech.

Prejudice takes many forms. It can be blatant, but it can also be subtle, just part of the landscape. Discrimination can occur in the absence of outright attacks on us and our speech. These instances occur when we are simply not considered and our experiences of speaking are ignored. When it is assumed that everyone is or should be fluent, we suffer. The authors in this book explore their own experiences of prejudice. They highlight the abundant evidence that people who stammer are discriminated against and stigmatized. They also describe how this societal stigma changes our understanding of stammering from a natural variation in speech production to a clinical defect with many negative consequences.

Pride

Whilst stammerers have been repeating the tropes of the 20th century, the conversation in disability has exploded into the 21st. In particular, we have seen the emergence of movements, such as neurodiversity, that re-imagine the concept of underlying ‘impairment’, or a ‘weakened body’, from disability. ‘Impairments’ are seen as natural variation and an intrinsic part of the rich diversity of humanity. If we set up society to support these variations, then we can all benefit from them: Tourette’s brings vocal spontaneity, autism increased attention to detail, and dyslexia creative writing. In tandem, disabled people are beginning to draw positive and empowering identities from their disabled experience. This thinking has not developed in a vacuum. In a wider context, these positive ways of conceptualizing disability increasingly intersect, overlap, and draw from activism in other areas of society, like womens, LGBTQI+, black and ethnic minority rights movements, and more. We live in a society that is beginning to understand that difference is not defect.

The dawn of stammering or dysfluency pride, chronicled in this book, shows the beginnings of a similar movement among the stammering community. This takes a different view of research findings into the cause of stammering. It sees the gene changes that predispose to stammering as natural human variation, not damaging mutations; and the neurological changes people who stammer have as differences rather than abnormalities in brain wiring.

It questions who has the right to decide whether the way of speaking these natural genetic and neurological differences lead to is inferior to fluent speech. Biologically, stammering comprises a plethora of unique speech patterns; it is only when placed in a certain social context that it becomes a disorder. We can each choose how to define stammering. We can accept the dominant definition of our society or we can choose to define it as a unique and valuable way of speaking.

Stammering pride is a counter narrative to the dominant societal narrative around fluency. We open the book with a transcript of Erin Schick's performance poem 'Honest Speech'. Her open, direct resistance to social norms and reframing of stammering as her voice's 'greatest symphony' and 'the most honest part of me' encapsulates the growing movement of stammering pride. A counter narrative only makes sense in relation to what it is countering. The term identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category. Thus, stammering pride can only be fully understood in relation to prejudice. Stammering pride asks individuals to question the discriminatory fluent norms and ableist attitudes of society and take a much more empowering view of their speech. Like Erin's poem, it invites us to resist these current fluent values, to stammer loudly and proudly, and show society what we sound like.

Counter narratives take different forms in this book. Through literature, theorising, research, art, photography and poetry, experiences of stammering which often remain invisible, unnamed and unacknowledged in mainstream society are brought into focus. Many of these narratives are deeply reflective, infusing personal history and experience with new meaning, complexity and depth. As a reader, expect to be challenged, unsettled, and moved. The different chapters in this book explore questions of inclusion and exclusion, the social construction of normalcy, and the profound effects of social and communication norms and expectations. It also looks into the boundaries and interactions between the individual who stammers and the collective, between the self and society. Many of these narratives uphold the value of breaking away from socially conceived norms and harnessing the unique experience of stammering in its own right.

As stammering is reclaimed as a different, legitimate, and valuable means of communication, a radical conversation around stammering gain emerges. Arguably, until we have a reason to stammer, until we choose to stammer freely and openly because it benefits us, stammering will remain positioned as the negative opposite of fluency. Other people will not value our stammering if we cannot value it ourselves. Pride denotes a feeling of

deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from our own achievements, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired. Stammering pride demands recognition for what the stammered voice adds to conversations, interactions, roles and relationships - not for what it lacks.

A number of chapters in this book demonstrate how stammering renders simple verbal exchanges anything but trite. Stammering brings novelty, unpredictability, and excitement. In the silence of stammering is the potential of what is yet to come. The unexpectedness of stammering forces both listener and speaker into a space of vulnerability, which can make everyday conversations immediately intimate and sincere. Thus, stammering can create opportunities, open doors to relationships, and foster a depth of connection that has benefit for the person who stammers and for society. The two-way nature of interaction creates an opportunity for every listener to meet the openness and authenticity of stammering in a way that fosters shared respect and intimacy.

What is dominant and what is subjugated in our society is fluid. This will become apparent as you try to understand where the contributors position themselves in the stories that they tell as they navigate the 'inside/outside' dynamics of society. What emerges are the multiple layers of positioning and the complexity in this negotiation. All the personal narratives in this book highlight the important influence of the dominant cultural scripts on their lives. What is powerful about the stories presented here is that they expand the boundaries of these dominant cultural storylines by offering alternative narratives around stammering that can be told. Each of the narratives offers a personal example of making sense of and moving beyond stereotypical conceptualizations of stammering as defective or a disorder to be treated. This is liberating, not just for the contributors who both author and live the story of their lives, but for the reader and for society at large as we too are unshackled from conforming to dominant and self-limiting narratives. It is an invitation to us all to explore and value our own uniqueness in this world.

Stammering Pride and Prejudice

The title of this book reflects its contents. We borrowed the Jane Austen pun from a conference held in 2016 at City Lit, London, exploring stammering from a social model perspective. To begin with, it was a working title, a place-holder, for when something more original came along. But, while other things have changed from inception to print – Chris alone got married, finished a PhD, and became an assistant Professor – the title has not. It succinctly captures what

this book is about: the current prejudice and stigma surrounding stammering in society counterpoised by the pride and rich meanings people who stammer are beginning to take in their speech.

Stammering: Pride and Prejudice comprises an eclectic mix of personal essays, art, and poetry related to stammering. Each piece is unique and can be read individually. We placed them in an order that begins in the depths of prejudice, wanders through therapy, and arrives at pride. We encourage you, however, to dip in and out of the book as you wish. The book draws on disability theory to create a multidimensional understanding of stammering in today's society. But academic thought alone does not bring about change. For these ideas to be of real worth, they must benefit people in their day-to-day, messy and difficult lives. *Stammering Pride and Prejudice* is filled with stories and experiences of people who stammer grappling with these ideas. Some of these are empowering, some bitter, some celebratory, some joyful. Others are more practical, personal accounts about how the social model can drive cultural change, for the benefit of both people who stammer and wider society.

Academic texts can become weighed down with jargon and innumerable references, particularly to readers unfamiliar to the subject. We have tried to avoid this and make the book accessible to those unacquainted with the language of disability studies and academia. We decided against a formal reference style, instead opting to integrate references into the writing, and asked authors to limit their bibliographies. We valued the unique voices of our authors. Accordingly their literary style has been maintained, and choice of 'stammerer', 'stutterer', or 'person who stammers/stutters' respected.

We found art central to our message. Art allows us to see, hear, feel, and think about stammering differently. Art can identify, challenge, and alter the connotations that accompany our everyday language. Visual art can accomplish this by doing away with language altogether. A picture is worth a thousand words, precisely because it does not use any. Language-based art, such as poetry and prose, still use language, but in new and exciting ways. We hope the artwork we have included will help highlight our prejudices and biases and in doing so manage to free our words and thinking from their historical chains.

Final thoughts

If you are the type of person who reads the final lines of a book before buying it, we want to draw your attention to a borrowed line from Chris' final chapter. He quotes from Walt Whitman's poem 'Song of Myself':

‘Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)’

Stammering can be understood in a multitude of ways. We wanted *Stammering Pride and Prejudice* to make the sentence “I am learning to stammer more” a little less absurd. To give people a more nuanced and positive way to understand their stammering. This does not mean that stammering is always a garden of roses. It can be a curse, a nuisance, and a gift all at the same time. The diverse voices in this book reflect this. They contradict each other and, sometimes, even themselves; they are likely to contradict your own thinking on stammering too. We invite you, however, to resist the temptation to try to resolve any differences prematurely, defensively, or artificially. Rather, to sit with the tensions, divisions and the contradictions painted by the book’s more coherent and complete picture of people’s experience.