How do people who stutter experience ableist microaggressions? A mixed methods exploratory study.

Tessa Senior, Octavia Calder-Dawe, and Ágnes Szabó

School of Health, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington

People Who Stutter (PWS) can experience considerable social stigma. Stuttering has generally been understood as a disorder that is best addressed through helping PWS to alter stuttered speech. Recently, new lines of inquiry inspired by disability theory are turning attention towards the systems of privilege that uphold fluency and marginalise dysfluency. Taking up these commitments, this paper presents findings from an exploratory online survey that aimed to understand the nature and frequency of ableist microaggressions perceived by PWS. Overall, participants reported encountering microaggressions frequently. Our thematic analysis of participants' descriptions of stuttering microaggression experiences highlights the mundane and diminishing nature of these interactions, and the power differential that exists between PWS and non-stutterers. We identify an urgent need to challenge ableist constructions of dysfluent speech as deficit.

Key words: *Stutter, Stigma, Ableism, Disability, Stammer, Dysfluency, Mixed-methods, Thematic analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Stuttering is commonly understood as the repetition of sounds, elongation of words and involuntary speech pauses known as blocking, with secondary physical characteristics such as head nodding, excessive blinking, leg tapping or pursed lips (Tichenor & Scott Yaruss, 2019). Stuttering is common, affecting an estimated one in 100 people globally, and approximately 45,000 people in Aotearoa New Zealand. The two dimensions of stuttering can be usefully described using an iceberg analogy. Observable behaviors are said to be the 'tip of the iceberg' and under the surface lie the psychological features which occur for people who stutter (PWS). While speech and language therapists have worked to address the 'above iceberg' perceivable behaviors to reduce objective stuttering, psychological research often concerns itself with the 'below iceberg' features. Research has found increased levels of shame, social anxiety, fear and guilt among PWS (Bloodstein et al., 2021; Hicks, 2003.; Pang, 2014). Research on perceptions of PWS have also demonstrated that PWS are subject to stigma: they may be considered less intelligent (Amick et al., 2017), have fewer employment options (Gerlach et al., 2018) and are deemed less attractive (Van Borsel et al., 2011) than non-stutterers.

Normative understandings of stuttering reflect a predominantly biomedical view, wherein stuttering is constructed as a disorder arising from functional speech differences which therapy aims to address and correct. Various therapy techniques are used by clinical speech pathologists to attempt to enhance fluency by ameliorating blocks and reducing the presentation of stuttering in the individual (Connery et al., 2021). Scales are used to objectively calculate stuttering frequency, stuttering severity or 'naturalness of speech' and therapy is then tailored to increase the fluency (O'Brian et al., 2004). In Aotearoa New Zealand, where this research is based, interventions are often administered in hospitals, community centers or clinical settings, with initial diagnosis taking place via a general practitioner. Although more holistic psychological therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) are gaining visibility, they remain individually focused in their approach, aiming to shape and improve a client's fluency (Beilby et al., 2012). ACT focuses on self-acceptance, encouraging clients to restructure their thoughts to accept their stutter in a manner designed to 'facilitate self-efficacy and self-responsibility' (Beilby et al., 2012, p. 290). Sitting behind this approach is the idea that it is a client's own personal reaction to their stutter which produces distress and anxiety (Beilby & Byrnes, 2012).

Biomedical and therapeutic approaches like ACT and speech therapy implicitly frame stuttering stigma as normal and inevitable. Stuttering comes into focus as something to be addressed on the individual level by altering speech to conform to 'normal' patterns, and/or through reworking the thoughts and beliefs of PWS to cope with stigma more effectively. Aligned research on PWS's perceptions of stigma often concludes with a 'clinical outcome', which guides therapists to help PWS reappraise stigmatising experiences to make them less distressing (Alqhazo et al., 2017; Boyle, 2018). This individualized focus is also reflected in self-stigma research tools, such as the Unhelpful Thoughts and Beliefs about Stuttering (UTBAS) self-report measure (St Clare et al., 2009). This measure positions thoughts such as 'people will doubt my ability because I stutter' and 'people will wonder what is wrong with me if I stammer' as indicative of an unhelpful thought pattern within the PWS (as opposed to an accurate perception of stuttering stigma). Endorsing these statements is therefore considered to indicate a problem with the PWS, rather than a failure of society to make required adjustments to accommodate PWS.

For some time, a growing literature inspired by critical disability theory and the social psychology of stigma has

challenged this individualising and biomedical view, which locates the origin of disability within an individual. Instead, the social model frames disability as a cultural doctrine which is proliferated through social attitudes and institutional practices (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver, 1981). The model moves the focus from individual bodies to societal assumptions, attitudes, and practices. As a consequence, the problem is not disabled people, but rather the system of ableist privilege that elevates non-disabled embodiments and marginalises disabled people (for theoretical work on ableism, see Campbell, 2009). For PWS, ableist rhetoric positions fluent (able) speakers as the normative ideal, naturalizing norms and interpersonal practices that disadvantage people who stutter. For example, the time allowed for oral presentations mandated in schools and workplaces may be based on a fluent speaking pace. As a result, PWS may have to say less, or risk penalty. In this instance, it is not the stuttered speech which creates a barrier for successfully presenting, but the allotted time frame which is based on fluent speaking standards.

While the social model is not without critics (and indeed has been adapted, extended, and challenged considerably in the last few decades), the paradigm shift it delivers is widely acknowledged. Constantino and colleagues (2022) make a strong case for the utility of social model thinking for understanding stuttering: where the problem lies, and the kinds of solutions that may improve health and wellbeing for PWS. This approach positions stuttering on a sliding scale of embodied diversity, suggesting the need to move away from a tight and individualizing focus on the functional capacities and cognitions of PWS, towards a more expansive consideration of the sociocultural context that produces stuttering as a problem. Thus, this approach to stuttering demands a focus on rights, justice and social change alongside individual-level therapies.

The concept of microaggression offers one way to theorise the mundane, everyday stigma and discrimination experienced by PWS. Originally coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970 and then widely adopted in antiracist scholarship, the term microaggression was first used to describe the subtly disparaging comments directed at African Americans in the United States (Harrison & Tanner., 2017; Pierce et al., 1978). Microaggressions are commonplace verbal or nonverbal behaviors which subtly or ambiguously communicate a negative misconception about a person belonging to a marginalised group (Sue et al., 2007). Although microaggressions can be intended to hurt, they may also be unintentionally harmful. They are often characterised by a degree of ambiguity and plausible deniability, which can make them difficult to pinpoint and challenge. Microaggression is an especially useful way to approach stuttering stigma from a critical disability studies perspective because it invites a close focus on interpersonal practices of power (e.g. microaggressions), with comparatively less attention to intrapsychic processes. This offers an important corrective to mainstream stigma research which, as indicated above, has a tendency to foreground the psychology of PWS. While not theorised as microaggressions explicitly, literature on stuttering and stuttering stigma suggests that this lens has strong potential. For example, PWS often report that they fear being viewed as ‘a fool’, perceived as ‘not normal’ or having their competence doubted (Bricker-Katz et al., 2010, 2013).

While a body of literature exists which highlights overt forms of stigma and discrimination experienced by PWS (Alqhazo et al., 2017; Boyle, 2018), there is little research that directly explores PWS’ experiences with microaggressions and more subtle and ambiguous forms of diminishment (Coalson, et al., 2022). In this paper, we report on an exploratory study designed to explore everyday ableist microaggressions experienced by PWS. We designed a mixed-methods online survey to elicit participants’ accounts of the nature and frequency of microaggressions they encountered. This is a first step towards understanding whether and how PWS perceive microaggressions and how they make sense of these interactions. This research is grounded in the experiences, knowledge and community connections of the first author, who is a PWS.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Methodology

In this study, we take up a material discursive lens, informed by critical realism, to guide our analysis. A critical realist position combines a realist ontology – the claim that a material reality exists independently from our perceptions of it – with a relativist epistemology, wherein reality as we experience and narrate it is understood to be constituted through sociocultural processes (Bhaskar; 1989; for applications of critical realism to psychological work on embodiment, see Sims-Schouten et al., 2007; Ussher, 2008). When applied to the phenomenon of stuttering, a critical realist approach makes room for an acknowledgement of the material reality of stuttering and microaggressions and their embodied dimensions. At the same time, this approach allows us to foreground the contingent, socially constructed nature of both stuttering and microaggressions as sociocultural phenomena. Paying careful attention to the socially constructed dimensions of stuttering is also a compelling fit with critical disability theory and the social model of disability, both of which foreground the contingent and power-laden nature of disablement.

In practical terms, this theoretical approach also positions our research as an epistemological intervention (see Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2017). Through putting forward the concept of an ableist microaggression to study participants who may not have previously encountered it, we are inviting them to experiment with a sociocultural framing of stuttering and stuttering discrimination. This is a deliberate, political act in a context where stuttering is routinely understood more narrowly as an individual functional impairment, both within and outside stuttering communities.

Participants

Eligible participants included people over the age of 16, who self-identified as PWS, currently living in Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia. Our geographic focus matches our community links. The age criteria reflect our particular interest in the experiences of teenagers and adults, who we conjectured were likely to have had more experience socializing beyond the family unit than children, and therefore more potential exposure to microaggressions.

We collected demographic information about age and nationality (our inclusion criteria for the research), and also invited participants to share their gender identity/identities (this was considered potentially important to know given that proportionally more men than women stutter; our sample reflected this pattern). While we hoped to reach a diverse range of prospective participants, we did not request information about participants' ethnicities, cultural identities, sexualities or socioeconomic status, as our focus was on overall patterns across the sample, rather than within-sample variation. Final survey respondents included 29 participants (30% women) who self-identified as PWS, aged between 20 and 75 (*Mean* = 39, *SD* = 16). Participants self-reported their country of residence as New Zealand (7), Australia (20), USA (1) and England (1). The two responses from England and the USA were removed from the data set because they did not fit the inclusion criteria. A total of 27 responses formed the sample for the final analysis.

Survey Materials

We used an online survey created with Qualtrics. The survey included seven multiple choice questions and one longer, open response question. Out of the seven multiple choice questions, six canvassed participants' experiences with specific microaggressions, including prompts such as 'Have you ever experienced people breaking eye contact or looking away from you when you stutter?' and 'Have you ever experienced someone misunderstanding your stutter to be something other than a stutter?'(see Table 1 for full list of questions). These questions were formulated based on multiple sources: 1) the lead author who, as a PWS, has direct experience of microaggressions, 2) through anecdotal evidence from the lead author's peers and community networks of PWS and 3) examples from previous research on stuttering stigma (Boyle, 2018; Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Butler, 2013). The last item asked participants to report on their felt stigma, which is one possible outcome of experiencing microaggressions in everyday life. Participants gave responses to the seven statements on a 4-point scale anchored at 1 = Always, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Rarely and 4 = Never.

The survey began with some brief information about the research along with a short explanation of the term 'microaggression' for clarity, recognising that this concept, and its application to stuttering in particular, may not have been familiar to participants. Presenting the multiple-choice questions first was a deliberate feature of our research design, creating a meaningful context for the open text response that followed and sensitizing participants to the kinds of experiences we were interested to know about.

For the open response question, participants were provided a text box and invited to "recall any experiences where you felt subtly devalued by the words or actions of the listener". We also offered two indicative examples of the kind of experiences we were interested in: "Someone asking 'have you forgotten your name?' when you block whilst introducing yourself" and "Someone looking away or interrupting when you are trying to order food in a restaurant". As with the multiple-choice questions, these examples helped us indicate what we meant by microaggression, and to differentiate between this and overt hostility. The survey took on average 20 minutes to complete (*Median* = 6 minutes, *SD* = 2.7 minutes). Survey responses were anonymous and the only demographic information that was requested were gender, country of residence and age.

Recruitment

A mix of convenience and purposive sampling was used for this study. The study was advertised via posters distributed at University campuses and local community centres. Recruitment posters included the survey website and a QR code which took them to the online Qualtrics survey. The lead author also individually contacted all speech and language therapists in Aotearoa New Zealand whose email addresses were available through a google search. An invitation to participate was also sent to all members of The McGuire Program via group email and a group message sent via digital messaging application Telegram. The McGuire Program is an international speech therapy program run by PWS for PWS. Participants are taught physical breathing techniques and psychological tools to help them overcome the fear associated with stuttering. A participation advert also appeared on the website for START, a stuttering research and awareness charity in Aotearoa New Zealand. 'Speakeasy Australia' (a national association for people who stutter in Australia) was also contacted, and the research appeared in their monthly newsletter. Ethical approval was granted through the [University] Human Ethics Committee (0000029224).

Data Analysis

Multiple choice answers were first analysed descriptively by calculating percentages of each response option. Further inferential statistics (using chi-square tests and independent samples t-tests) were calculated to investigate the relationship between microaggressions and felt stigma. Open-ended responses were analysed through a thematic process aligned to Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis. This involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes inductively, developing themes, then reviewing candidate themes closely before settling on a final thematic structure. While coding was relatively quick given the small data set, developing themes took much longer. We worked through multiple iterations, experimenting with different organizing strategies and guided by the desire to generate strong, distinctive themes. The first author led the coding and initial statistical and thematic work. The final analyses were developed collaboratively through discussion between the three authors.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

Quantitative analysis of survey responses

Experiences of microaggressions

Table 1 shows that experiences of microaggressions were common in this sample. On average, participants reported 'sometimes' or 'always' to four microaggression experiences. All participants reported having experienced at least one of the six proposed experiences. None of the participants reported always experiencing all six experiences, but four participants selected sometimes or always for all six microaggression experiences.

Table 1. *Responses to multiple choice questions about specific instances of microaggression*

	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Microaggression experiences								
Have you ever experienced people breaking eye contact or looking away from you when you stutter?	4	13.8%	21	72.4%	3	10.3%	1	3.5%
Has a stranger ever offered you unsolicited or unwanted advice about your stutter?	2	6.9%	12	41.4%	10	34.5%	5	17.2%
Have you ever felt that you missed out on an opportunity (e.g., a job, promotion or invitation to a social event) because of your stutter, without being directly told this was the reason?	3	10.3%	16	55.2%	4	13.8%	6	20.7%
Have you ever felt comfortable to have a discussion with people who react negatively towards your stutter?	3	10.3%	10	34.5%	10	34.5%	6	20.7%
How often have you felt that people are focusing on how you are saying something and not what you are saying?	4	13.8%	19	65.5%	4	13.8%	2	6.9%
Have you ever experienced someone misunderstanding your stutter to be something other than a stutter?	3	10.3%	16	55.2%	8	27.6%	2	6.9%
Stigma experience								
In an average week, how often do you feel stigmatised by your stutter?	3	10.3%	11	37.9%	10	34.5%	5	17.2%

Note. Percentages represent proportion of respondents to the question in the row. $N = 27$

An overwhelming majority of participants (85%) reported that they always or sometimes experienced people breaking eye contact or looking away from them when they stutter. This was followed by 78% of participants reporting that they felt that people always or sometimes focused on how they were saying something and not what they were saying, and 48% of participants saying that they have always or sometimes had a stranger offer them unsolicited or unwanted advice about their stutter. In addition, two thirds of participants reported others misunderstanding their stutter (67%) or missing out on job opportunities because of their stutter (63%). Roughly half of the participants (56%) said that they rarely or never felt comfortable to have a discussion with people who reacted negatively towards their stutter. While feeling stigmatized was the least commonly endorsed survey item, still 44% of participants felt either always or sometimes stigmatized because of their stutter on an average week.

Microaggressions and stigma

People who sometimes or always felt stigmatized because of their stutter reported significantly more experiences of microaggressions ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 0.90$ versus $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.10$); $t(25) = 5.12$, $p < .001$; $d = 1.983$. Specifically, they were more likely to report that people mistook their stutter to be something other than a stutter (91.7%) compared to those who never or rarely felt stigmatized (46.7%); $\chi^2(1) = 6.08$, $p = .014$, Cramer's v = .474. They were also more likely to report that people offered them unsolicited advice about their stutter (75%) than people who said they were rarely or never stigmatized (26.7%); $\chi^2(1) = 6.24$, $p = .013$, Cramer's v = .481. Finally, those who felt sometimes or always stigmatized were more likely to report missing out on opportunities because of their stutter (83.3% versus 46.7%); $\chi^2(1) = 3.84$, $p = .050$, Cramer's v = .377.

Interim discussion of quantitative results

Despite the relatively small sample size, taken together, these results suggest that microaggressions are an entrenched feature of respondents' everyday lives. The finding that the overarching question addressing felt stigma was the least commonly endorsed statement is also significant, suggesting that the kind of subtle diminishments captured by the microaggression statements in our survey may not match up with participants' own understandings of "stigma" (a term that may be more strongly associated with more overt, hostile, and concrete instances of discrimination). Nevertheless, our findings suggest that experiencing microaggressions more frequently could lead to increased feelings of stigma. The associations between felt stigma and the three statements addressing stutter misattribution, unsolicited advice and missed opportunities indicates that these kinds of discriminatory experiences may be particularly important correlates of respondents' experiences of stigmatization.

Thematic analysis of open responses

Participants' responses to the open-ended prompt supported and developed the broad pattern of findings identified in the quantitative data above. Respondents offered detailed, sometimes lengthy accounts of the interactional difficulties, discomfort and discrimination they encountered in the course of everyday life. In this section, we present three interlocking themes we have developed through analysis of participants' qualitative responses: microaggressions as *unremarkable*, microaggressions as *diminishing*, and microaggressions as generally *well-intentioned misunderstandings*. We present and discuss these three themes in detail below.

'Not much really': Microaggressions as unremarkable

Participants frequently described instances of poor treatment from others as unremarkable: that is, as expected, commonplace and therefore as relatively insignificant. Linguistic devices emphasizing frequency, such as the words "often", "all the time" or "100s of examples", emphasized the routine and familiar nature of microaggressions for participants. The way participants characterized these instances aligns with the hallmark features of microaggressions as being familiar occurrences which catch one's attention enough to be remembered but do not stand out as overtly stigmatising. One respondent described their encounters with different kinds of microaggressions this way:

"…There are also the hurry-ers, people who repeat themselves in an effort to make you speak faster, unaware or not caring that it only makes everything worse. People who try to finish your sentence even though they have no clue what you're actually trying

to say, mishearing you and getting your order wrong or name wrong […] The list goes on."

In this response, instances of ableist intrusion are presented as a long list (one that, it is implied, 'goes on' beyond the scope of a survey response). This conveys a sense of weary familiarity with these kinds of interactions and people, which are problematic because they undermine the PWS' interactional agency. The invention of a collective noun ("the hurry-ers") also works to construct these impatient interlocutors as commonplace: a garden variety of non-stutterer.

Participants' understanding of microaggressions as mundane and unremarkable was also evidenced through the frequent use of qualifying language. In the response below, the participant begins by qualifying their account of microaggressions (as being "not much really"), before proceeding to reel off five common examples in a conversational, offhand manner:

"Not much really, mostly only when conversing over zoom or on the phone where they think I've lost connection or have finished talking and start to talk themselves while I'm trying to get out my words. In person it tends to just be trying to finish my sentence for me or looking away. It's very rare that I ever get actually insulted or anything like that, mostly just in odd cases."

This passage details several examples of mundane diminishment, while simultaneously working to present these examples as unremarkable, relatively unimportant events (so much so that they almost escaped the participants' attention). Moreover, examples are couched in minimizing phrases such as 'not much really', "just" and "in odd cases" that serve to underscore their apparent insignificance. At the same time, the ease with which these examples appear to be recalled creates an impression that these responses are very familiar, an expected reaction when talking to people who do not know the PWS. Finally, the contrast this account sets up between routine examples of microaggressions – interrupting, talking over, looking away – and "rare" instances of "get[ting] actually insulted" also serves to minimize and attention away from these routine, everyday examples, towards the rarer instances of overt hostility.

Microaggressions as disempowering

Alongside a construction of microaggressions as unremarkable was a markedly different understanding of these experiences as fundamentally disempowering, "devaluing" and problematic for PWS. In contrast to representations that emphasize the unremarkableness and insignificance of microaggressions, this theme highlights the disempowering effects of others' behavior. Accounts of disempowerment often hinged on being overtly or subtly diminished or othered as a result of others' responses to stuttering, leaving respondents feeling *"hopeless, incompetent, and frustrated".* This is evidenced in the passage below, where a participant described a routine kind of conversation breakdown:

"Some reactions from people where they thought they misheard or perhaps thought that I had omitted a word and would exclaim confusion loudly or ask me to repeat myself in a really obvious way. [this] would often draw attention to me and heighten my anxiety and self-consciousness"

As illustrated above, othering is amplified by insensitivity: extra loud speech and requests for repetition that emphasize difference. This pattern is usefully analysed as disempowerment because of the underlying relations of power in play. The act of drawing attention to a person's stutter creates discomfort, but it also works to shift power into the hands of the listener. By choosing to point out the difference, the listener is positioning themselves as an arbiter of speech that is acceptable – and speech that is not. As indicated by respondents' references to "anxiety" and "self-consciousness", PWS may be doubly disempowered by these interactional patterns because challenging microaggressions requires speaking, and microaggressions themselves have potential to amplify stress and, in doing so, increase dysfluency. Correcting others' behavior and resisting disempowerment is thus inherently more challenging for PWS. The demands of challenging this treatment from others was clear in instances where participants described being simply "too tired to correct them", and "just going along with" others' misperceptions in order to "get it over with" and end the interaction.

Another way in which participants described microaggressions as disempowering and diminishing was through non-stutterers offering flawed and potentially stigmatizing interpretations of the cause of the dysfluency they perceived. Listeners mistakenly attributed stuttering to a range of presumed conditions and personal attributes, including memory and cognitive impairments, being drunk or high, being nervous or indecisive, or having Tourette's syndrome. Across the board, participants described these kind of mistakes as offensive and disempowering, leaving them feeling "really awful", "cut […] up" and pigeonholed as a person who "has a problem":

"The comment, have you forgotten your own name really used to cut me up when I used to struggle to speak"

"On two occasions, I have had someone think that I have Tourette's and I had to tell them it's actually a stutter"

"It's very rare that I ever get actually insulted […] just in odd cases where someone asks if I have a mental disability or something of the sort because of it."

There are multiple currents at play in the accounts above. On one hand, participants are describing a sense of stigmatizing disempowerment because speech dysfluency is oriented to as a problem in need of explanation. At the same time, PWS's accounts of disempowerment dovetail with a wider ableist context where being described as disabled, as someone with a cognitive impairment, or as someone who cannot recall their own name are culturally intelligible as insults. Thus, this theme highlights disempowerment at both interpersonal and sociocultural levels.

Significant in these interactional misunderstandings of stuttering is the implicit position of the non-stutterer as a

diagnostic authority. While others in general are described as having little knowledge of stuttering (De Britto Pereira et al. 2008; Iimura et al. 2018), they appeared confident in passing judgement on the nature of the "problem" PWS have. This confidence could extend to questioning PWS about their stutter based on a lack of knowledge about how stuttering presents itself in general. In one example, a respondent was queried about their speech by a stranger asking why "you didn't stutter when you said that"? The implication sitting behind this question is that every word a PWS says should be a word that is dysfluent; as a result, this question implicitly questions the validity of the respondent's claim to being a PWS.

Microaggressions as well-intentioned

So far, this analysis has outlined two contrasting themes that make sense of microaggressions in contradictory ways: as fundamentally unremarkable and unimportant, on one hand, and as disempowering and diminishing, on the other. In this final thematic section, we present a third representation of microaggressions. Woven through the open response data was a construction of microaggressions as *well-intentioned*. This construction presents others' questionable treatment of PWS as arising from a benign – albeit bumbling and "clueless" – desire to offer help and encouragement. These responses often highlight a juxtaposition of intent versus impact, wherein listeners may feel they are doing the right thing, whilst behaving problematically. For example, participants often described others' tendency to finish their words or sentences as arising from a misguided desire to be "helpful":

> "*People often finishing what I am trying to say for me instead of giving me the chance to say it myself. To them they are being helpful.[…] I am competent and know what I want to say. Just need the chance to say it. And sometimes they get it wrong but by that point I just go along with it just to get it over with, even if it is not what I really wanted to say."*

> *"People would often finish words or sentences I was struggling with. It always felt that they were doing it to help me out or to maintain the natural flow of the conversation but it was devaluing nonetheless."*

Misguided attempts to help through interjection and speaking over/speaking for are an established form of ableist microaggression (Coalson et al, 2022). Such apparently "helpful" attempts to speak for participants demonstrate an understanding of stuttering as a problem that requires active intervention, and the stutterer as in need of rescue. The fluent speaker helps by taking on the responsibility of finishing the sentence, which the stutterer is considered unable to manage.

That a listener considers it helpful to finish the sentence of PWS perhaps indexes an underlying construction of stuttered speech as something to be eradicated (whether through therapeutic intervention, or in this case through silencing and speaking over PWS), rather than something that can be accommodated. It also highlights how the expectation of normal speech is informed by normative constructions of time. By not making a reasonable adjustment, (giving the PWS more time to finish their sentence) the listener is imposing "clock time" and a fluent speakers' framework onto a speaker who may operate according to a different temporality ("crip time", see Kafer 2013). More broadly, the fact that this kind of uninvited interruption can be interpreted as fundamentally well-intentioned and benign indicates the profound power and reach of ableist logics.

This construction of diminishment as potentially well-intentioned (and therefore difficult to critique) is evident in the detailed passage below, where a respondent described a pattern of diminishing treatment received from a classmate at school:

> *"A classmate used to intentionally stutter in order to, as he put it, see what it felt like. He explained he was fascinated by my stutter and couldn't understand how it happened, so he pretended to talk with one around me in order to try to grasp what it was like. I felt embarrassed by it and would never draw attention to what he was doing. I could never tell if he was being completely honest about it but it did feel like making fun of me regardless of his intentions."*

This account demonstrates how two themes, *microaggressions as disempowering* and *microaggressions as well-intentioned*, interlock and interact. On one hand, this passage demonstrates the embarrassing and disempowering experience of being mimicked. The explanation offered by the classmate – that faking a stutter around a PWS would allow them to "understand how it happened" and to "see what it felt like" – could present as plausible in an ableist context while also being potentially offensive and stigmatising. Reflecting this tension, the respondent is ambivalent in their assessment, torn between the classmate's allegedly "honest" motives and the feeling that this person was "making fun of me". The interpretative pressure on display in this account, which emphasizes the classmate's curiosity, fascination and potentially innocent intentions, contrasts sharply with the content. Despite the respondent's embarrassment, the classmate's microaggression was protected from challenge by his claim to a seemingly benevolent motive: that he was simply trying to understand the stutter. Recalling emotional labour scholarship (see, e.g. Hochschild, 1979) the PWS was left to do their own emotional work in justifying the listeners' actions, despite how it made them feel. A similar dynamic is evident in other participants' talk about strangers who used humour and laughing to respond to stuttering. One offered this example of a person "trying to make a joke" when they blocked while ordering food: "like 'ha, hard decision aye?' […] which is meant as a joke but makes me feel awful."

This understanding of microaggressions as well-intentioned was also evident in how respondents talked about naturalness and natural speech. In an ableist context where verbal fluency is normative and dysfluency is stigmatized, strangers' microaggressions are more readily understood as well-meaning attempts to "maintain the natural flow of conversation". Of course, what is presented as "natural" here is in fact highly value-laden. Taken together, these examples illustrate the way in which a construction of microaggressions as fundamentally well-intentioned compels PWS to give their interlocutors the benefit of the doubt. In practice, this may leave little room

to contest the attitudes and biases that underpin microaggressions and the poor treatment of PWS more generally.

DISCUSSION

This paper has presented an exploratory, two-part analysis of PWS's experiences with microaggressions. Quantitative analysis of seven multiple choice questions demonstrated that all 27 survey respondents reported experiencing microaggressions on a regular basis. These experiences included acts such as people breaking eye contact or looking away from them when they stutter and listeners focusing their attention on how the speaker is speaking and not what is being said. Thematic analysis of the open response questions identified three contrasting constructions of microaggressions: as unremarkable, as disempowering, and as well-intentioned.

The overall findings of this exploratory research suggest that, for these respondents at least, microaggressions unfold with regularity to the point that PWS may have normalised them (as evident in constructions of this poor treatment as unremarkable). At the same time, our analysis highlighted the ways in which respondents made sense of microaggressions as simultaneously disempowering and well-intentioned. As demonstrated, these two themes come together in respondents' talk in ways that facilitate ableist privilege and uphold norms of fluent speech. It is the PWS who bear the brunt of fluent speakers' lack of knowledge about and intolerance of dysfluency, and the diminishing treatment that results. The power advantage held by the fluent speaker asserts itself through the expectation that the PWS must justify their minority speaking style by explaining their lack of 'normalcy'. These interactional layers build and may culminate in an elevated mental workload placed on PWS. Finally, our findings suggest that the complexities of naming and challenging microaggressions are compounded for this group by the nature of stuttering: interactionally, the tool needed to challenge others – speech – is the commodity under attack.

The chilling effect of good intentions

Our analysis shows that an assumption of benevolence undergirds the way participants described approaching microaggressions from others, making them hard to name and challenge. This hallmark of self-doubt as a key, defining feature of microaggression experiences has been widely reported in the literature (Sue et al, 2007). This tension manifests across this exploratory project in several ways. First, as encapsulated in the theme microaggressions as mundane, participants tended to downplay, minimize and qualify experiences of hostility in relation to stuttering. Significantly, even those participants whose quantitative responses indicated that they rarely or never experienced microaggressions were able to list several examples in the open response question. On a broader level, the difficulty of identifying mundane microaggressions may also be evident in the relatively low number of PWS who participated in the survey. While the survey had good reach through use of networks and targeted promotion (we estimate that at least 150-200 people would have been eligible to participate), the survey received just 29 responses of which 27 were analysed. Future work in this area could consider approaching stuttering microaggressions in a different way, with language that is more attuned to the ambivalence PWS may feel around characterizing non-stutterers as engaging in aggression, as intending to harm or as behaving in an unreasonable way (Lilienfeld, 2017).

More broadly, the difficulty PWS may have in identifying microaggressions is precisely what makes them important to highlight and discuss. The entrenched notion that an act cannot cause harm because it is not intentional or obvious diminishes the impact of microaggressions. Our analysis, along with others' (Coalson, et al., 2022) has shown that these acts leave people feeling devalued and unworthy, much like the impact of verbal abuse or overt stigma. A focus on the intent of aggression (e.g., that the person did not mean to cause harm, therefore it cannot be categorised as harmful) diverts attention from their detrimental effects on people's wellbeing (Mekawi & Todd, 2021). This further embeds the responsibility of unpicking and dealing with microaggressions in the mind and hands of the PWS. In the current social context, then, PWS are not only made responsible for interactional disruptions but are also held accountable for how they internalise stigmatising experiences.

Power and comfort: Towards shared responsibility?

Our findings suggest that mundane interactions surrounding speech dysfluency are structured around the sensibilities and comfort of non-stuttering interlocutors. The power advantage held by the fluent speaker asserts itself through the expectation that the PWS must justify their minority speaking style by explaining their lack of normalcy. The pressure to explain and disclose stuttering is arguably designed to put the listener at ease by allowing them to better understand the interactional situation. Along similar lines, non-stutterers may finish the sentence of the person who stutters because they expect their own speed of interaction to be matched, or because they feel uncomfortable and unwilling to listen to dysfluent speech (Guntupalli et al., 2006; Susca & Healey, 2002). Within these acts there is no acknowledgment that the forced disclosure or sentence-finishing may be experienced by PWS as uncomfortable and intrusive. These interactional layers uphold the communication expectations and preferences of non-stutterers and place an elevated workload on PWS.

Analysis of participants' descriptions of everyday microaggressions has illustrated the power differential between PWS and non-stutterers. This power differential positions PWS as the cause of communication unease and difficulty (Constantino, 2016). A social model/critical disability theory approach makes available another interpretation, where conversational partners might take shared responsibility for managing conversational flow. While normative, medicalized approaches tend to locate the barriers to communication within dysfluent speech and speakers, an alternative view suggests that managing stuttering is about developing the capacity to listen to dysfluency as much as the capacity to speak fluently. Indeed, all forms of speech, talk and narrative are

profoundly contingent on an audience's willingness to listen.

Picking up on this idea in a paper aptly titled 'My speech problem, your listening problem, and my frustration' McCormack and colleagues (2018) investigated shared responsibility for communication in interactions between children who stutter and fluent-speaking caregivers. Here, carers took responsibility for some elements of communication breakdown, emphasizing the role of their own listening skills in fostering successful communication. Constantino (2016) has also suggested that a listener's intentionality can transform interactions where stuttered speech occurs. Noting that unexpected stuttering and irregular speech rhythms break the listener out of their usual passive listening routine, Constantino suggests that listening to PWS entails an act of trust wherein the listener must share in the vulnerability of not having control over the conversational flow. Thus, a non-stutterer's interactional power is traded for an accountability to listen.

This approach, one which devolves the idea of responsibility away from the PWS and shifts it onto societal structures aligns with the idea of "crip time" (Kafer, 2013). Crip time identifies and challenges hegemonic understandings time and timeframes to which we must all adhere or risk being deemed socially deviant. Applying a crip time perspective to dysfluency would mean adopting an understanding of time that allows temporality to match the rhythms of the PWS rather than the PWS having to adjust to the temporal construct of fluent speakers.

Importantly, conversations do not occur in a social vacuum. Context is foundational to people's understandings of and experiences with language, speech and communication. This research was undertaken with participants located in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. Both are settler colonial societies where, as a result of colonization, linguistic repression and ongoing multi-level racism, many social structures and public services remain hostile to Indigenous interests. In Aotearoa New Zealand, where our team is based, Māori PWS may face intersecting and amplified discrimination and microaggressions through a combination of stuttering stigma and racism – though this area is alarmingly under-researched (Meechan & Brewer 2022). In this scoping study, participants were not asked to report on ethnicity, as we chose to restrict requested demographics to the inclusion criteria (age, nationality) along with gender (selected because stuttering is considerably more common among men). It is clear that more research is needed to address the intersectional complexities of stuttering, particularly for Indigenous PWS and Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Previous literature on stuttering has demonstrated how overt stigma diminishes and disenfranchises PWS (Amick et al., 2017; Gerlach et al., 2018; Van Borsel et al., 2011). In this research, we have explored PWS's experiences with microaggressions: more subtle and ambiguous forms of stigma that are nonetheless harmful and, as our findings suggest, pervasive. While small in scope, our study has highlighted how ableist assumptions underpin everyday interactions for PWS, shoring up the interactional and structural privilege of those who speak fluently.

Our findings emphasize the importance of stuttering interventions that, in line with the social model of disability and critical disability theory, extend beyond the PWS to the sociocultural context that defines dysfluent speech as deficit. This does not, however, mean that there is no place for therapy and treatment. An improved social understanding of stuttering can enhance the adaptions made in speech therapy to benefit all PWS. For example, some modern speech therapy techniques encourage PWS to use dysfluency deliberately, as this can facilitate control over how and when they stutter, creating a feeling of agency and reducing the fear of speaking (McGuire, 2020). Therapy could also incorporate techniques that would help PWS to encourage conversational partners to enhance their capacity to listen. Enhancing awareness and minimizing ableist microaggressions towards dysfluent speakers has potential to reduce the stigma encountered by those using fluency-shaping techniques as well as those who opt to stutter freely. More broadly, normalising dysfluent speech promises to bring stuttering out of the shadows, reframing it as part of speech diversity alongside tonal and dialectal variation.

References

Alqhazo, M., Blomgren, M., Roy, N., & Awwad, M. A. (2017). Discrimination and internalised feelings experienced by people who stutter in Jordan. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 19*(5), 519–528. https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2016.1209561

Amick, L. J., Chang, S.-E., Wade, J., & McAuley, J. D. (2017). Social and Cognitive Impressions of Adults Who Do and Do Not Stutter Based on Listeners' Perceptions of Read-Speech Samples. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01148

Barber, S., Gronholm, P. C., Ahuja, S., Rüsch, N., & Thornicroft, G. (2020). Microaggressions towards people affected by mental health problems: A scoping review. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences, 29*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796019000763

Beilby, J. M., & Byrnes, M. L. (2012). Acceptance and commitment therapy for people who stutter. *Perspectives on Fluency & Fluency Disorders, 22*(1), 34–46. https://doi.org/10.1044/ffd22.1.34

Beilby, J. M., Byrnes, M. L., & Yaruss, J. S. (2012). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for adults who stutter: Psychosocial adjustment and speech fluency. *Journal of Fluency Disorders, 37*(4), 289–299. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2012.05.003

Bhaskar, R. (1989). *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy.* London,UK: Verso.

Bloodstein, O., Bernstein Ratner, N., & Brundage, S. (2021). Defining and describing stuttering. In *A handbook on stuttering, seventh edition* (p. 8). Plural Publishing.

Boyle, M. P. (2018). Enacted stigma and felt stigma experienced by adults who stutter. *Journal of Communication Disorders, 73*, 50–61. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2018.03.004

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Journals.

Bricker-Katz, G., Lincoln, M., & Cumming, S. (2013). Stuttering and work life: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Fluency Disorders, 38*(4), 342–355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2013.08.001

Bricker-Katz, G., Lincoln, M., & McCabe, P. (2010). Older people who stutter: Barriers to communication and perceptions of treatment needs. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, *45*(1), 15–30. https://doi.org/10.3109/13682820802627314

Butler, C. (2013). Identity and stammering: Negotiating hesitation, side-stepping repetition, and sometimes avoiding deviation. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *35*(7), 1113–1127. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12025

Calder-Dawe, O. & Gavey, N. (2017). Feminism, Foucault and Freire: Dynamic sociocultural research into sexism with teenagers. *Qualitative Psychology 6*(3) 216-231. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000106

Coalson, et al., G. A. (2022). Microaggression and the adult stuttering experience. *Journal of Communication Disorders, 95*, 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2021.106180

Connery, A., Galvin, R., & McCurtin, A. (2021). Effectiveness of nonpharmacological stuttering interventions on communication and psychosocial functioning in adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine*, *14*(1), 17–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/jebm.12408

Constantino, C. (2016). *Stuttering Gain*. https://isad.live/isad-2016/papers-presented-by-2016/stories-and-experiences-with-stuttering-by-pws/stuttering-gain-christopher-constantino/

De Britto Pereira, M, M., Rossi, J, P., & Van Borsel, J. (2008). Public awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Rio de Janeiro. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, *33*(1), 24-31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2007.10.001

Gerlach, H., Totty, E., Subramanian, A., & Zebrowski, P. (2018). Stuttering and Labor Market Outcomes in the United States. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research*, *61*(7), 1649–1663. https://doi.org/10.1044/2018_JSLHR-S-17-0353

Guntupalli, V. K., Kalinowski, J., Nanjundeswaran, C., Saltuklaroglu, T., & Everhart, D. E. (2006). Psychophysiological responses of adults who do not stutter while listening to stuttering. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, *62*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpsycho.2005.11.001

Harrison, C., & Tanner, K, D. (2018). Language Matters: Considering Microaggression in Science. *CBE Life Science Education*. *17*(1). http://doi.org/10.1187/vbe.18-01-0011

Hicks, R. (2003). The Iceberg Analogy of Stuttering. Paper presented at the 2003 International Stuttering Awareness Day Online Conference. Retrieved August 2024 from http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/isad6/papers/hicks6.html

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology, 85(3), 551-575.*

Iimura, D., Yada, Y., Imaizumi, K., Takeuchi, T., Miyawaki, M., & Van Borsel, J. (2018). Public Awareness and knowledge of stuttering in Japan. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 71, 136-145. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcomdis.2018.02.002

Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Keller, R. M., & Galgay, C. E. (2010). Microaggressive experiences of people with disabilities. In *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact (pp. 241–267). John Wiley & Sons.*

Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(1), 138–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616659391

McCormack, J., McLeod, S., McAllister, L., & Harrison, L. J. (2018, 37-12 07:37:14). *My Speech Problem, Your Listening Problem, and My Frustration: The Experience of Living With Childhood Speech Impairment* (Rockville, MD) [Research-article]. ASHA Wire; American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Retrieved August 2024 from https://pubs.asha.org/doi/pdf/10.1044/0161-1461%282009/08-0129%29

McGuire, D. (2020, July 3). *The McGuire Programme—What We Do*. https://www.mcguireprogramme.com/what-we-do/

Mekawi, Y., & Todd, N. R. (2021). Focusing the Lens to See More Clearly: Overcoming Definitional Challenges and Identifying New Directions in Racial Microaggressions Research. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *16*(5), 972–990. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621995181

O'Brian, S., Packman, A., Onslow, M., & O'Brian, N. (2004). Measurement of Stuttering in Adults: Comparison of Stuttering-Rate and Severity-Scaling Methods. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research*, *47*(5), 1081–1087. https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2004/080)

Pang, V. (2014). *Dr. Sheehan's Stuttering iceberg analogy*. The Stuttering Foundation. https://www.stutteringhelp.org/blog/sheehan-stuttering-analogy

Pierce C., Carew J., Pierce-Gonzalez D., Willis D. (1978). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In Pierce C. (Ed), *Television and education* (pp. 62-88). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Sims-Schouten, W., Riley, S. C. E., & Willig, C. (2007). Critical realism in discourse analysis. A presentation of a systematic method of analysis using women's talk of motherhood, childcare and female employment as an example. *Theory and Psychology*, *17*(1), 101–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354307073153

St Clare, T., Menzies, R. G., Onslow, M., Packman, A., Thompson, R., & Block, S. (2009). Unhelpful thoughts and beliefs linked to social anxiety in stuttering: Development of a measure. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, *44*(3), 338–351. https://doi.org/10.1080/13682820802067529

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*(4), 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

Susca, M., & Healey, E. C. (2002). Listener perceptions along a fluency–disfluency continuum: A phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, *27*(2), 135–161. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0094-730X(02)00126-2

Tichenor, S. E., & Scott Yaruss, J. (2019). Stuttering as Defined by Adults Who Stutter. *Journal of Speech, Language & Hearing Research*, *62*(12), 4356–4369. https://doi.org/10.1044/2019_JSLHR-19-00137

Ussher, J.M. (2008), Reclaiming Embodiment within Critical Psychology: A Material-Discursive Analysis of the Menopausal Body. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*, 1781-1798. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00151.x

Van Borsel, J., Brepoels, M., & De Coene, J. (2011). Stuttering, attractiveness and romantic relationships: The perception of adolescents and young adults. *Journal of Fluency Disorders*, *36*(1), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2011.01.002

Corresponding Author:
Octavia Calder-Dawe, School of Health, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
Email: octavia.calderdawe@vuw.ac.nz