

Some Indians Who Stutter

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THIS IS A report and tentative interpretation of research on stuttering among a number of Indian groups on the Northwest Pacific Coast. The data were obtained by field contacts, interviews and observation covering eight reserves of Salish Indians, two Kwakiutl and one Nootka, all located on the coastal mainland of British Columbia and Vancouver Island. The research in the culture area proper was supplemented with interviews from two Haida informants, one Tsimshian and one Nootka who were not living in their respective areas. In addition to this body of interview data, we secured information from school officials and also some written materials from Indian children at the Port Alberni and Alert Bay residential schools.

In general our findings conflict with reports by Johnson (2, 3), Snidecor (6) and Bullen (1) of an absence of stuttering among American Indians. Thus we encountered (1) both stuttering speech and persons regarded as stutterers among the contemporary coastal Indians, (2) evidence of preacculturational existence of this type of speech disorder, and (3) well-defined concepts of stuttering and stutterers in the language and cultures of all of the bands we came to know.

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Without trying to establish a rate of stuttering for the Indian population of the whole area we may record the following facts: Two stutterers were identified for us at the Alert Bay school where the enrollment is 220; at the Port Alberni school there were two stutterers for a pupil population of 240; at the Cowichan day school out of a population of 110 'quite a few' students were stated to have trouble with 'g' sounds associated with self-consciousness and embarrassment. All of our 13 native informants were acquainted with at least one or two cases of stuttering and several stated that the disorder was commonplace among their people. The two Nootka informants were especially clear on this point. In three Salish bands with a population of nearly 370, we came to know intimately seven adults, six men and one woman, who currently were stutterers. This percentage of about 1.9 approximates the estimated incidence of stutterers for our own population (7).

We were able to interview directly and observe the speech of two stutterers, one a Salish boy of 14 years of age and the other a Tsimshian youth of 20 years. Their case histories follow:

Case 1: Stanley Joseph is an illegitimate son of Emily and has two brothers and one sister, the latter also being illegitimate. His mother in her earlier life drank heavily and was sexually promiscuous. She continues

to make and drink home brew and is drunk and abusive much of the time. Her husband is a logger who drinks moderately. Early in Stanley's life the mother habitually accompanied her husband to live in logging camps, at which times she left Stanley in charge of his older sister, Mary Jane, who is also drunken and sexually promiscuous, and given to occasional prostitution. Mary Jane obviously regards her younger brother as a burden and incorrigible; she repeatedly tells others, 'Can't do a thing with him.' Stanley has badly broken speech, the most obvious symptom of which is disrupted breathing in the form of gasps before words, which he is able to say only after long pauses. When he tries to speak he strains, blinks his eyes and draws his head down on his chest. Characteristically, he has trouble with his speech in both Salish and English. His difficulties are greater in school than at home, where the pressure to speak in a formal way is much greater. He says that the other children laugh at him when he stutters and that this 'makes him feel bad.'

Case 2: Alfred McGill comes from Greenville, a town founded by early Methodist missionaries on the Nass River. Both his maternal and paternal grandfathers were chiefs in the Tsimshian tribe. His father has the equivalent of one year of college education and was the first lay reader of the local Anglican church. He is an ordained minister, but was always reluctant to assume responsibility for a church of his own. His occupation is that of carpenter and fisherman and he has been very prosperous even by White standards. Alfred has been brought up as a strict Methodist, with constant insistence by the father that he avoid all smoking and drinking.

The father further stressed the importance of being a gentleman at all times and when Alfred went away to high school his father told him to think of himself as an ambassador of the Tsimshians.

Alfred is physically small, the shortest male in his family. His next oldest brother excelled him in athletics which he felt very keenly because of the importance attached to athletic prowess by the Tsimshians. He began to work on his father's boats when he was eight years old. When he reached nine years he went away to a residential school for Indian children, but continued to work with his father during the summers. When he was 15, Alfred went to Vancouver where he entered high school. This was a White high school, Alfred and his cousin being the first Indians to enter it. At first he felt very conspicuous and he was unused to the great freedom which he was given in contrast to the residential school. Ultimately he caught up in his studies and came to distinguish himself in athletics, especially boxing. Following high school he spent one year in a university at Vancouver, after which he received a year's training in the Normal school at Victoria. This was sufficient to qualify him for his present job of teaching.

Alfred has stuttered as far back as he can remember, although his disorder grew more pronounced while he was in high school. As a small child he was very shy, so much so that he always lagged behind his parents when they walked into town. His mother attributed his trouble to nervousness and pronounced words for him. His father took a critical attitude, using the native term for 'acting crazy' when he reprimanded him for his stuttering. His main difficulties came

on 'sh' and 'ed'¹ sounds. At an early age he avoided speech situations when he could and at the residential school he tried to keep from reciting in class. In high school he grew exceedingly self-conscious about his speech; here he began to substitute synonyms for words on which he blocked and also began to lower his head, cover his mouth with his hand, and fiddle with his necktie in order to conceal his inability to speak. While at Normal school he came under the guidance of a speech instructor who sought to break his habit of word substitution. At the present time he still lowers his head and covers his mouth with his hand as he approaches a feared word. He has trouble with the same 'sh' and 'ed' sounds.

These cases, in our estimate, exemplify in several important particulars stuttering as it appears in White persons in our own society, namely, in the presence of word blocks, anxiety, and awareness of social disapproval. We noted especially the so-called 'secondary' manifestations of stuttering in the form of blinking the eyes, drawing the head down, and in disturbed breathing. These symptoms which are commonly interpreted as a function of the person's anxiety or anticipation of probable social penalties of his speech failure also came out in other reported cases. In one such case the man 'danced up and down to get the words out' and in another the man 'squeezed his eyes shut,' usually giving up after a struggle to speak and announcing that he couldn't say the word.

It may strike the critical reader that despite the obvious influence of aboriginal culture patterns (especially in Case 2) behind the stuttering in these cases their more significant

etiology may lie in personal disorganization and psychic conflict resulting from acculturation. Consequently other kinds of data are necessary to demonstrate the probability of its occurrence under aboriginal conditions.

Evidence that stuttering occurred aboriginally before any significant contacts and interaction with White culture in the area was of three sorts: (1) The dates of the birth and childhood development of known cases of stutterers, (2) the knowledge of aboriginal methods of treating and 'curing' stuttering, and (3) the linguistic recognition of the defect. A number of cases were known in which the stutterers had been children between 1865 and 1880, dates which precede or barely coincide with establishment of the first religious missions in the area. One informant now 55 years of age gave the case history of his grandfather who was a stutterer. The grandparent's childhood dated back at least to 1855 and possibly to 1840, at a time when the degree of contact and interaction with White population by the Indians of his band was limited to fur trade.

A somewhat different type of data pointing to the early pre-White contact occurrence of stuttering among the coastal Indians came from descriptions given us of native methods of 'curing' stuttering. These included such things as hitting the stutterer's arm, striking a block of wood placed at the back of his head, mingling his saliva with the rain dripping off the roof shakes, ritual eating, gargling with noxious concoctions of herbs and crushed nettles, and treatment by a shaman who employed a variety of medicines, rituals and songs. The Tlahoose and Homalthko may lay claim to the most unique and dramatic of the cures described for us;

¹ Approximated.

in these bands the stutterer was instructed to find a board with a knot-hole in it and every morning on arising to recite to it *ha'ak'ok chen* (I give my stuttering to you) and then spit or blow through the hole in order to get the stuttering out of his throat.

It is most improbable that such well-defined methods of treating stuttering arose after culture contact. These patently are primitive or folk techniques and bear no sign of White influence or borrowing.

Perhaps even more telling proof of the very early, preacculturative presence of stuttering in the Northwest Pacific Coast lies in the widespread linguistic recognition of the disorder. Every tribal language of which we inquired contained words for stuttering as well as for certain other speech disorders. As far as we could tell there were no borrowed English words or intertribal borrowings to designate stuttering. A partial indication of the number and variety of speech disorders recognized and named in the coastal tribes of the area is given in the following list:

<i>Homaltheo, Tlahoose, Sliammon</i>	
stuttering	<i>ha'ak'ok</i> ²
<i>Comox</i>	
stuttering	<i>habk'ok</i>
<i>Cowichan, Seschelt, Squamish</i>	
stuttering	<i>o'tsa'tsa</i>
<i>Nanaimo</i>	
stuttering	<i>skeykulskwels</i>
lisp	<i>'ustcowits</i>
a mute	<i>'ustcimatlal</i> (one with his tongue between his teeth)

²The similarity between this word and that used by the Comox may be accounted for by the fact that these tribes are all one linguistic group. They say they 'speak the Comox language.' The Comox proper differ somewhat in slurring sounds, however, having fewer sharp breaks.

<i>Haida (Skidegate)</i>	
stuttering	<i>kilekwigu'ung</i> (broken voice)
lisp	<i>stul'da'ga</i> (pointing with your finger)
<i>Tsimshian (Nass River)</i>	
stuttering	<i>ach'al</i>
lisp	<i>stats'a'dilk</i> (biting your tongue)
<i>Kwakiutl</i>	
stuttering	<i>kaketsakwa</i>
mutism	<i>hin'tsa'tso'la</i>
cleft palate	<i>am'bo</i>

The Nootka of the west coast of Vancouver Island merit special comment chiefly because of Edward Sapir's (5) early research on this tribal area and also because of the way in which the Nootka language is modified and adapted to reckon culturally with a wide variety of speech defects. Sapir described, in all, five speech abnormalities in Nootka, although two of them probably can be reduced to variants of lisp. The other three are stuttering, cleft palate speech and involuntary nasalization. Our two Nootka informants described, respectively, three and four different speech defects; the older of the two, from Nootka Sound, spoke of the following: *habuchin*—stuttering; *tlatlachkin*—blocking or 'pinching off' words; *ninichin*—straining to get words out. The other man, from the Uchucklesit band at Port Alberni, gave a somewhat different set of four categories: *habucha*—stuttering; *habuting*—lisp; *tlatlachin*—'collapsed speech'; *ninichin*—talking through the nose ('just like those Swedes'). There remains some confusion in our minds as to which of these is cleft palate speech, although we are inclined to believe that the defect designated as *ninichin* may well be the one.

Cultural Aspects of Stuttering

The attitudes of the coastal Indians in the North Pacific towards stutterers range from serious to mild disapproval, through humorous tolerance to pity and condescension. Of all the coastal peoples, the Nootka provide us with the most abundant evidence of the social penalization of persons with physical and speech defects. In this culture, fat persons, very small persons, sore-eyed, squinting, cockeyed, hunchbacked, lame, circumcised, left-handed people and those with speech disorders became the object of pity, mockery, satirization, humor and patronage of the sort shown small children. This is most apparent in the myths of the Nootka but emerges with equal clarity in associations of animals, mythological characters and defective persons with various linguistic and stylistic processes involving the symbolic use of sounds. Thus when a person who had a speech defect was addressed or talked about his defect was imitated or mocked, with changes in word forms, such as suffix changes, being made which carried implications of smallness, childishness, animal quality or of some physical defect.

While we do not know whether similar adaptations in discourse about or with stutterers characterize the other tribal languages in the area, nevertheless a content analysis (4) of myths occurring throughout the broader culture area of the Northwest reveals much social rejection and social isolation of child, adolescent and adult deviants such as orphans, crippled, blind, stupid, dirty, lazy, weak, and those with scabs or skin diseases. Such myths tend to be analogues of the success stories of our own culture and have been equated with the Cin-

derella theme in Grimm's fairy tales. Typically these pariahs are abandoned by their own people, following which they isolate themselves in the bush, then return to perform some heroic feat which re-establishes them as wealthy, prestigious persons in their band. While stutterers are not mentioned in any of these myths, we found in several of the freely associated stories written for us by residential school children equivalents of Horatio Alger-like stutterers who are socially rejected, become socially isolated, and then overcome their defect to go on and become famous. The sensitivity of these elementary school children to public opinion in relation to speech inadequacy was unmistakable.

On the whole the rejections and penalties of stuttering in the Northwest Coast cultures were informal rather than formal. In one case we were told that among the Tsimshian in the old days boys who stuttered were compelled to take a back seat in the potlatch ceremonies; however, this was the result of decisions by the families of the youngsters involved rather than the consequence of a formal rule to the effect. Support is lent this conclusion by the replies of several Kwakiutl to our inquiry as to whether a member of their family who stuttered was ever insulted publicly. The answer was: 'No—but then everyone knows he stutters and we know that they know.' Furthermore, accounts were supplied us of several Nootka stutterers who had given potlatches despite their defects.

The competitive emphasis throughout the cultures of the Northwest Coast was such that the defects, inadequacies or mistakes of individuals might at any time become the subject of verbal aggression, insult, trait names and humorous gossip—espe-

cially the latter. The vulnerability of the individual to these was at the same time the vulnerability of the group with which he was identified. In tribes having clan organization the whole clan stood to lose status or prestige through aspersions cast upon its members because of their shortcomings; in others it was the family which suffered. This made the clan or family particularly sensitive to the deviations of its members and led to exacting educational practices.

The rigorous child-training procedures held especially where participation in feasts, potlatches and associated rituals was demanded of the individual. In order to achieve the imperative solemnity and precise decorum at these sacred winter festivals small children on certain occasions were subjected to gross, fear-inducing experiences such as being kidnapped, supposedly eaten by wolves, being made sick by shamans, swung back and forth over the fire, or thrown into the ocean. Although parents were not responsible for those ordeals and seldom used physical punishment, they worked constantly with very small children to teach them their sacred songs and dances and to indoctrinate them with values of the adult culture. At very early ages (as early as six or seven years) children were often compelled to sing and dance before watchful, critical audiences composed of rival bands and tribes as well as of members of their own village band.

From what has been said and from other interview data we cannot introduce here it is plain that the cultural and sociopsychological prerequisites for the development of stuttering were strongly operative in the Northwest Coast. Thus we have (1) the cultural recognition and symbolizing of stuttering, (2) social penalties for the

disorder, (3) specific anxieties about the speech development of children on the part of parents, and (4) internalization of sensitivity about speech in both the child and the adult.

On first impression, our data would seem to contradict the conclusions of Johnson, Snidecor and Bullen that stuttering is extremely rare or absent among American Indians. Indeed, so stated, these conclusions are negated by our research. There is little reason to doubt the claim, however, that stuttering does not occur among the Bannock and Shoshone, the tribes in which Johnson and Snidecor conducted their field investigations. The error was to generalize about the 'American Indian' on the basis of this limited sample of a quite heterogeneous universe of cultures. Variation between American Indian cultures, it must be noted, may be as great as that between a given native culture and our own dominant White culture, at least in certain features having to do with participation of children in the adult culture.

The Bannock and Shoshone cultures show little in common with the complex and ceremonially rich social organization of the Indians of the Pacific Northwest. The former are variants of Plains Indian cultures, involving nomadism, periodic dispersion into small groups, plus integration around buffalo hunting and skirmish warfare. More directly to the point of our interest the Bannock and Shoshone peoples appear to have made few stringent demands upon the growing child until the time of adolescence. The moralistic and didactic elements of stories told to Shoshone children were only incidental and tenuous at best. Participation in dance ritual was permissive rather than compulsory for the child.

Of course, certain kinds of child deviants received cultural recognition from the Shoshone: twins, epileptics, feebleminded, berdaches, ninimbric sprites, those who were tongue-tied and also deaf mutes. Furthermore, persons outside the family group mocked these infirmities. In decided contrast to the Northwest coast culture, however, no interfamily nor interclan relationships complicated the family treatment of abnormal children. Family attitudes are portrayed as kind, helpful, sympathetic, and although protective are not overprotective. Shimkin cites cases of both tongue-tied individuals and deaf mutes who grew into reasonably well integrated and happy adults in Shoshone society.

In conclusion we may say that comparative data from *particular* American Indian cultures tend to support rather than refute the general socio-

psychological hypotheses of stuttering proposed by Johnson, Snidecor, Van Riper and others.

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