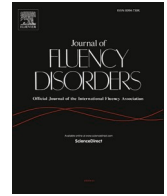





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Working life experiences of people who stutter in Finland: Recommendations for enhancing inclusive communication at work

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: People who stutter (PWS) face public stigma, characterized by negative societal beliefs and stereotypes. Due to lack of awareness, PWS may be perceived as inferior and less intelligent, capable, and social, affecting their psychological well-being. While some aspects of the impact of stuttering—such as income, role entrapment, and discrimination—have been explored in previous research, less is known about the deeper personal experiences of PWS in working life. This study highlights the workplace experiences of PWS, their personal aspirations, and ideas for improvement. By understanding more of PWS' experiences and emotions related to communication at work, it is possible to create a more inclusive working life.

Method: Data were collected through an online survey from 45 Finnish participants over the age of 18 who stutter and have work experience. The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis.

Results: Over half the participants (n = 25, 56 %) reported that they do not speak openly about their stuttering within their current or previous work community. PWS described their experiences in terms of fears of public stigma, internalized stigma, and resisting stigma-driven assumptions. PWS expressed a desire for increased awareness of stuttering and for the promotion of greater inclusivity in working life.

Conclusion: Negative experiences of PWS often reflect broader societal attitudes. Participants suggested implementing flexible communication strategies to create inclusive workplaces, reducing microaggressions, supporting productivity, and enhancing job satisfaction. Embracing communication diversity can unlock employee potential and foster inclusivity. Respecting privacy and not requiring disclosure of personal information is crucial.

1. Introduction

Understanding the profound impact of stuttering on various aspects of life is crucial. The quality of life among people who stutter (PWS) can be affected by activity limitations and participation restrictions resulting from stuttering (Yaruss & Quesal, 2004). Stuttering also has more serious impacts, such as an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Williams, 2023). Since stuttering impacts one's life negatively, examining the origins and reasons behind these effects is important. As many adults spend a significant

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amount of time at work, employment plays a crucial role in their lives and well-being. This study aims to highlight the thoughts and perspectives of PWS regarding their communication experiences in the workplace.

The personal experiences and views of PWS regarding the impact of stuttering on their working life have not been studied as extensively as the opinions of others about stuttering or its causes (Gabel, 2015). Every person who stutters experiences and reactions to their stuttering are unique, and focusing on these individual perspectives in research in order to gain a better understanding is important (Tichenor & Yaruss, 2019). When we understand more about the experience of stuttering, it becomes possible to address the negative perceptions and limitations associated with stuttering in our society (Boyle, 2017; Cooper & Cooper, 1985, 1996; Quesal, 2010; St. Louis, 2011; Tellis et al., 2008; Tichenor & Yaruss, 2019).

1.1. Stuttering as a social phenomenon

From a sociological perspective, stuttering is a type of deviation from situational and cultural norms that define appropriate ways of speaking and communicating (Klassen, 2002). Stuttering is a complex phenomenon—a combination of sociological, psychological, and communicative factors (Mancinelli, 2021). The context, participants, and type of conversation influence the interaction where stuttering occurs. Stuttering cannot be defined solely as an individual characteristic; it is necessary to investigate the environmental factors influencing stuttering.

1.1.1. Social model of stuttering

Traditionally, stuttering has been examined from a medical perspective, focusing on understanding its causes and developing treatment methods to reduce stuttering (Constantino & Simpson, 2022). In recent years, research has begun shifting its focus to the social determinants of stuttering, and the social model of stuttering has been discussed more. The social model of stuttering considers the impact of the environment and social factors on the quality of life of PWS. It also sees stuttering-related disabilities and restrictions as the consequence of environmental barriers rather than one's impairment (Constantino & Simpson, 2022; Oliver, 1990, 2013). It highlights that society and its norms and values are less suitable for PWS than for fluent speakers (Constantino & Simpson, 2022). Although the social model of disability does not explain why people stutter, it does help us understand how stuttering is experienced. According to the social model, PWS are the experts in their stuttering. Appreciation and understanding of their experience must be paramount for researchers and clinicians who can act as collaborators and allies for PWS considering social change.

From the perspective of the social model of stuttering, ableism—the discrimination of not able-bodied (in this case, PWS)—is the main reason that stuttering is difficult for individuals (Constantino & Simpson, 2022). PWS try to pass as fluent in order to avoid ableist views and gain the privileges of fluent speakers, which stuttering can deny them of (Constantino et al., 2017). Constantino and the research group (2022) also noted there would not be a need to hide stuttering or pass as a fluent speaker if there were no social advantages. Interventions for more supportive environments could enhance the quality of social interaction for PWS.

1.1.2. Stigma and internalized stigma

PWS face public stigma, meaning negative and distorted beliefs, prejudices, and stereotypes of society and the environment towards marginalized groups (Boyle & Blood, 2015). Public stigma can be interpersonal (e.g., being mean to others) or structural (e.g., discrimination in work recruitment), which can have a significant negative effect on psychological well-being (Boyle, 2015b; Boyle & Fearon, 2018; Constantino et al., 2017). Due to a lack of information in society, PWS might be perceived as inferior, as well as less intelligent, capable, and social (Byrd et al., 2017; Constantino & Simpson, 2022; Ferguson et al., 2019). Stigma acts as a mediator for prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1986; Smart, 2001).

Stuttering-related stigma often manifests in everyday situations as ableist microaggressions: verbal or non-verbal actions (Coalson et al., 2022). Microaggressions perpetuate negative stereotypes, diminish the experiences of minority groups, and can significantly affect the mental health and well-being of those targeted (Coalson et al., 2022; Donovan et al., 2012; Fattoracci et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions can be ambiguous; the intent behind the action is often overlooked, or the harm caused can be dismissed as a misunderstanding or joke (Coalson et al., 2022).

The public stigma and its manifestations that PWS face can lead to internalized stigma, when individuals internalize a society's beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes of themselves (Boyle, 2013, 2015a, 2018; Gerlach et al., 2021; Vogel et al., 2013). That means PWS are aware of being stigmatized by the public; they begin to agree with those negative attitudes and apply those to themselves (Corrigan et al., 2011). Stigma shapes the collective understanding of stuttering and generates negative attitudes and reactions towards PWS (Constantino & Simpson, 2022; Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Link & Phelan, 2006).

1.1.3. Social stigma affects PWS' identity and mental health

According to the social model of stuttering, PWS face discrimination due to the stigma of stuttering (Coalson et al., 2022). Thus, PWS try to avoid stuttering, which undermines their well-being while reinforcing the negativity and stigma associated with stuttering. PWS try to distance themselves from these negative beliefs and stigmatized stereotypes, which again maintain stigma and restriction from society (Constantino & Simpson, 2022; Goffman, 1963), thus negatively affecting mental health (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; McAllister et al., 2012). The social model highlights that societal expectations for fluent and efficient communication can stigmatize PWS (Constantino & Simpson, 2022; Mancinelli et al., 2021). These expectations can make PWS feel they do not meet communication standards, limiting their participation (Boyle, 2015a; Mancinelli, 2021; Vogel et al., 2013). Although PWS wish to engage in social situations, fear of stuttering often leads to avoidance (Mancinelli, 2021). Stuttering can negatively impact identity formation due to social stigma, affecting social interactions (Daniels & Gabel, 2004). People assess their societal worth through their identity, and for

PWS, internalizing a positive identity is challenging due to negative social experiences (Mancinelli, 2021; Tatum, 1999; Van Riper, 1982).

1.2. The impact of stuttering on working life

PWS have reported a variety of negative ways stuttering has affected their ability to perform and succeed at work. Discrimination that begins in education can lead to professional disadvantages for PWS (Gerlach et al., 2018), as the professionalism of PWS in the workplace is often doubted, and their suitability for different work tasks may be limited at every stage of their career (Boyce et al., 2022; Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Williams, 2023). Fluent colleagues can question the competence of PWS (Schlagheck et al., 2009), which affects employers' plans to hire a person who stutters (Powers, 2020). In addition to discrimination, PWS experience more bullying and isolation than fluent speakers in working life (e.g., Blood & Blood, 2007; Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Opp et al., 1997). Stuttering does not always affect the career choice of PWS, but it has negatively affected their job performance, relationships with people in authority at work, and opportunities for advancement in their careers (Klompas & Ross, 2004). Nevertheless, previous research has indicated that PWS may feel—or be explicitly told—that certain careers are unsuitable for them due to their stuttering (Dew & Gabel, 2024, 2025; Gabel, 2015). Dew and Gabel (2024) found that societal stereotypes and stigma influence the types of careers recommended to PWS, while their 2025 study demonstrated that implicit bias plays a significant role in shaping these recommendations. Together, these findings highlight the need to actively challenge and dismantle stigma to support equitable career opportunities for PWS.

The negative impact of stuttering on work experiences is most likely due to a combination of public and self-stigma since the two types are very closely related (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). Environmental negative attitudes towards stuttering affect one's ability to function, participate and perform and negatively impact one's psychological well-being (Penttilä, 2023; Penttilä, Rauhalä, et al., 2023; Yaruss, 2007). Stigma is also known to weaken self-efficacy in the workplace (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). PWS also experience that they could not speak openly about their stuttering (e.g. Blood et al., 2003). Notably, research suggests PWS may experience these difficulties secondary to self-stigma rather than directly due to their speech difficulties (Boyle & Blood, 2015; Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; McAllister et al., 2012). Although much is known about the negative experiences of PWS in the workplace and the adverse attitudes towards their career advancement, job selection, and limitations, there has been limited in-depth research on how PWS themselves perceive these potential constraints in working life and how they explain them. By gaining a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of PWS regarding workplace challenges, new solutions to these can be developed.

As working careers lengthen due to population aging (Rees, 2009), maintaining well-being at work becomes increasingly important. Choosing a field of career that genuinely interests them is crucial to increasing work engagement and maintaining a meaningful quality of life (Pham et al., 2024). Work provides income, psychological stability, development, structure, and a sense of identity and participation in society. Thus, all factors that hinder careers and working life (e.g., discrimination and bullying) must be eliminated. In the workplace, one should not have to hide or conceal their characteristics, such as their speech traits. The culture of working life would improve if the experiences of PWS are better understood.

1.3. Aim of the study

This study investigates the experiences of working life communication in Finland from the perspective of PWS. As stuttering persists for life for many, it is important to gain more information about the experiences of stuttering in working life and how working life could be improved for PWS. This way, working life would be made more equal for PWS, and their well-being at work could be promoted.

The research questions of this study are:

1. How do PWS experience their stuttering in working life?
2. What are the hopes and ideas of PWS for communication in working life?

2. Method

2.1. Survey design and implementation

The data collection method chosen for this study was an online survey, which has become a major research method in academic research during the last decades (Saleh & Bista, 2017). The survey addressed participants' experiences with stuttering and its impacts on their work life and well-being. The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire from Tampere University via Microsoft Forms. The Finnish questionnaire for Finnish PWS was open from the 10th June to the 31st of August 2024. Potential research participants were sought by sharing the research project page and a short informational message on social media and emailing the members of Finnish Stuttering Association and speech therapists working with PWS. The shared internet page contained more detailed information about the study (study bulletin, privacy statement, and a link to the online survey). The survey was piloted with a member of the target group, a person who stutters. The survey remained unchanged after the pilot testing.

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 37 questions. Initially, respondents were asked seven questions about their background and stuttering. This was followed by 28 questions regarding the impact of their stuttering on their working life and career choices, including two Likert-scale questions, 13 yes or no questions, and 15 open-ended questions. The survey was conducted as part of a larger

study, and the most relevant questions for this research were selected.

2.2. Participants

The criteria for participating in the study were 1) self-reported developmental stuttering, 2) at least 18 years of age, and 3) currently working or having previous experience in working life. Criteria were announced in the research announcement. Forty-six participants answered the survey, but the answers of 45 were analyzed, as one participant was under 18. Table 1 presents more detailed information about the participants.

2.3. Data analysis

After the online survey was closed, three questions were identified as particularly relevant to the research questions of this study. Chosen questions were: “Can you talk about your stuttering openly in your current work community?”, “If you answered “no”, “how would you describe your experience?” and “Describe what, in your opinion, makes the discussion situation relaxed and equal in your work community?”. Our analysis focuses on the participants’ answers to these questions. For the purposes of this article, the questions and data examples were translated into English by the authors.

To begin, we analyzed the quantitative responses to the question ‘Can you talk about your stuttering openly in your current work community?’ by reporting frequencies. This preliminary step served to guide and refine the focus of the subsequent qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis began with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, 2004). IPA seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their own experiences in a specific context (Palmer et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). IPA is best suited to forms of data collection which invite participants to articulate thoughts and emotions related to their experiences of a target phenomenon, in this case, stuttering at work (Smith, 2004). Recent research on stuttering has employed phenomenological methods to investigate the lived experiences of PWS, e.g., Jackson and the research group (2015) for evaluating the experience of anticipation of PWS, and Tichenor and Yaruss (2018) for experiences of moments of stuttering.

Our IPA analysis started with familiarization with the data through repeated readings, followed by the identification of data segments relevant to the research questions. The unit of analysis was a word, sentence, or a longer thought segment. Main concern and claims of the participants were coded, including the consideration of used language (see Larkin et al., 2006). The aim of the analysis was to gain a deep understanding of how each individual makes sense of their lived experience, focusing not only on what was said but also on how it was expressed and the personal meaning attached to it.

These data segments were then thematically analyzed to best illustrate the shared experiences of participants. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Illustrative quotations were selected to support and exemplify each theme (Douglass et al., 2019). These quotations were also used to highlight participants’ narratives and bring forth their lived experiences. Table 2 presents an example of our data analysis. Based on the expressions found on data, data segments were created and subsequently grouped into themes. This combination enhances both idiographic depth and analytic clarity, supporting the development of a conceptual structure grounded in personal meaning-making (Chang & Wang, 2021; Naem et al., 2023; Spiers & Riley, 2019). The initial stages of both the IPA and thematic analysis were conducted by the first author,

Table 1
Background information of the participants.

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	18–27	12	27
	28–37	15	33
	38–47	5	11
	48–57	5	11
	58–67	5	11
	68–77	2	4
	> 78	1	2
Gender	Female	29	64
	Male	16	36
Age of onset of stuttering	Under 2 years old	3	7
	2–4	24	53
	5–7	11	24
	8 years or older	7	16
Education	Comprehensive school	0	0
	Secondary education	15	33
	Bachelor’s degree	15	33
	Master’s degree	15	33
Field of work	IT and technology	3	7
	Social and health	11	24
	Business and marketing	14	31
	Construction and environment	4	9
	Education and culture	5	11
	Industry and logistics	5	11
	Food industry	3	7

Table 2
Example of IPA and thematic analysis.

Original expression <i>I'm constantly afraid that coworkers or a superior will think that I shouldn't be in the job I'm in because I stutter.</i>	IPA		
	<u>Interpretation</u> Participant is aware of negative stereotypes and stigma of stuttering and is afraid that these stigmatized beliefs might affect others' thoughts negatively. The participant's expression also implies an assumption that stuttering affects job performance.		
	Thematic analysis		
	<u>Code</u> afraid, I shouldn't be in the job, because I stutter	<u>Data Segment</u> Fear of negative consequences	<u>Theme</u> Negative perceptions of stuttering

who carried out all steps of the analysis independently. To enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings, a consensus procedure was applied, in which the first, second, and last author jointly reviewed and discussed the coding, theme development, and interpretations until agreement was reached.

3. Results

3.1. Essential structure of the findings

Over half of the respondents (n = 25, 56 %) reported that they do not speak openly about stuttering in their current or previous work community and subsequently elaborated on their experiences. Key findings of our study indicate that the workplace communication experiences of PWS are significantly shaped by both external and internalized negative perceptions of stuttering. PWS have fears of negative evaluation or consequences at work due to their stuttering, and they experience self-stigma and shame related to their stuttering. Additionally, PWS describe their stuttering through their encounters with negative or uninformed reactions from others and indicate assumptions that stuttering affects their performance at work. PWS emphasized that enhancing workplace communication can be achieved by fostering inclusivity and increasing awareness. These factors are crucial for creating a more supportive and understanding work environment. The following sections present the main themes derived from the data, accompanied by representative quotes and analytical descriptions that illustrate the richness and individuality of participants' narratives (see Table 3).

3.2. Theme 1: Fear of public stigma

PWS displayed awareness of the negative stereotypes and public stigma associated with stuttering. The data revealed that PWS tend to refrain from speaking openly about their stuttering in the workplace due to concerns about potential negative consequences or reactions affecting their professional or social lives. This was particularly evident in situations where colleagues were misinformed about stuttering.

3.2.1. Data segment 1a: Fear of negative reactions

Participants expressed fear that superiors' and colleagues' thoughts and attitudes would become more negative if they knew about their stuttering (Example 1).

Example 1. Maintaining professional credibility (ID 18)

I don't feel it (speaking) is necessary, and I don't want people to feel that I'm less credible at my job or that stuttering makes me a worse employee –

Table 3
Overview of the results.

Themes	Data segments	Description
Fear of public stigma	Fear of negative reactions	Reports of anticipated or enacted negative reactions by colleagues, supervisors, or clients
	Fear of negative consequences	Reports of anticipated or enacted consequences of stuttering, such as being fired
Self-stigma	Personal discomfort	Reports of emotional or physical pain and discomfort when stuttering at work
	Conforming to expectation	Reports of pressure to be fluent and be perceived as a fluent speaker
Negotiating stigma-driven assumptions	Work tasks	Reports that work tasks can still be completed with the presence of stuttering
	Communication	Reports that communication with coworkers, supervisors, and/or clients was possible with stuttering
PWS's hopes and ideas for workplace communication	Enhancing workplace inclusivity	Reports of hopes for reducing unwanted behavior, enabling disclosure of stuttering, and fostering respect
	Raising stuttering awareness	Reports of hopes for acknowledging individual differences and increasing knowledge on how to respond to stuttering

Due to the lack of stuttering awareness, PWS have experienced that their colleagues do not understand stuttering and cannot be sure how others will react (Example 2). A lack of stuttering awareness is also described as a reason for the past negative experiences reported by PWS. Reactions can be embarrassing and may position PWS in an inferior role in the workplace community. Discussing stuttering can also attract attention to PWS, which may be distressing, especially when colleagues' knowledge and understanding of stuttering are limited or inaccurate

Example 2. Colleague did not show empathy or understanding (ID 46)

I told one of my colleagues that as a child, I was bullied for stuttering and that I was always treated differently compared to others because I stutter. My colleague showed no empathy or understanding at all. I feel that after talking about the anxiety and unpleasant memories related to stuttering, it feels like more attention has been paid to my speech, and I am being talked over more. I've also noticed that sometimes people hold back their laughter when I start stuttering.

3.2.2. Data segment 1b: Fear of negative consequences

In addition to the change in thoughts and attitudes, PWS spoke about fear of negative practical consequences, such as losing their position in the work community due to their stuttering and the negative attitudes associated with it (Example 3).

Example 3. Job insecurity (ID 36)

I'm constantly afraid that coworkers or a superior will think that I shouldn't be in the job I'm in because I stutter.

3.3. Theme 2: Self-stigma

Self-stigma emerged as a recurring theme in the data, as participants described internalizing negative societal attitudes toward stuttering. This internalization manifested in the perception of stuttering as a personally significant and negatively perceived characteristic. Participants frequently reported experiencing emotional discomfort and a heightened sense of pressure to conform to normative expectations in the workplace.

3.3.1. Data segment 2a: Personal discomfort

Even though talking about stuttering was considered possible in some responses, it was typically avoided due to feelings of shame, fear, and distress. PWS preferred to pass over the subject quickly, indicating that discussing stuttering was uncomfortable and challenging for them (Example 4).

Example 4. Minimizing personal pain (ID 4)

However, I don't talk about it openly; it's more of a quick-to-pass rather painful thing.

3.3.2. Data segment 2b: Conforming to expectations

Expressions by PWS highlighted the absence of a supportive work culture, in which employees did not feel psychologically safe to openly discuss their challenges and vulnerabilities related to stuttering (Example 5)

Example 5. No workplace culture for expressing weakness (ID 21)

The organization does not have a strong culture for open discussion and showing weaknesses.

The expectation to project strength, coupled with fear of negative judgment, contributed to self-blame and pressure to conceal stuttering. Participants described lacking the courage to talk about stuttering, implying that such openness required exceptional bravery. While some expressed that stuttering should be more openly discussed—especially in familiar work environments—they often attributed the cause of silence to themselves (Example 6). Even in respectful workplaces, internalized societal attitudes led to avoidance and fear of speaking.

Example 6. Speaking is up to me (ID 7)

—In general, speaking with stuttering is so up to me that no matter how calm and respectful the atmosphere is, I might still not participate in the conversation because I stutter, and I'm ashamed to show that I stutter.

3.4. Theme 3: Negotiating stigma-driven assumptions

While some described positive experiences and felt confident in their ability to perform well despite stuttering, others emphasized that stuttering often remained largely invisible and therefore did not require explicit discussion. PWS expressed that they manage stigma-related expectations by either downplaying the relevance of stuttering or avoiding its disclosure.

3.4.1. Data segment 3a: Work tasks

The data indicated that PWS often assumed that stuttering could negatively impact their job performance, particularly through others' perceptions. However, participants also emphasized that they were able to carry out their work competently despite these assumptions (Example 7). Some described that there was no need to talk about stuttering at work, as they were able to perform normally regardless of it. This indicates the expectation that stuttering is something that one must explain to others if they cannot perform their job as usual.

Example 7. Able to carry out work tasks (ID 34)

My stuttering is still there, but I am still able to carry out all work tasks as usual.

3.4.2. Data segment 3b: Communication

The data suggest that PWS are often oriented toward a perceived need to hide their stuttering in the workplace. This raises important questions about whether the work environment supports open communication and acceptance of individual differences in speech and communication styles. Despite this, participants shared experiences of professional success in roles not traditionally considered suitable for PWS (Example 8). These accounts drew on the stigmatized assumption that PWS are better listeners than speakers and reframed this stereotype to highlight the strengths and advantages associated with attentive listening.

Example 8. A stutterer in customer service (ID 42)

I was able to serve customers well, and I liked my job. I was happy when I succeeded in my tasks. The customers liked me; I listened to them. I was able to be in [customer service work task]. It was a miracle in hindsight—a stutterer in customer service!

3.5. Theme 4: PWS's hopes and ideas for workplace communication

Participants in our study provided a wide range of suggestions for improving working life and workplace culture for PWS. In total, 90 distinct ideas and hopes were identified. The main themes included enhancing workplace inclusivity by avoiding unwanted behaviors, enabling disclosure, and fostering respect for communicative differences. Participants also emphasized the importance of increasing awareness of stuttering in the workplace—for example, by improving knowledge on how to face to stuttering and recognizing individual variation among PWS.

3.5.1. Data segment 4a: Enhancing workplace inclusivity

PWS expressed a desire for more inclusive and accepting workplace environments that allow for diverse speech styles and authentic self-expression. They hoped for calm, open, and respectful atmospheres where stuttering would not need to be hidden or modified, and where they could participate equally in workplace communication. These wishes reflect a broader call for interactional equity and communicative participation. Respectful discussions about minorities were seen as contributing to a culture in which differences are acknowledged and valued (Example 9). Participants also expressed that a more relaxed and less perfection-oriented work culture would reduce pressure and support psychological safety. They highlighted the importance of tolerating silence and creating space where perfection is not expected—especially in speech.

Example 9. Respectful atmosphere (ID 40)

— I also think the fact that any minorities are spoken about respectfully in coffee table discussions creates an atmosphere where differences are allowed.

A recurring theme was the hope that colleagues would not react negatively to stuttering or draw attention to it—whether through jokes, comments, or subtle dismissiveness (microaggressions). Participants emphasized the importance of patient, uninterrupted listening and the availability of time and space to speak. Such wishes imply that many participants had experienced the opposite: environments in which respectful and neutral responses were lacking (Example 10).

Example 10. No interruptions (ID 20).

People listen to each other calmly, giving everyone space to talk; there is no rush, and they don't talk over each other.

3.5.2. Data segment 4b: Raising stuttering awareness

Lastly, the data from this study highlighted the importance of increasing stuttering awareness in the workplace. Participants emphasized that PWS are individuals, and that stereotype-based treatment and communication can be insulting and frustrating (Examples 11 and 12). Nevertheless, participants also acknowledged that people often act *out of goodwill* (Example 12). They hoped to be seen as whole individuals, not reduced to a single characteristic such as stuttering. Finally, PWS expressed a desire to retain agency over how much stuttering defines them, emphasizing that others should not make assumptions about their abilities (Example 11).

Example 11. Seen as a whole and disclosure (ID 25).

—The individual is seen as a whole, not only through a single factor but also as stuttering. Of course, stuttering is a part of me and always will be. However, the person who stutters should have full control over how much they let stuttering define them.

Example 12. The importance of stuttering awareness and recognizing individual differences (ID 29).

There would be more information about stuttering. For example, the fact that a person who stutters can communicate in the same way. If the person who stutters is a stranger, they want to meet me halfway out of goodwill. They even start speaking more slowly, which just annoys me. I am a fast speaker and listener. Stutterers are very different.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary

This study investigated how PWS experience their stuttering in the workplace and what kind of hopes and ideas they have for communication at work. Data were gathered through an online survey and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and thematic analysis. Fifty-six percent of participants reported that they do not speak openly about their stuttering in the workplace. Participants discussed their stuttering in terms of fear of public stigma, self-stigma and negotiations to stigma-driven assumptions. They expressed hope that increased stuttering awareness in the workplace would foster a more inclusive work culture and enhance communication.

4.2. Negative emotions reflecting broader societal attitudes

According to our results, PWS frequently described their experiences in working life through negative emotions, with shame emerging as the most frequently reported. Shame, conceptualized as a reaction to perceived violations of social norms (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), underscores the emotional toll that stuttering can exert, often manifesting in topic avoidance. Such avoidance may impede open communication and hinder the formation of social connections in the workplace, while also adversely affecting self-esteem and overall well-being (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). Participants' narratives revealed that internalized societal attitudes toward stuttering contributed to the development of self-stigma, thereby reinforcing feelings of shame in professional contexts. This aligns with findings by Bricker-Katz et al. (2013), who identified self-stigmatization as a significant barrier in working life, associated with diminished self-esteem and increased fear of evaluation. Prior research has further demonstrated that self-stigma-related dysfunctional beliefs—such as low self-confidence, hopelessness, fear of negative evaluation, avoidance behaviors, and a perceived lack of social support—can negatively impact the mental health of PWS (Penttilä, 2023; Türkili et al., 2022). Importantly, these challenges do not reflect individual deficits, but rather broader societal and structural attitudes that perpetuate stigma. Taken together, these findings highlight the urgent need to foster environments in which stuttering can be openly acknowledged without fear or shame.

Another frequently mentioned emotion in our findings was fear. This fear often stemmed from concerns about the potential negative consequences of disclosing one's stuttering, such as negative perceptions and attitudes from colleagues and supervisors. Participants expressed worries that others might view them as unsuitable for their roles due to their stuttering, which aligns with findings by Bricker-Katz et al. (2013). In our data, stuttering was perceived to reflect broader aspects of PWS's lives, such as their social skills and mental health. When stuttering occurred at work, participants often felt compelled to explain it to their colleagues. However, the perception that stuttering must be concealed, combined with fears of negative consequences, contributed to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. These experiences made it difficult for PWS to express themselves fully in professional settings. Such fear can also lead to the avoidance of social situations or attempts to hide stuttering—behaviors known to be highly stressful and overwhelming for individuals who stutter (Boyle, 2015b; Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Gerlach-Houck et al., 2023; McAllister et al., 2012; Vogel et al., 2013). Boyle et al. (2023) have emphasized that improving the understanding and addressing of self-stigma could enhance PWS's opportunities to participate in working life, thereby supporting their mental health.

Our analysis showed that PWS use self-accusing language while they described their stuttering in workplace contexts. Participants expressed emotional discomfort about not speaking openly about their stuttering, using language that reflected self-blame. This discourse aligns with broader cultural narratives of individualism, which emphasize personal responsibility and may lead individuals to internalize problems that are socially or structurally rooted. Traditional rehabilitation approaches, grounded in medical models, may reinforce this tendency by framing stuttering as an individual impairment, often neglecting the role of environmental and societal factors (Constantino & Simpson, 2022). Our findings highlight the need to promote workplace environments that take responsibility for inclusive practices and do not place the burden of socially constructed problems on individuals, which would also reflect the principles of social model of stuttering (Constantino & Simpson, 2022).

4.3. Resisting assumptions about the negative effects of stuttering on working life

Our data indicated that PWS often perceive stuttering as a barrier to workplace performance, reflecting internalized feelings of inadequacy and an awareness of societal stereotypes. Within the framework of role entrapment, individuals in positions of power—such as fluent speakers—may influence which roles are considered appropriate for minority groups like PWS (Gabel et al., 2004).

Our findings align with the research by Gabel et al. (2004), which found that PWS were perceived as less suitable for professions requiring verbal performance and public speaking. Similarly, McAllister et al. (2012) reported that PWS themselves tend to pursue less verbally demanding roles, reinforcing the belief that stuttering limits career options. Despite these challenges, participants in our study demonstrated resilience by succeeding in roles not typically associated with PWS, thereby challenging stereotypes and emphasizing their competence. Some participants also noted that stuttering often remains hidden and is rarely discussed in the workplace, highlighting the need to foster inclusive environments where PWS are not pressured to conceal or justify their speech.

4.4. Strategies for inclusive communication with colleagues who stutter

Participants hoped that enhancing inclusivity and raising awareness of stuttering in the working life must be increased, which was also found out in the research of Türkili and colleagues in 2022. By raising awareness about stuttering and its diverse manifestations, it is possible to foster understanding, reduce incorrect and negative stereotypes associated with stuttering, and reduce stigma-related disadvantages of PWS in working life.

PWS hoped that increasing awareness would reduce coworkers' undesirable reactions, such as interrupting, speaking over, and filling in words. In the context of our study, such behaviors can be interpreted as microaggressions—subtle, often unintentional acts that convey disrespect or marginalization (Coalson et al., 2022; Fattoracci et al., 2021). Microaggressions have been linked to adverse psychological outcomes, particularly when they occur repeatedly in everyday environments such as the workplace. In professional settings, they contribute to hostile and unwelcoming atmospheres, reducing job satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being (Fattoracci & King, 2023). These acts convey the message that PWS are inferior and that their speech and thoughts are less valuable than those of fluent speakers (Fattoracci & King, 2023), reflecting broader societal ideologies that prioritize fluency and smooth interaction (Luke, 2021). Reducing such behaviors is likely to support both employee well-being and organizational outcomes (Maji & Rajeev, 2024).

Our findings revealed the risks PWS associates with openness about stuttering at work. Participants often described negative experiences following disclosure, despite openness being socially valued. While inclusive practices are growing in workplaces (e.g., gender-neutral language; Dhanani et al., 2024), they may lead to “forced openness,” where individuals feel obligated to disclose personal traits. For PWS, this raises critical questions about responsibility and the burden of educating others. Disclosure can foster understanding but may also be emotionally taxing, especially in uninformed environments. It is not always relevant to job performance and may attract unwanted attention.

Nonetheless, increased awareness can make disclosure safer and more empowering. Research links openness to improved well-being, self-esteem, and job satisfaction (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013). Participants expressed a desire to speak authentically and be accepted without modifying their speech. Self-acceptance correlates with reduced discrimination (De Nardo et al., 2016), and disclosure supports this process (Plexico et al., 2009). To support this, workplaces should invest in communication competence, encourage active listening, and foster appreciation for diverse ways of speaking. Such practices contribute to well-being, self-esteem, and job satisfaction, and help ensure that all employees are treated equally and evaluated based on their skills.

4.5. Methodological considerations

This study provided novel insights into the experiences of Finnish working-age individuals who stutter, a topic not previously investigated. However, the reliance on convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings, and the self-reported nature of the survey responses may introduce biases. Additionally, the online communication format lacks certain nonverbal cues integral to face-to-face interactions, potentially restricting the depth of interviews. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted with a person who stutters to refine the clarity of the questions, ensure the use of appropriate and respectful language, and improve the overall flow of the survey.

This study utilized qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis. IPA was utilized for an in-depth examination of how PWS explain about their own stuttering and what kind of hopes they have for workplace communication. The analysis was conducted inductively, meaning researchers developed themes without predetermined categories. This approach provided deeper insights into how respondents framed their thoughts and engaged with the survey questions, revealing underlying cultural assumptions and normative expectations of communicative dynamics. In addition, thematic analysis was utilized to form overarching categories to make results more structured. By combining thematic analysis with IPA, it is possible to develop a conceptual structure grounded in individual lived experiences. This integration allows for both idiographic depth—through close attention to personal meaning-making—and analytic clarity, by identifying patterns and structure across the dataset (Naeem et al., 2023). One strength of this method was its flexibility and ability to reveal meanings within the data without relying on pre-existing hypotheses. Additionally, the researcher's role in interpreting the data could introduce subjectivity, although reliability was enhanced by checking the findings with other researchers. The analysis process was made as transparent as possible, and analytical claims were supported with data excerpts, allowing readers to see how the data supported the claims made.

All the participants in our study were Finnish, and thus the findings reflect experiences within the context of Finnish working life. However, similar themes have emerged in international research, supporting the relevance of our results and our ability to make cross-cultural comparisons. For example, Coalson et al. (2022) found that PWS in the United States reported experiencing microaggressions in everyday interactions, including in the workplace. Likewise, Boyle (2018) and Blood et al. (2003) documented that PWS often fear negative reactions from others and may avoid speaking situations where their stuttering might become apparent. Furthermore, Iimura et al. (2022) demonstrated that Japanese adults who stutter experience pronounced self-stigma, and Iimura et al. (2018) noted that

increasing public awareness of stuttering in Japan could help reduce negative attitudes. These cross-cultural findings are consistent with our results and suggest that the challenges faced by PWS in professional contexts are not unique to Finland but reflect broader, global patterns.

Another limitation of the current study concerns the translation process. The survey questions and participants' responses were originally written in Finnish and later translated into English for the purposes of this paper. While care was taken to preserve the original meaning, this approach may have introduced certain challenges, such as the potential loss of nuance, reliance on a single-step translation, and the possibility of researcher bias influencing interpretation. These factors may have affected the coding and thematic analysis. Future research could strengthen the interpretive approach by incorporating multiple translators, back-translation procedures, or bilingual coding teams to enhance linguistic and conceptual accuracy.

Due to the small study population, broader generalizations or statistical conclusions cannot be drawn from our study. In the future, expanding the dataset and combining Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis with quantitative methods could help strengthen the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, comparing data from different sources (e.g., academic studies, industry reports, surveys, and personal interviews) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Future research could address these limitations by employing a more diverse sampling strategy and incorporating additional data sources (e.g., interviews or focus groups) to enrich the analysis.

5. Conclusion

Our findings show that PWS often experience negative emotions in working life, reflecting broader societal attitudes that frame stuttering as a disadvantage. While increasing awareness and reducing stigma are essential, it is equally important to respect individuals' privacy and avoid placing the burden of disclosure on them. Participants emphasized the need for inclusive communication practices and workplace cultures that value patience, active listening, and diverse communication styles. Such environments can reduce microaggressions, improve well-being, and support full participation. Ultimately, fostering awareness and inclusivity helps challenge the "ideal speaker" norm and promotes a more inclusive and equitable work culture where stuttering is acknowledged and respected.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Melisa Stevanovic: Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Veera Pirinen:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Johanna Nissinen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nelly Penttilä:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Microsoft Copilot in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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