



Stuttering and work life: An interpretative phenomenological analysis



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The experiential claims of nine people who stuttered were examined with the purpose of determining the impact of stuttering on their work lives and to further examine what meaning they derive from these experiences.

Method: Six male and three female participants aged 29–61 years (mean age, 41.4) who stuttered were interviewed and verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Credibility was established by way of member checking, researcher comparison with only consensual themes and interpretations presented in the final analysis.

Results: Four Superordinate themes, “stuttering is always there; stuttering at work reveals a problem; stuttering limits communication; and stuttering limits occupational progression” were distilled by descriptive and interpretative treatment of the interview transcripts. The interpretative level of analysis identified self-stigma as central to the meaning derived from these experiences. Participants’ expectation of stigmatizing public attitudes, together with their own self-validation of such attitudes perpetuated diminished feelings about self-esteem and self-efficacy. Fear of negative evaluation may be heightened in the work context and might mediate feelings of self-stigma in this context.

Conclusions: Superordinate themes and their subthemes indicate that stuttering is problematic at work by way of perpetuating in the PWS an expectation of negative evaluation by others. Findings implicate issues of self-stigma as generating feelings of self-doubt and self-reproach in PWS in the workplace. The development and effects of self-stigma in PWS have broader implications than the workplace context alone and further examination of the issues of self-stigma in stuttering is recommended.

Educational objectives: At the end of this activity the reader will be able to: (a) describe how stuttering might affect workplace experiences; (b) describe the impact of stuttering on communication in the work context; (c) describe how qualitative methods can provide insights into the impact of stuttering in the work context; (d) describe the impact of self and public stigma on wellbeing in the work context.

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1. Background

In adulthood work life can be central to economic and personal life satisfaction. Work has direct financial implications and is an opportunity to accrue psychosocial benefits. These benefits might include a sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction in goal attainment, recognition of talents and skills, and an overall sense of self-agency as one progresses along a career path (Lent & Brown, 2006; Russell, 2008). Work for some people also provides social interaction, friendship and a sense of belonging. The work domain is considered critical to psychosocial factors in adulthood that promote subjective wellbeing such that vocational psychology is considered central to achieving understanding of the interactions between the individual and the work domain (Walsh, 2008). Research evidence shows a positive relationship between work satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (Walsh, 2008) and it is also established that chronic health-related disorders can intrude on work life with significant psychosocial repercussions. Chronic conditions such as diabetes, epilepsy, back pain, anxiety and depression can have negative effects on workplace experiences (e.g. Sandqvist, Hesselstrand, Scheja, & Hakansson, 2012; Vickerstaff, Phillipson, & Wilkie, 2012). However, the impact of chronic stuttering on work life is currently unknown.

The adverse effects of stuttering for some people have been well documented. Social penalty becomes part of the experience of speaking from a young age (Langevin, Packman, & Onslow, 2009). Once stuttering is chronic, many people who stutter (PWS) experience long-term adverse effects (Craig, Blumgart, & Tran, 2009; Yaruss, 2010). Some show resilience while others may develop psychological sequelae, particularly social anxiety and social phobia (Craig, Blumgart, & Tran, 2011; Messenger, Onslow, Packman, & Menzies, 2004). By adulthood most PWS will have experienced stereotypical attitudes towards stuttering (MacKinnon, Hall, & MacIntyre, 2007).

1.1. Workplace experiences of people who stutter

Investigations of stuttering and workplace experiences have shown that for many who stutter the workplace is a challenging environment. Performance expectations to be fluent and feelings of exclusion related to public attitudes towards people who stutter (PWS) have been identified as sources of discomfort (Klein & Hood, 2004; Logan & O'Connor, 2012). It is also likely that the need to engage in sustained, unpredictable and sometimes time pressured verbal communication may result in discomfort and stress. Work environments that require telephone use may be especially problematic for some PWS (James, Brumfitt, & Cudd, 1999). Crichton-Smith's (2002) investigation of the communicative experiences of 14 PWS showed that participants felt that their stuttering had significantly limited their employment, education and self-esteem. Most participants reported that their workplace experiences had been significantly impacted by stuttering (Crichton-Smith, 2002). Klompas and Ross (2004) found that the majority of their participants did not feel that stuttering impacted their career choice; however, most reported that stuttering affected their job performance, their relationships with people in authority at work and their opportunities for advancement.

Klein and Hood (2004) surveyed the impact of stuttering on employment opportunities and job performance for 232 PWS. They found that PWS perceived limitations on the types of jobs they were able to seek and the roles that they were able to take at work. Participants also reported that negative stereotyping influenced occupational progression (Klein & Hood, 2004).

1.2. Impact of negative attitudes about people who stutter in the workplace

Public attitudes towards PWS typically involve the ascribing of PWS with negative and stereotypical attributes such as insecurity, timidity, lacking assertion, apprehensiveness and reticence (MacKinnon et al., 2007). Research has shown that these views are upheld to the extent that public perception is that stuttering decreases employment prospects (Hulit & Wirtz, 1994; Hurst & Cooper, 1983a, 1983b; Klein & Hood, 2004; Logan & O'Connor, 2012; Silverman & Paynter, 1990).

The effect of negative stereotyping extends to vocational stereotyping whereby, PWS are perceived to be suitable only for some specific occupations (Gabel, Blood, Tellis, & Althouse, 2004). Thus role entrapment frames PWS as only suitable for jobs that have less assertive, verbally demanding roles. This means PWS are perceived as unsuitable for occupations such as teaching, sales or law (Gabel et al., 2004; Swartz, Gabel, Hughes, & Irani, 2009). Further, it is known that PWS may select jobs on the basis that are they less verbally demanding, regardless of other aspects of the job. This leads to some PWS feeling dissatisfied because they find themselves in roles that do not meet their aspirations (Opp, Hayden, & Cottrell, 1997; Rice & Kroll, 1997).

A survey of employer attitudes towards PWS (Hurst & Cooper, 1983a) found that 40% of respondents viewed stuttering as a hindrance to employment, while 75% believed that stuttering impacted negatively on employability. Fifty percent of those surveyed also indicated that they would select a nonstuttering applicant if given a choice (Hurst & Cooper, 1983a). An extension of this work to guidance counsellors found that 80% indicated attitudes that stuttering was vocationally "handicapping" (Hurst & Cooper, 1983b). Whilst the employer survey showed that they did not regard stuttering as affecting job performance, both studies suggest that employing a PWS may present challenges for a prospective employer.

Anecdotal reports lend credence to the perception that stuttering may be a barrier to career progression but this remains untested empirically. Tran, Blumgart, and Craig (2011) found that there were no significant differences between the incomes of PWS, controls and the overall Australian workforce. Similarly McAllister, Collier, and Shepstone (2012) in a British birth cohort study found that there was no difference between the earnings at 23 years of age of their participants who were

stuttering compared to nonstuttering peers in adolescence. McAllister et al. (2012) did find differences in the status of jobs of people who did and did not stutter at age 50. PWS were more likely to be working in low status jobs at age 50 than those who did not stutter. Taken together these findings suggest that occupational consequences of stuttering may be long term.

1.3. The present study

On the whole, a review of the research into stuttering in the work context revealed that the workplace is problematic for some PWS. They perceive that both career choice and occupational progression are influenced by stuttering. To some extent these perceptions may be correct because employers and the general public also believe that PWS are not suitable for some occupations and work roles. Most of this research has investigated global perceptions of PWS and employers. This study is the first qualitative exploration of the workplace and work life experiences of PWS.

The present paper uses Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to examine the stuttering experience in the workplace and to report on *what it's like* to be a person who stutters in the workplace. Importantly using IPA allows examination of how participants' make sense of their stuttering experiences in their work lives. Similar studies using the IPA method have been conducted across a range of life conditions and experiences such as depression (Rhodes & Smith, 2010), chronic pain (McParland, Eccleston, Osborn, & Hezselstine, 2011) and the experience of emotional distress (Sisley, Hutton, Goodbody, & Brown, 2011). In these studies research questions were framed to derive information about the phenomenon (pain, illness, emotional distress) and how participants made sense or gained meaning from their experiences with these phenomena (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

This research describes participants' experiences of stuttering in their work lives. Participants' experiences are utilized to interpret how participants' make sense of their experiences. Research questions were framed to be consistent with the IPA method and as such we asked:

How do PWS experience the impact of stuttering on their work life?

1. What sense do they make of these experiences?
2. What sense can we make of their experiences?

2. Method

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee of the University of Sydney (Ref. No. 12912).

2.1. Choosing IPA

Investigation into the lived experience of stuttering in the workplace context has not previously been undertaken using an IPA perspective. Qualitative research in stuttering has yielded deep insights into the stuttering experience (e.g. Bricker-Katz, Lincoln, & McCabe, 2010; Corcoran & Stewart, 1998; Crichton-Smith, 2002; Klompas & Ross, 2004) but there remains a gap in this research into the work lives and experiences of PWS which the current study hopes to inform.

The IPA method utilizes three theoretical perspectives from the qualitative research paradigm: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith & Osborn, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenological perspective seeks to describe the lived experience of participants. The hermeneutic perspective seeks to interpret the experiences and finally the idiographic perspective seeks to understand the experiences and interpretations of individuals. Individuals' experiences may be compared and contrasted and theoretical generalisations made. IPA captures both the participants' and the researchers' interpretation of the lived experiences with the emphasis on "sense-making" of the experiential claims of people who experience phenomena such as stuttering (Smith, 2007). The sense-making involves two levels of interpretation, one by the researcher and the other by the person who is living the experience, hence the notion of a double hermeneutic. In the current study participants who stuttered were interviewed about their stuttering experiences in their work lives and based on these claims the researchers applied an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) to understand how they made sense of their stuttering in the work context. Using IPA to analyze data from in-depth interviews with PWS allowed the researchers to identify and interpret themes from individuals and to identify convergent and divergent themes and interpretations. In this way IPA facilitated a richer, more in depth description and interpretation of the experiences of PWS in the workplace.

2.2. Participants

Nine PWS participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews about their stuttering and work life. IPA typically involves a small number of participants because the idiographic perspective requires in depth study of individuals (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Participants were purposively sampled from a larger group of PWS who had participated in an on-line quantitative survey investigating the workplace experiences of PWS. The findings of that study are yet to be published. Participants in the survey were asked to indicate if they were willing to participate in an interview about their workplace experiences. Forty-nine participants indicated their willingness to participate in an interview. Of these nine were deemed suitable for inclusion in the study because they had stuttered since early childhood, were over 18 years of age, were currently

Table 1
Participant demographic information.

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest qualification	Current Occupation	No of years in current position	No of years in the workforce	Researcher rating of stuttering severity	Treatment history
Allan	29	M	Masters degree in urban planning	Town Planner	3	5	Severe 7–8	Current
Doug	41	M	Completed high school	Warehouse Manager	10	22	Moderate 5–6	Intermittent not current
Martin	61	M	Masters degree in electrical engineering	Electrical Engineer	25	40	Moderate 5–6	Intermittent not current
Allison	51	F	Completed high school	Bank Customer Service	4	25	Mild 3–4	No
Eve	32	F	Post-school legal training at technical college	Paralegal	13	13	Mild 3–4	In early childhood
Mark	41	M	Bachelors degree in media studies	Journalist	5	20	Mild/moderate 4–5	No
Kelvin	35	F	Masters in Business	Performance Analyst	2	15	Moderate 5–6	Intermittent not current
Pam	49	F	Teaching degree	Administrator	10	24	Mild 3–4	No
Ethan	34	M	Masters in Architecture	Architect	8	8	Severe 8–9	Current

working and could attend an interview in person at the University of Sydney. In addition the nine participants worked in a range of employment situations, had varying education levels and came from a wide age range. IPA aims to recruit homogenous samples so convergence and divergence of themes and interpretations can be examined across individuals who have a phenomenon in common, in this case they all stuttered (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1 shows participant demographic information and includes information on age, gender, current occupation, number of years in the workforce and number of years in their current employment. Participants varied in terms of age, qualifications, socio-economic status and occupation. Some had a family history of stuttering. All participants had accessed speech treatment at some stage in their lives. Some participants were still having treatment. Researcher rating of stuttering severity shown in Table 1, was based on a 1–9 Likert scale where no stuttering would be equal to one and severe stuttering is equal to nine (O'Brian, Packman, Onslow, & O'Brian, 2004). Participant's stuttering severity ranged from two participants in the severe range, three in the moderate range and four in the mild range.

2.3. The semi-structured interviews

IPA requires “rich data” gained by allowing participants to freely express their experiences and stories with the researcher who strategically introduced questions and responses in a semi-structured interview (Smith et al., 2009). The researchers created a framework of questions so that all participants were steered towards responses that addressed the research questions. The semi-structured interview schedule included open-ended questions about each participant's stuttering and stuttering experiences in their work-life. For demographic purposes, some questions were directed towards finding out case history information as well as participants' accounts of the development of their stuttering. A question schedule was formulated according to the guidelines recommended for an IPA research design, i.e. combinations of question-types were used to ensure that the experiences and the participants' interpretations were described in detail. For example the following question types were used:

Descriptive, e.g. Could you tell me what your job involves?

Narrative, e.g. How do you handle frequent presentations at work?

Structural, e.g. What is involved in responding to a customer complaint?

Evaluative, e.g. How do you feel when you've had a bad day with your speech at work?

Comparative, e.g. Do you think you would be promoted if you worked somewhere else? (Adapted from Smith et al., 2009)

Interviews were conducted according to the protocols described for IPA (see Smith et al., 2009) with an interview schedule formulated as previously outlined. Each interview commenced with some general conversation to establish rapport and ensure that the participants understood the research focus and process. The interview schedule was applied in a flexible manner. The researcher followed the lead of the participant and encouraged them to elucidate and reflect on their experiences. Reflection involved recalling specific workplace experiences and describing their response and interpretation of the experience both at the time and in the present.

All interviews were conducted in the same room at the University of Sydney by the first author. Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded. Interviews were recorded on an Olympus Digital voice recorder (Model WS-300M).

The participant and interviewer sat on comfortable chairs with access to water and tissues. Participants were informed that the interview could last one to two hours and most interviews were completed in one and a half hours.

2.4. Interpretative phenomenological analysis of the data

The IPA method incorporates comparative thematic analysis common across other qualitative methodologies (see Boyatzis, 1998) to identify emergent themes within individuals and between individuals in a group of participants. Following the semi structured interviews each audio recording of interviews was transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. Rules of transcription were that exact wording of the exchange between interviewer and participant was made but moments of stuttering were not marked on the transcriptions. The iterative and inductive cycles described by Smith (2007) and Smith et al. (2009) were central to the processes undertaken in analysing the transcripts. Each transcript underwent an analysis that involved:

1. A line-by-line examination of the transcript to identify the workplace experiences described by participants.
2. After several readings, which included at times re-listening to the recordings the researcher identified and labelled individual themes particular to each participant. (Labelling of themes was used as an alternative to coding. Labelling denotes identifying the theme by calling it by name e.g. “exclusion” or “frustrated”).
3. *Identification of Superordinate or Master Themes.* Once individual themes were identified, the researcher compared the themes between participants. A common theme between the participants was considered to be a Superordinate or Master Theme. Some themes remained particular to one participant and were not grouped into the Superordinate themes.
4. Themes constituted repeated patterns of similar content and feelings expressed by all participants to their stuttering experiences at work. These content groups were named or encapsulated by the researchers into Superordinate themes using the participants’ words where possible.
5. Subthemes under each Superordinate theme were identified and described. For example one Superordinate theme that emerged for all participants was that “Stuttering at work revealed a problem”. This was an overarching theme that all participants expressed however there were different elements to this Superordinate theme within the participants, for some from the cohort they simply did not want people at work to detect that they had difficulty speaking, other participants were concerned that the “problem” would be interpreted as something to do with work competence.
6. Interpretative analysis involved the researcher reflecting on the whole interview, the themes that emerged and ascribing meaning to these themes that could be supported by statements made by participants in their interviews and examining how the themes expressed meaning for the participant(s).
7. The researchers then included their interpretations of the themes at this aggregated level and made further modifications to the Superordinate themes and subthemes.
8. Having determined the Superordinate themes and their subthemes, researchers offered their interpretations of the themes to enhance and aggregate meaning derived from participant experiences. Thus the analysis moved from the descriptive thematic level to the abstract conceptual level and it is here that the research delivers findings based on researcher interpretation of the participant data.

2.5. Credibility

Central to the IPA method is that participants in the studies share the experience of a particular phenomenon. In the current study all participants stuttered and it was their experiences of this that were under investigation. Sensitivity to context is considered essential in an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009) and in this study the researchers included two experienced speech pathologists and a clinical psychologist who were all well informed both academically and clinically in stuttering. The researchers were also experienced in conducting interviews and in qualitative data collection methods.

The first and second authors independently established the themes for individual participants. The individual themes were then corroborated and consensus reached via discussion between the two authors. Superordinate themes were identified via further reading and rereading of the transcriptions and clustering of similar content and feelings by both authors and consensus was reached again via discussion. Both authors were involved in the labelling of the themes, definitions for the labels and interpretation of the themes and modification by consensus. The issue of credibility is heightened in IPA by the interpretative element of the analysis. The two researchers’ interpretations and themes and participant checking of these themes and interpretations determined the final Superordinate and subthemes. Reliability for themes and interpretation of the themes was determined by consensus between all three (two researchers and participant) for all Superordinate and subthemes described in the study. This is considered appropriate for trustworthiness of identified themes in qualitative methodologies (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

A second individual interview was conducted with each participant. A written report detailing the Superordinate and Subthemes gleaned from his/her interview transcript was provided to the participant. This report included the interpretative level analysis. Participants were asked to clarify and correct interpretations that they found inaccurate in their report. They were also asked to verify whether the themes in the report were commensurate with their experiences of stuttering, and they were requested to check their biographical information to ensure that researcher’s information was accurate. Participants expressed a high degree of agreement with the individual level themes and made few changes to the themes and

Table 2
Superordinate themes and sub-themes across participants.

Superordinate themes	A. Stuttering is always there	B. Stuttering at work reveals a problem	C. Stuttering impacts communication	D. Stuttering limits occupational progression
Sub-themes	1. Stuttering is part of life experience 2. Work is different 3. Disclosure of stuttering is helpful	1. Being perceived as “not normal” 2. Others may doubt my competence 3. Impacts self confidence	1. Frustration – talking is hard 2. Can’t show your true abilities	1. Stay in my comfort zone 2. Greater verbal demands if I progress 3. Feeling overlooked

interpretations. However all points of difference between researcher interpretations and participant intent were reviewed to bring interpretations in line with participants views. Researchers sought further understanding of what participants said, and how they made sense of their experience by iterative examinations of the individual transcripts (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

3. Results

Table 2 outlines the four Superordinate themes and their subthemes that were revealed by thematic analysis and were common to all participants. The description and identification of the Superordinate themes enabled the analysis to move to the interpretative level and determine what meaning participants derived from their stuttering experiences in the workplace. Individual interpretations of workplace experiences are presented in this section and broader interpretations across all the themes by the researchers are presented in Section 4. The Superordinate themes and subthemes are described below. [Direct quotes from participants appear in italics.]

3.1. Superordinate theme (A): stuttering is always there

Participants described their stuttering as having a pervasive influence on their work. Many participants described constant vigilance regarding their speech and what others may be thinking about them and their speech. This was not surprising to participants given that they had been living with stuttering most of their lives. Participants described increased pressure and focus on stuttering while at work and they discussed disclosure as a possible coping strategy.

3.1.1. Subtheme A.1: stuttering is a part of life experience

Participants reported that stuttering was a part of their life experience and they were not surprised that their career choices were influenced by their speech disorder. Allan described that he always wanted to become a pilot, *“Well my dream was to become a pilot. You can’t – like if you don’t have a handle over your speech you cannot do it. Yeah, but it had a huge impact”*. The impact he referred to was the disappointment he experienced when he realized that his speech prevented him from realizing his dream occupation.

Another participant Doug said, *“I always wanted to join the military”* and that he faced disappointment when told that he was not suited for military training because he stuttered. Doug described his interview for the military in the following way: *“I went in there to talk to a careers adviser and I was having some blocks here and there saying things, and she said ‘how long have you had your stutter for?’ and I said, ‘since I was five’ and I just asked could that be a problem, she said, ‘yes it could be’. Oh, it was a personal blow. Well I mean I try to put myself in the other person’s shoes I suppose, if there’s a platoon out there and I have to call something out and I can’t – that’s it, people are going to die. But at the same time I think over the years of work I’ve always got the job done”*.

The disappointment of confronting how stuttering framed their career options was expressed by other participants and showed how stuttering consequences might have been established before their work lives even commenced. Some participants were not surprised that their work life would be impacted and Martin expressed this when he said, *“But I already would know before I got there that speech was going to be an issue, definitely when I was applying for a job where I knew I’d have to deal with a lot of people”*.

Others, like Ethan moved into a career that they self-selected and enjoyed and when talking about choosing his career Ethan told, *“It was in high school, I’d always had an interest in architecture, and that was what I was focused on really from probably year 10 onwards perhaps and that’s the path I’ve ultimately followed”*.

Some chose careers that they were steered towards by interest, ability and suitability yet others were made to deviate from their preferred career path because of their stuttering. Some were in jobs that they did not originally train for but they liked the work and were satisfied with what they were doing.

3.1.2. Subtheme A.2: work is different

Most participants described their stuttering as having the greatest impact at work. An example of this is when Allison spoke about using word avoidance more at work: *“I think I do a lot more word avoidance at work than I do at home. Yeah, I think*

I do a lot more word insertions, changing, trying to laugh while I'm saying it so people – oh, hang on, sorry what was that word again? You know like that or 'where was I?' kind of a comeback. Yeah, I do a lot more acting to present an image than probably what I do at home". Her comment showed how she put effort into achieving fluency at work and this involved masking or camouflaging her stuttered speech. Her awareness that her flippancy was inauthentic indicated that she endeavoured to seem easy-going and even relaxed when speaking but masking her stuttering was her primary goal.

Allan also felt pressure to *perform* and compensate for his stuttering for fear of being perceived to have *shortcomings* because he stuttered. Allan explained: *"I've always felt like I need to compensate in other aspects of my job. So because I stutter, because I'm not good in talking, I have to overcompensate in other areas- so I have to be perfect in doing my report because that evens out that shortcoming of mine and I've always thought like that in the office. That's just how I've always done it at work. Look, in a way it's good because I always aim higher but it puts a lot of pressure on you".*

Eve was determined to hide her stuttering, *"Yes. I worry about it every day. I don't know. I just don't want anyone to hear me stutter. I don't know why, but I've always been like that".* Her past experiences with stuttering and her attitudes and beliefs about herself and her speech, were present before she commenced her work life. The work context served as a different context but one that involved greater vigilance for fear that she might stutter.

In contrast Allan described how he could be focused on his work but when he stuttered he was reminded that he had a limitation: *"I'm engrossed in my work and I love that. It's more like if my phone goes and then it's like oh yeah, I stutter so there's always a reminder that you stutter and that's always – it's kind of like this cloud that's always hovering over you, always. It gets smaller but it's always there".*

3.1.3. Subtheme A.3: disclosure of stuttering is helpful

Earlier adverse experiences of stuttering left some feeling fearful of openly acknowledging that they stuttered in case they pre-empted negative reactions from others. However, others felt that disclosing stuttering was a helpful way of coping at work. Allison felt that disclosing her stutter by talking openly to work colleagues gave her a feeling of control: *"Sometimes I think they go 'hmm I wonder' – my perception is I see them thinking and I go 'oh I'm a stutterer' and they go 'oh are you?'". I've always been upfront; I want people to know that I'm all right with it".* Here Allison shows that her decision to disclose and acknowledge that she stuttered was her way of ensuring that discussion about her speech difficulty was possible and preferably not hidden by her co-workers.

Mark, a journalist seemed fairly relaxed when he explained that: *"In the work place I just let people know that I have a stutter basically. It's sort of one of the first things that – not the first thing, but if I start to stutter, I just say 'I've got a stutter, this might take a while' or something, just so they know what's going on. Then it doesn't really worry me".* For Mark, telling people at work that he stuttered, *"just so they know what's going on"* reassured him and like Allison, his self assurance came because he took control of initiating disclosure. This had different implications for participants who sometimes felt it to be an appropriate course of action but not in all situations.

3.2. Superordinate theme (B): stuttering at work reveals a problem

This Superordinate theme described as "stuttering at work reveals a problem" framed the highly salient and core concerns arising from the participant's experiential claims (Storey, 2007). This Superordinate theme embodied the sub-themes that expressed participants' fear of others doubting their competence" and how this impacted on their self-confidence.

3.2.1. Subtheme B.1: being perceived as "not normal"

Eve's stuttering created great anxiety that she might be judged as, *not normal* and her reactions to her own stuttering were negative and disapproving, *"I don't want them to think 'oh she's not normal because she's a stutterer. That's I suppose how I feel".* Her central fear had to do with the notion of "normalcy" and not being "*normal*" was a perception that she feared others might have if they heard her stuttering. Her way of making sense of her stuttering and the feelings associated with it were that at work she needed to hide her stuttering or else others would discover that she was "*not normal*". Pam had similar fears to Eve and said how, *"I hated looking like I was stupid because I couldn't say it".* Thus fearing negative evaluation for these participants was about being judged to be unintelligent more extremely than others might interpret their stuttering as a mental disorder.

3.2.2. Subtheme B.2: others may doubt my competence

Once participants spoke at work it was clear to their colleagues, employers, managers and supervisors that they stuttered. Allan explained, *"You've got to go in there with a degree of honesty and openness otherwise it seems like well maybe he is hiding this, is it an issue with him. They don't know so you've got to tell them and educate people a little bit".* The notion of "*an issue*" related to Allan's wondering what thoughts others at work might have about openly acknowledging his stuttering. He assumes that the thoughts will be negative and wants to clarify. Previously Allison talks about wanting her co-workers to understand that *"I am alright with it (her stuttering)"* and here Allan talks about his co-workers possibly speculating, *"is it an issue with him?"*. In both instances Allan and Allison want to establish that their stuttering is not a sensitive "no go zone" which must not be revealed or acknowledged. By enabling clarification they make it possible for their stuttering to be what it is, a speech difficulty.

Participants perceived that negative judgments might set up inferences about their overall competence in the job. Typically these cognitions were linked to the notion of “looking stupid” or for others perceiving they are “incompetent”, “stupid”, “a failure”. Some spoke about experiences where they perceived people behaving towards them as if they were incompetent and unable to carry out their job responsibilities. Doug described, “People actually thought I wasn’t good enough to do very much, like the occasional person on the phone perhaps laughing or giving me a hard time”.

Allison said, “I’ve actually had someone laugh at me when I tried to get something out”, and Pam spoke about how, “I’d think oh God, that word and it wasn’t about me it was about my impression, how that person viewed me and I hated looking like I was stupid because I couldn’t say it”.

Kelvin explained how he knew his work well but felt more confident and competent when he did not stutter. He reported that he stuttered more when he was uncertain and believed this conveyed a lack of competence. He described that, “Obviously when it comes down to the monthly reporting time and bonus calculations, I will get more calls. But those staff I can handle because I know my work very well. But if you ask me questions that I have no idea about, I would tend to stutter more. Also, if I know that my answer is what you want to hear I will stutter less but if I know that my answer is not what you want to hear I will find a hard time trying to explain to you”.

Participants also expressed concern that they might be perceived to be unprofessional and even inappropriate if they stuttered. Allison described, “it’s embarrassing for me and it’s not professional at all to not even be able to say the customer’s name I just don’t think it’s a good thing”. While participant experiences were different, the idea that stuttering interfered with their ability to present themselves in a professional manner recurred and one participant, Allan said, “I’m in an office around my colleagues and I’m conscious of how others think of me so if I’m on the line and I’m having a block or I’m not getting it out as eloquently as someone else is in the office. I feel like others are judging me. That, I think, is half of it, the other half is – I’m a professional. If I’m not able to speak properly, smoothly and in an academic – no, like speak eloquently, it looks bad for me as a professional”.

Doug, a warehouse manager felt that he was not progressing in his work life and believed his stuttering compromised how others perceived his efficiency. He told how, “The customers would ask him (his boss), Why do you let him answer the phone? He’s just taking too long. I don’t have time to wait. What do you say to that? I mean it isn’t a nice thing to hear”. He went on to explain how his boss had responded, “I think at first he was trying to be sympathetic towards me because he would say to people, “he (Doug) knows where everything is, he can put his hands on the items when he has to; does he ever send you the wrong things, does he ever get it wrong, he always does what he has to do. But I just think over time he probably got fed up with it, just trying to justify it all the time and then the company brought in this policy that the customer’s always right and you can’t argue with the customers”.

3.2.3. Subtheme B.3: impacts self-confidence

Eve summed up how it was for her when she said: “If I stutter, I then have bad thoughts. I actually tell myself I’m an idiot. I can’t say that word, why can’t I do certain things. So then, the whole day is just snow-ball effect because you’re telling yourself this and you’re stuttering more and it’s just getting worse and worse”. Eve’s sentiments embody self-denigrating cognitions that demonstrate the impact that her stuttering had on her self-confidence at work and to some degree this was similarly experienced and expressed by other participants. Recording voice messages, making presentations, speaking to clients for this participant group was daunting. Kelvin described how, “We have to – if you go on an annual leave or long leave, you have to leave a scripted voicemail and I used to be so scared of doing it that I would have to go to a room and do it, try it once, can’t do it. . . and I always usually get stuck on one word so I do it again, I can’t. The eighth or ninth time, you hate yourself, it’s so easy why can’t you just do it and that sucks”.

Kelvin expressed the impact of his stuttering in a very finite way, when I don’t speak well then I feel that I’m not capable of anything. This was evident for several of the participants who reported that when their stuttering was more severe they believed they performed less well generally in their work, Pam said, “If I don’t speak well it means I’m not performing well.”

3.3. Superordinate theme C: stuttering impacts communication

The impact of stuttering on participants’ communication was expressed in the Superordinate theme, “Stuttering impacts communication”. Not surprisingly the struggle to speak presented as a multi-layered problem with sub-themes including “frustration – talking is hard” and “can’t show your true abilities”.

3.3.1. Subtheme C.1: frustration – talking is hard

A prevailing experience was frustration when a spontaneous reactive verbal response or humorous contribution was not possible. Mark, a journalist described situations that he encountered and said, “Maybe someone has said something and you’ve got a perfect icing on that line or a come-back and you just can’t say it because – you start to say it and you get so tongue tied and comedy is all about timing and the timing is all wrong and you’re just ah, forget it. Then you finally force it out and it’s nowhere near as funny as it should have been because you spent two minutes trying to get the word out”.

Frustration was expressed in several examples such as losing opportune moments to talk, moments of stuttering that distract listeners and knowing answers or solutions and not offering them. Those who had participated in speech intervention where they learned speech-restructuring techniques almost uniformly failed to apply their techniques in the workplace.

They criticized themselves for not doing so. For some speaking fluently at work was considered as inauthentic and also attracted attention because as Allan said “*they all know that I stutter*”.

3.3.2. Subtheme C.2: *can't show your true abilities*

Most expressed how they limited the amount of speaking they did and believed that this detracted from demonstrating their skills. Pam said she monitored her speech at work, trying to avoid words that started with “M” because she found those words very challenging, “*Its words that start with M so the word 'Marilyn' is a hard one and I work with a lady called Marilyn and I have to – I end up calling her the OHS&S Coordinator a few times because I just know when speaking to someone and it's a topic, it's not her name that's – it's a topic I want to get them to understand that when I say to them 'you need to go and speak to... Marilyn' there's this pause and it just doesn't feel comfortable*”.

The frustration of stuttering was compounded by Pam's concerns to find a way of substituting words and by altering her communication she limited her capacity to elaborate and fully state what she intended. Allison's work role involved making frequent telephone calls and she described that, “*Part of my job is making phone calls and I detest that and the reason I don't like that is because the people at the other end can't see me, they don't know me. I'm okay if I'm calling people for a good reason, you know you've got a term deposit that's matured, we can earn more interest for them, yeah that's okay. But cold calling I'm no good at and that is part of my job description and it's something that I battle with every manager that I have*”.

The limitations imposed by stuttering on communication was expressed by participants as a complex mix of the stuttered speech itself and the concentrated effort to avoid stuttering or some speaking situations, limiting their speaking, selecting different words and changing syntax. This in turn limited their ability to show what they were truly capable of in the workplace.

3.4. Superordinate theme (D): *stuttering limits occupational progression*

The final Superordinate theme was that stuttering impacted participants' ability to achieve occupational progression. This was evidenced, they believed in a failure to be selected for promotion or being unsuccessful in applying for promotion. As with other Superordinate themes this major theme was nested with sub-themes that expressed how the prospect of promotion was challenged by “*greater verbal demands if I progress*”. This fear made it easier for participants to stay in their “*comfort zone*”. Difficulties in achieving promotion presented as complicated and a situation faced with ambivalence. Most wanted to achieve and develop in their roles but were limited by the prospect that if they moved into occupational levels that involved higher level responsibilities, this invariably presented with higher verbal demands. Several participants acknowledged this dilemma whilst others who had not been offered promotional opportunities expressed frustration because they believed that their stuttering prevented them from being offered opportunity and they were *overlooked* by bosses and managers because they stuttered.

3.4.1. Subtheme D.1: *stay in my comfort zone*

Some spoke about deliberately holding themselves back from applying for promotion. Participants' experiences led them to believe that stuttering influenced their ability to achieve promotion or change jobs. Most, feared interviews and situations where they were required to argue their case for seniority. Allison, who had been successful in a range of jobs, said that she had never been interviewed for any of her jobs and she believed that if she had, she might not have been employed: “*If I had to really get across in an interview all of my assets, I would probably find that quite difficult because I would not be able to say it in the way that perhaps I should*”.

3.4.2. Subtheme D.2: *greater verbal demands if I progress*

Allison has managed to control the level of verbal interaction each previous job required but in her current job she was asked to move into a more senior role where she would be required to increase her telephone contacts: “*I said look, I stutter you know and you're telling me that you want me to talk to the customers and make calls and this particular manager said 'you'll be right, you don't have to make the calls and you're very good at your job so we want you to do this.' I'm like oh, I don't know*”. Allison was given positive feedback about her work and offered the opportunity to progress. However, she anticipated that by progressing she would be placed in a situation of greater verbal demand and the stress associated with this created a dilemma that resulted in her opting to remain in the less demanding position.

Ethan spoke about his temperament and related how, “*I'm not an outgoing person really and that's I guess something that's impacting my work now more than anything*”. Whilst he did not feel that his career choice was unduly influenced by his speech he was concerned that, “*who I've become and how outgoing I am*” was affecting his work life and limiting his ability to, “*network and make small-talk to get clients*”. He wanted to explore other job possibilities but: “*in the back of my mind there's the thought that's re-establishing myself in a whole new country, in a whole new industry, and that involves a lot of talking to people – it still plays on your mind*”. It is appropriate to contemplate major life change with such thoughts but for Ethan the dominant cognition was related to the amount of talking he might be anticipating and that was majorly limiting his initiation of changing his job situation.

3.4.3. Subtheme D.3: feeling overlooked

Participants reported that promotion had not been offered to them because they stuttered. Allan, a highly qualified city planner, had worked at one level in his organization, and wanted to move into a senior role. He explained how: *“I would like to be in a role that I’m able to influence others and a big aspect of that is your ability to communicate ideas. You know, for me it’s always been a lot harder verbally. Yeah so in terms of my – what I aspire to, I want to be able to influence others so I’d like a leadership role”*.

He went on to say, *“I had an interview last month at work for a senior role and I’ve had enough experience for a senior role. I know that because my colleagues of senior level now and they’ve had less than four years experience, I’ve had more than them. I remember in the interview, the interviewer said ‘you know this role. . .’ – and he was quite arrogant – he says ‘you know this role, it requires a lot of liaising with stakeholders and stuff like that, are you up for it?’ I know what he was implying and I said, ‘Yes, I am’ and he nodded. But yeah, I believe it’s holding me back a lot in that I don’t go for other senior roles because it involves a heavy amount of talking”*.

He tried to take the perspective of the employer in the situation and acknowledged that speaking was not, for him, a strength Allan spoke about his stuttering as a “disability” and taking that perspective he recognized that limitations from stuttering could be lifelong. Yet he longed to compete equally with others in the workplace.

A number of participants described occasions where they did not achieve promotion and believed that whilst they were never told directly that it was because they stuttered, they were certain that was the reason. Martin, an electrical engineer said, *“I found that when I was the most suitably qualified person for a position or a vacancy which had come up invariably I wouldn’t be considered for it. I know that when my current boss’ position came up – there was another lady that I had worked with in software development and I know that she was asked if she wanted that job – Nobody asked me if I wanted to apply for it but I already knew that there was no point because I wouldn’t get it”*.

Unlike some of the other participants Martin, at 61 years was firmly of the view that he had been excluded from promotion because he stuttered. He said three times during the interview that he had *“a chip on my shoulder”*. In all the contexts that he used this phrase it was about being thwarted in achieving a goal because of his stuttering. He stated, *“I feel I didn’t get good consideration for the job because of my speech. Now, whether it is related to my speech or whether it’s just because I don’t have enough get up and go and how those two things interlink, I don’t know”*.

Here Martin reflected on whether his stuttering and his personality were connected when he described not having enough *“get up and go”* which suggested that his interpretation was based on finding something in himself that fit the public stuttering stereotype.

4. Discussion

Participants’ interpretations of their experiences were included in the above thematic analysis. However, in IPA researchers also engage at an interpretative level across the themes and participants. For most people performance at work is important and work represents a context where people want to appear unflawed, physically and emotionally (Sheane, 2012). The feeling of being *under pressure* in the work context was expressed by participants and for most this meant trying to reduce, hide or mask that they stuttered, despite knowing that their stuttering was evident. Participants were ambivalent about openly speaking about their stuttering in the work context. The issue of disclosure came across as very challenging for participants. Some believed that it was necessary and enabled them to take control so that others did not form unfounded views about them because they stuttered. Such ambivalence expressed by participants about disclosing stuttering in their work lives has been described in other studies (Plexico, Manning, & Levitt, 2009) and for most PWS the decision to disclose involved complex cognitions and feelings connected with uncertainty about how others might evaluate them when they stuttered. These results suggest that during interventions for PWS, the topic of disclosure at work should be explored.

Stuttering at work often challenged participants’ feelings and perceptions of their competence. The workplace intensified the pressure to be fluent for functional reasons directly related to communication demands involving tasks such as making telephone calls, presenting or speaking at workplace meetings and the daily verbal interactions with clients and customers. Participants overall believed that they were competent in their jobs and some even expressed feeling that they were more competent than some of their colleagues. Yet their sense of self-efficacy was mediated by how fluent they were on a particular day. When they stuttered their ability to sustain their own belief that others respected their competence was shaken.

When participants stuttered at work it became apparent to others that they had difficulty speaking fluently. Thus the theme *“stuttering reveals a problem”* was predicated on negative stereotyping from others in reaction to their stuttering. When they spoke at work they feared that their stuttering placed them at risk of misperceptions of their competence, their mental health status or even their intelligence. The expectation that others’ perception would be consistently negative because they stuttered at work was expressed by several participants. Thus, stigmatizing attitudes in the workplace, either self-stigma or a real or perceived public stigma influenced participants work life experiences and became compounded by the limitations experienced by the stuttering itself. Clinically, this underscores the importance of the availability of psychological treatments for PWS.

Difficulty with occupational progression for PWS is described in other studies (Gabel et al., 2004; Klein & Hood, 2004) and participants in the current study described similar experiences. Difficulties with occupational progression arose for a range of reasons that pertained to the stuttering itself, the attitudes of people in the workplace and the attitudes and feelings of the PWS. Participants’ appeared to limit themselves because they feared interviews or feared increased verbal interactions in

a new role. Consequently, exploring treatment goals and appropriate interventions that target speaking during interviews and work conversations may be an important part of assessment of PWS.

Self-stigmatizing attitudes were evident in many examples but were nuanced differently for each participant. Eve and Pam expressed apprehension that stuttering might be interpreted as something aberrant in them. Allan, who used the term *disability* to describe his disorder, persisted in challenging the disabling effects of his stuttering by placing himself under pressure to compensate for limitations that were a consequence of the impairment.

Formative earlier years of stuttering experiences where others' reactions to their stuttering conveyed negative and frequently stigmatizing attitudes were evidenced in the results from these participants. Their experiential claims revealed concerns that their stuttering would influence others' perceptions of them. This is characteristically evident in self-stigma which was reflected across their cognitions about how others would interpret their speech difficulties. These feelings and behaviours are described extensively as part of the process of self-stigma which develops when beliefs perpetuated by public stigma become internalized and enacted by participants in their own attitudes (Corrigan, Larson, & Rüsch, 2009; Corrigan, Rafacz, & Rüsch, 2011). Research into self-stigma suggests that it is inexorably linked to the stereotypes in the public context and that the harmful beliefs become internalized when these beliefs prevail through the growing up years (Corrigan et al., 2011; Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). The meaning that participants appeared to take from their experiences was weighted by the interplay of public and self-stigma that influenced their sense of self in the workplace context. Most participants shared the experience that if their speech was "good", they had a good day at work but if they stuttered frequently their sense of well being at work was eroded.

5. Conclusions

The research questions in this study addressed how people who stutter experienced the impact of stuttering on their work life and how they made sense of their experiences or what meaning they derived from their experiences. Participant responses showed that stuttering may have substantial impact because it limited their communication, thereby preventing them from demonstrating their proficiencies maximally. Most workplaces expect communication abilities for ordinary tasks such as answering and making telephone calls or interacting with people. These job-tasks can be extremely difficult for this group. The overriding experience for these participants was fear of negative evaluation by others and a belief that such evaluations would invariably reflect scepticism about their ability to do their job competently.

The Superordinate theme "Stuttering is always there" was insidious for participants who all reported expending a great deal of conscious thought at work scrutinizing their speech and trying to avoid stuttering. This sustained self-appraisal of their speech to avoid the prospect of being negatively evaluated by others took a toll on their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Few participants described testing the validity of the views that they believed others held. Yet even without validation, they persisted with fearing stuttering might invite negative judgement by their bosses, supervisors and colleagues. Public stigma experienced by these participants was also evident in the difficulties they encountered achieving promotion and whilst some felt satisfied with the level at which they were employed, they avoided the prospect of promotion if they were expected to engage in more verbally demanding situations in their new position. This study highlights the possibility of PWS experiencing discrimination in the workplace as a result of public stereotypes about stuttering. It is likely a complex interplay between self-stigma and its limiting effects, public stereotypes and general work competency and expertise occurs when employers make potentially discriminating choices for promotion.

People who stutter are likely candidates for self-stigma and this further impacts their self-esteem and confidence at work. Some public stereotypes of stuttering include that PWS are "shy, insecure, reticent, guarded, avoidant, introverted, quiet, hesitant, self-derogatory, nervous, tense, and afraid" (MacKinnon et al., 2007, p. 298). These public stereotypes drive the notion that PWS are only suitable for some occupations thus framing public expectations that are restrictive and limiting (Gabel et al., 2004). The internalizing of these attitudes by PWS was evidenced in the interviews where participants expected negative judgements from others because of their stuttering. In the workplace these judgements were perceived to reflect on how competent they were in their work role. However few participants reported receiving negative feedback about their performance. They also said that they rarely asked for feedback with only Allan reporting that he raised the topic of his speech when interviewed for his current position.

Research into the effects of self-stigma suggests that, "it diminishes self-esteem and feelings of self-worth which undermines hope and optimism in achieving goals" (Corrigan et al., 2011, p. 340). Thus the intensity of emotion attached to participants' fear of negative evaluation about their stuttering could be viewed as a highly adverse effect arising from years of exposure to the public stuttering stereotype (Betz, Blood, & Blood, 2008; MacKinnon et al., 2007) and tacit acceptance that these stereotypes are valid (Craig et al., 2009). This phenomenon which is described as "stereotype threat effect" (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995) contributes to the limitations of the stuttering itself because it involves heightened social evaluative anxiety levels that can interfere with performance in contexts such as the workplace (Schmader et al., 2008). The experience of stuttering can be significantly debilitating for those who confront daily the limitations of the speech impairment as well as adverse reactions of others and themselves to their stuttering. Findings from this study suggest that the effects of self-stigma on the stuttering experience should be further explored, particularly how it may mediate feelings of self-efficacy and self esteem in individuals who are competent and skilled in their work.

This study has drawn attention to the impact of stuttering in people's work lives and how limitations imposed by stuttering on communication are complicated by the interplay of public and self-stigmatizing expectations and judgements. The extent

of stigma in the workplace context requires concerted appraisal particularly to determine whether perceptions of public stigma experienced by PWS are valid. The extent to which these stigmatizing attitudes become prejudicial and enacted in discriminatory behaviours towards PWS also requires investigation. Self-stigma can significantly limit goal setting and ambition and this may act as a barrier to occupational progression. Self-limiting beliefs are characteristic of self-stigma and the interplay between these undermining thoughts and feelings with real or perceived external (public) stereotyping of PWS creates an important dynamic that requires further research. The impact of the stuttering experience for PWS in the work domain has been shown in this study to be complicated by a range of cognitions and feelings centred on real and perceived negative reactions of others to their stuttering. Moreover, participants showed how anticipation of negative judgements and reactions to their stuttering frustrated their sense of self-efficacy.

The limitations of this research are those inherent to the IPA method and qualitative methodologies which limit study to a small number of cases, which in turn limits the representativeness of the sample obtained. Participants' interpretations of their experiences are free from bias however, the researchers' interpretations may not be. At the outset the use of interpretation involves subjective reasoning and whilst participant's interpretation are free of bias it is recognized that researchers may not be free of bias and this is why consensus between participants and two researchers was applied to determination of themes and interpretations thereof. The researchers involved in this study have been reading, thinking and researching about the work place experiences of PWS for some time and may have been influenced by their prior experiences when making interpretations. Nonetheless the interpretations are now available for others to test and examine and provide strong direction for future research.

In this study issues of self-stigma in PWS were raised and have clinical implications that are potentially no different from self-stigma as an interconnected complication arising in other lifelong conditions (Vogel, Bitman, Hammer, & Wade, 2013). Participants showed that they were highly vulnerable to the prospect of negative reactions and negative assumptions based on their stuttering at work. Prevalence of these elements across the themes suggests that self-stigma and stuttering may be in an unhelpful mediating association that requires further concerted examination because it diminishes self-esteem and restrains possibilities for occupational goal setting.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Stuttering and work life: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

QUESTIONS

1. Research investigating workplace experiences of people who stutter suggest:
 - a) Stuttering has little effect on communication in the workplace.
 - b) People who stutter are generally less inclined to participate in executive positions.
 - c) Employer's responses to research surveys show that they resist employing PWS.
 - d) People who stutter perceive that they will have difficulty achieving promotion.
 - e) People who stutter seek menial occupations.
2. Qualitative studies of the stuttering experience have shown:
 - a) Stuttering is only challenging because of the impact on communication.
 - b) Themes that emerge in studies include acceptance, resilience and stoicism.
 - c) The stuttering experience involves feelings of fear, suffering and loss of control.
 - d) Stereotyping stuttering is not a common phenomenon.
 - e) Most people who stutter will disclose that they stutter in an interview situation.
3. Interpretative phenomenological analysis describes:
 - a) A narrative approach to collecting qualitative data.
 - b) Only answers research questions of measurement.
 - c) Describes and interprets emergent themes from qualitative data collection.
 - d) Formulates theory based on the emergent themes from qualitative data.
 - e) Explores the discourse elements of participant transcription.
4. Findings from the current study highlighted that:
 - a) People who stutter are more concerned than average with their social interactions at work.
 - b) Workplace stresses for PWS have to do with fearing how others might negatively evaluate them because of their speech.
 - c) Stuttering is rarely evaluated negatively in the workplace.
 - d) The more severe the stuttering the more negative the consequences in the workplace.
 - e) Occupational progression is rarely an issue for people who stutter.
5. Self-stigma is when:
 - a) Other people hold stereotypically negative views of a person because they stutter.
 - b) Negative public perceptions are internalized by the person who is seen to be different.
 - c) People who stutter are regarded as insecure, introverted and nervous by the public.
 - d) Public attitudes create prejudicial beliefs.
 - e) Discriminatory behaviours towards people who stutter emerge in the workplace context.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jfludis.2013.08.001>.

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