

SOME ASPECTS OF STUTTERING IN THE LIGHT OF ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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The writer will attempt to present in this paper some of the basic similarities between his studies of stuttering (2) and of speech communication (6) and the theoretical formulations of Alfred Adler. According to Adler, a person feeling a physical or a social inferiority will struggle to overcome this inferiority, and may do so by directing his energies toward compensation in his striving for superiority and perfection. Through his preoccupation with his weaker organs, the individual develops, in addition to his verbal language, an organ dialect of his own, which leads to an understanding of his neurosis.

STUTTERING AND NEUROSIS

Free-flowing, spontaneous speech obtains mostly in an environment of parental warmth and acceptance. Hesitancies in speech will first appear in response to parental prohibitions and restitutions. Although non-fluent speech or hesitancy in younger children is fairly normal, tense parents who are perfectionists will often find this alarming and may tag the child as a stutterer. This label sets in motion a chain-reaction of worries, anxieties and preoccupations which will be a source of grave concern to both child and parents.

As a fundamental aspect of the whole personality, the function of speech is both verbal communication and the expression of an individual's interpersonal relations. Because of its complicated nature, based in complex and finely balanced muscular activity, speech is extremely susceptible to disorganization and non-performability during periods of emotional tension. Since language is the chief medium of communication for a child, it is also the area first affected when the protective structures of the organism are threatened and anxieties result.

The speaking situation normally used to convey an idea, express a feeling or ask a question, now becomes a self-assertive, self-conscious act fostered by emotions of hostility and fear. Simple social situations in which speech is required now unconsciously become a testing ground for possible social combat, and the hesitation that results from the conflict between the rational impulse to speak and the irrational fear of speaking becomes crystallized into a stutter. It is the same process which characterizes occasional stuttering in both child and adult.

As an outward expression of anxiety stuttering is secondary to an unhealthy personality development and is manifested specifically and implicitly in speaking where lines of normal verbalization and communication are disturbed.

EXAGGERATED GOAL

The person who tends toward stuttering, though basically similar in structure to other neurotics, may be said nevertheless to present characteristic differences in his orientation toward life. Because of his particular make-up, his early interpersonal relations, and his accentuation on anxiety and fears in the speaking situation, there is created what I refer to as the process of self-glorification in stuttering, or the *Demosthenes complex* (3, 4, 5).

On the whole, many people who stutter are found to be highly intelligent and capable. Yet there still seems to be a discrepancy between what their capacities and potentialities actually are and what they unrealistically expect of themselves: a peculiar lack of judgment in the fields of endeavor toward which they strive. I have found that many who stutter strive toward those very vocations where the use of verbal communications plays an important role. They want to become salesmen, lawyers, psychologists, social workers, etc.

As Adler (I, pp. 243-250) has clearly described, the neurotically disposed individual, because of his sense of inferiority, attempts to compensate for this by setting his goals higher than does the normal person and strives more rigidly to reach them. Beginning with early childhood, the neurotic individual is robbed of feelings of basic confidence and self-esteem. To remedy his early hurts and frustrations, he creates an *idealized image* of himself. In this way he struggles to lift himself above others. In his imagination he can compensate for his feelings of inadequacy by endowing himself with illusory powers and exalted notions of himself.

The process of self-idealization is not developed entirely in the imagination or out of thin air. Each person creates his image of himself in terms of his own capacities, potentialities, early personal experiences, childhood fantasies, day-dreams and his particular needs. He idealizes his particular neurotic solution, be it compliancy, aggressiveness or detachment; and builds around it his own special attitudes, feelings, beliefs and convictions.

Horney succinctly refers to self-idealization as a "comprehensive neurotic solution—i.e., a solution not only for a particular conflict but one that implicitly promises to satisfy all the inner needs that have

arisen in an individual at a given time. Moreover, it promises not only a riddance from his painful and unbearable feelings (feeling lost, anxious, inferior and divided), but in addition an ultimately mysterious fulfillment of himself and his life. No wonder, then, that when he believes he has found such a solution he clings to it for dear life" (7, p. 23).

PRIVILEGED POSITION

Many stutterers, as Adler has pointed out for neurotics, unconsciously select certain symptoms and develop them until they can consciously use them as real obstacles. "Behind this barricade of symptoms the patient feels hidden and secure" (1, p. 265).

Stutterers many times feel apart and different. They believe others are better able to cope with problems and live with them, than they themselves who are more obviously crippled because their speech defect is something they cannot hide. They will further admit that while victims of migraine, asthma, stomach ulcers and so on, do suffer, they are able to conceal their troubles generally. As stutterers, however, they themselves must put up with an added burden in the way of social criticism and judgment. As a result, they feel themselves entitled to special conditions and privileges from a society which should be obligated to make allowance for the stuttering difficulty.

Some stutterers, embittered, will blame a way of life where such gadgets as telephones, dictaphones and other means of verbal communication make speaking a 'must.' According to their way of figuring it, others more fortunate should take over for them in speaking situations which may give them bad moments. Others should answer the phone, make the necessary verbal requests, supply all necessary data and information, and give their complete and undivided attention to the stutterer when he speaks. The reasoning here is that "since you know I stutter, you should help me by making an all-out effort to understand me when I speak and so protect me from embarrassment and ridicule."

The stutterer seeks through some inner resource to throw his voice at will out to his audience or to pull it back into himself. He plays with words, changes them about, makes substitutions and may even, if he finds the going difficult, create his own vocabulary. Emotionally under pressure, he feels he must be master of his own language and that by one device or another, he should be able to make it suit his own particular needs. He may become annoyed, however, if his listeners do not understand the meaning of his cryptic verbal communications,

his coined words, his gesticulations, his unfamiliar pronunciations. At still other moments, when speech is difficult, he will attempt to save himself by filling in gaps with falsities, absurd rationalizations or even obvious distortions. If questioned as to the validity of his remarks, he is seemingly offended at his listeners. Actually what he experiences under these circumstances is rage at himself for not having reinforced and fool-proofed his magic solutions. Had he not failed to bluff his way through to a convincing performance, his defenses could not have been penetrated. So here again, the neurotic stutterer reveals his blind faith in himself and his compelling dependence on his maneuvers and duplicities.

The various bodily movements and contortions used also carry with them a sense of implied ritual. The pressing of both hands against the body, the blinking of the eyelids, the placing of the palm of the hand over the mouth—these are but a few of the many bodily “magic” gestures used in stuttering.

In our trying to understand the stutterer, it is most important that we constantly keep in mind the tremendous neurotic pride invested in these solutions. Adler refers to such maneuvers of the neurotic as “arrangements which pile up in front of him like a mountain of junk” (1, p. 305). Only through a slow unveiling of his conflicts and defenses as a whole will his reliance on these neurotic props be abandoned.

OVERSENSITIVITY

Most stutterers are in constant dread of being defeated as they speak. Even before they begin, they are overwhelmed by the fear of not being able to initiate the utterance of a single word or sound. Threatened, they will anxiously whip up and distort the facts or the actualities until they regard the situation in the light of a calamity and doomed to failure. Driven toward perfection in speaking, they say to themselves: “I won’t even be able to open my mouth,” “I can’t do it—I know I shall stutter” or “I shall be paralyzed with fear.” They fear ridicule, criticism and embarrassment, and thus their main emphasis is not on what they want to express but on how they will appear before others when they speak, and on how they will finish up in terms of the audience’s reaction. Due to their profound sense of inadequacy, each new attempt at speaking becomes a testing ground for their actual existence. As Adler clearly formulated it, “The feeling of his weakness so dominates the neurotic that, without his knowing it, he harnesses all his strength to build a protective superstructure. It is in doing so that his sensitivity becomes sharpened” (1, p. 291).

In social or job situations, the stutterer is often compelled to protect himself from exposing his speech difficulty by constantly avoiding the necessity for speech. He will go out of his way to avoid lengthy conversations, have others answer the phone for him, will seldom ask for directions, will restrict his spoken desires—anything rather than encounter verbal friction. He may want to ask for a raise or a legitimate privilege from his employer, but he will refrain from doing so because it would mean he would have to plead his own cause, and that might embarrass him. In restaurants, he will usually sit by himself and when ordering will, if possible, point out the entree he wishes.

Still other stutterers use expansive attitudes to cover up their shortcomings in their life-situations. They will brag about the advantages they as stutterers have over average speakers. They take a peculiar destructive delight in showing how cunningly they avoid difficult situations by using their stuttering not as a crutch but as a powerful excuse device. Some will take great pride in identifying themselves with stutterers like Churchill or Somerset Maugham who have accomplished so many great things.

DISTANCE BEHAVIOR

In his interpersonal relationships, the resigned type of stutterer seeks to safeguard himself by maintaining his emotional distance from others. Although he may appear to have many friends and acquaintances, he rarely becomes emotionally involved with anyone. Many stutterers have even withdrawn physically into an isolated, inconspicuous existence. They never marry, and by avoiding most social contact manage to live like hermits. Some go to the extremes of avoiding buses, restaurants or other public places where they run the risk of having to speak in order to communicate their wants to others.

The stutterer is also a chronic hesitator in other areas of his life. Stuttering with all its blocks and hesitations almost always represents the localized and externalized expression of a general state of indecisiveness and wavering. Before attempting to speak, the stutterer procrastinates and anxiously thinks about what he will say, how he will say it and when. Since he cannot be spontaneous in his choice of words and speech must therefore be a conscious act, he is extremely cautious and perfectionistic in what he communicates. Even when he is quite certain that he knows what he wants to say, his self-doubts grow and he will be forced back into a position of indecisiveness and further hesitations. In the end he finds himself in the dilemma of

either offering passive resistance and refusing to say anything at all or of involving himself by pushing himself into the speaking act. Or he may externalize this and persuade himself that others are coercing him into doing so.

According to Adler, "This picture of restricted movement is given by all the symptoms of neurosis. In the speech of the stammerer we can see his hesitating attitude. His residue of social feeling drives him to make connection with his fellows, but his low opinion of himself, his fear of coming to the test, conflict with his social feeling, and he hesitates in his speech" (1, p. 279).

The stutterer is therefore unable to find relaxation, enjoyment or an inner contentment. The tremendous expenditure of energy implicit in a conflicting ordeal of this sort is bound to leave a person frustrated, hopelessly resigned, inert and exhausted. Spontaneous initiative is either paralyzed within him or is short-lived as all his attempts at constructive effort are thwarted or diverted. The energies which might have been utilized to achieve positive direction toward his goals must be consumed in his efforts—negative ones—to maintain his defenses and excuses.

By gradually gaining an understanding of his own dynamics, and by carefully worked out changes, the stutterer may in time—and often does—overcome his conflict, and so arrives at a rewarding and healthy state of self-realization.

SUMMARY

In the stutterer speech is no longer only a means of communication, but has become a testing ground for social combat and for personal superiority. Instead of tackling his difficulty positively, his fear and discouragement and his oversensitivity lead him to the pseudo-comfort of an exaggerated goal, of personal privilege, and distance from others and from the tasks of life. By gaining insight, he may frequently overcome his conflict.

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