

# How People who Stutter Experience and Navigate Stigma and Discrimination in the U.S. Labor Force: A Phenomenological Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

People who stutter (PWS) face inequalities when participating in the U.S. labor force due to stigmatizing beliefs. Stuttering meets the definition of disability because it causes difficulty speaking, adverse emotional reactions, and impaired social dynamics (Yairi and Seery, 2023). As a disability, PWS are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act; however, many PWS continue to experience stigma, discrimination, and inequality in the labor force. PWS experience role entrapment, which discourages them from pursuing their desired career (Dew & Gabel, 2023; Gabel et al., 2004, 2008), and continue to report discrimination when applying and interviewing for jobs (Palasik, et al., 2012). Once employed, those who stutter face unequal employment opportunities and reduced pay compared to those who do not stutter (Gerlach et al., 2018), and report significantly reduced vocational satisfaction and quality of life (Bricker-Katz et al., 2013; Plexico, 2019).

While many studies have described the problem of stigma and discrimination toward PWS in the labor force, few have directed studies with the intent to understand how to improve these experiences. This critical gap in the literature impedes the ability of PWS and their allies in impacting change and improving vocational outcomes and satisfaction. Research is needed to identify ways to improve vocational outcomes for PWS. It is important to develop evidence-based actions PWS can take to successfully combat stigma and discrimination. This study aims to close the identified critical gap within the literature by investigating how PWS report experiencing and navigating stigma and discrimination throughout all stages of labor force participation. To pursue this aim, this study will conduct semi-structured interviews with PWS about their experiences and navigation of stigma and discrimination toward stuttering in the U.S. labor force. In addition, experienced speech and language pathologists will be interviewed to provide their experiences with helping PWS navigate stigma and discrimination in the work experiences. The interviews with these key stakeholders will be analyzed using a robust qualitative methodology to identify common themes. Results of this study will provide vital insights by reporting the firsthand experiences of PWS and SLPs and results of their navigation attempts.

The results of this study will further the National Stuttering Association's (NSA) missions and build upon its legacy of supporting those who stutter by providing additional evidence-based recommendations to its members and the greater stuttering community made up of ally's, speech-language pathologists, and researchers. The NSA has dedicated its resources to supporting and empowering PWS through its *WeStutter@Work* initiative. Findings from this research will contribute to this initiative by providing PWS with valuable insights into how others have navigated experiences of stigma and discrimination successfully. SLPs will gain additional perspectives of the experiences PWS face in the labor force, and use these results to add to their clinical programs. Researchers will discover new topics for future studies based on the identified themes. Further, results will contribute to the NSA's ongoing advocacy initiatives seeking to educate employers and empower PWS to pursue their desired life goals.