



Because I have a voice

St John Harris explains why the social model of disability matters for people who stammer

Because I have a voice! is a now famous line from *The King's Speech*, which the film's screenwriter and person who stammers, David Seidler, used in his Oscar acceptance speech. The British

Stammering Association (BSA) has since adopted it as a slogan.

For me, the film and the extraordinary phenomenon it engendered says much about the 'medical' as opposed to 'social' model of disability, and underlines why the latter is of significance in both understanding stammering and as a basis for supporting people who stammer.

A tale of two speeches

Two speeches frame the film: the first at Wembley Stadium in 1925; the second, the triumphant wartime speech at Buckingham Palace in 1939. The first speech is characterised by painful blocking, despair and excruciating embarrassment; the second by great determination and courage, but also by the close presence and guidance of the King's speech therapist, resulting in a remarkable piece of oratory. In between, we have the developing relationship between Bertie and his therapist, Lionel Logue. This relationship gradually subverts the medical model of disability presented in such sharp, painful relief in the film's opening scenes. Bertie's desperation to eradicate his stammer with all the psychological and emotional



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turmoil this entails, is replaced by a mature acceptance of stammering's place within his self-identity.

Crucially, the King delivers the final speech without being completely fluent. "You still stammered on the 'w'," Logue half-jokes afterwards, to which the King replies, "I had to throw in a few extra ones so they knew it was me." In reflecting on the film, BSA patrons Ed Balls MP and David Mitchell have seized on the significance of this gently ironic remark and wholeheartedly endorsed this 'victory.'

Lasting psychosocial fulfilment

How does this 'victory' relate to the social model of disability? The social model distinguishes between the impairments people have and the oppression they experience. The traditional focus of the social model has been on the disabling environment – the physical and social barriers that marginalise disabled people. However, in recent years the exclusions and oppressions

of disability have extended to those that operate along psychological and emotional pathways: the traditional myths, stereotypes, and narratives that tell people who stammer to hide their affliction, or alternatively do everything they can to eradicate it. Chief among these is the powerful cultural narrative of suffering, medical intervention and cure.

The King's Speech starts along this narrative trajectory and then develops into something else altogether. For surely the triumph of the tale is one of self-acceptance and self-realisation, not one of fluency. Fluency, as most people who stammer know, can be a dangerous chimera, the dogged pursuit of which can diminish lives, forever placing the goal of so-called completeness and fulfilment out of reach. The medical model tells us that unless we achieve this goal, we will always be 'lesser'.

I used to believe in the goal of fluency and subscribed to the perpetual round of speech therapy, the achievement of fluent

speech in a clinical setting, practice at home, attempt to translate to the outside world and eventual relapse and disappointment. By embracing the social model, I can resist this narrative, and explore alternative ways of self-understanding and expression.

For me – and this may seem counter-intuitive – coming to terms with my stammering identity absolutely does not conflict with trying to manage my stammering behaviour. A strong sense of who I am as a person who stammers – even if this identity is one of several, and even if this side of me may not always be apparent – is a good platform to then modify the way I stammer and so develop my voice. SLTs play a key role in giving people who stammer permission to stammer, so that in the end they will give themselves the right, not just to stammer, but to be themselves. If you take the right to stammer as your founding principle, how can SLTs help people who stammer to exercise this right, and flourish in doing so? What does it mean to communicate well in a broader sense than mere fluency? It is these kinds of questions that adult stammering therapy can address when informed by the social model of disability. ■

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Note:

This is a précis of St John's presentation at the launch of the book, *Stammering therapy from the inside*, at City Lit, London on 9 May 2013.