Inhibitory Control in Children who Stutter

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1. Introduction
- Inhibitory control (IC), as described by Rothbart (1989), is the capacity to plan and to suppress inappropriate approach responses under instructions or in novel or uncertain situations.
- IC forms an integral part of Rothbart’s model of temperament, which she defines as ‘constitutional differences in reactivity and self-regulation’. Reactivity refers to motor, emotional, and attentional responses to internal and external stimuli. Self-regulation are those processes serving to modulate this reactivity (e.g. Approach/Withdrawal, Inhibitory control, and Attention). Temperamental concepts are being used to explain behavioral and physiological patterns and responses that are evoked under conditions of stress (e.g. novelty situations, unfamiliar persons).
- Using the Children’s Behavior Questionnaire (CBQ) (Rothbart, et al., 2001) we found differences in IC between CWS and CWNS (Eggers, et al., 2009 & submitted) (Figure 1).
- IC plays a significant role in determining how various mental processes work together in the successful performance of a task (Dowsett & Livesey, 1999) and is strongly related to the conscious use of attention (Kochanska, ‘97).
- According to Barkley (1997) response inhibition refers to three interrelated processes: a) inhibition of a prepotent response, b) stopping of an ongoing response, and c) protection of self-directed responses from competing events or interference.

2. Aim of the study
- To examine whether previously found questionnaire-based differences on IC can be corroborated by direct, behavioral, neuropsychological computer tasks.

3. Participants
- 60 children (48 boys and 12 girls): 30 CWS (4:10 – 10.00; mean = 7:05) and 30 age (± 3M) and gender-matched CWNS (4:10 – 9:11; mean = 7:05), all native Flemish speakers, with no known reported neurological, psychological, developmental problems, and normal or corrected to normal vision.
- Subtest Vocabulary & Block Design of the WISC-R (Vander Steene et al., 1986).
- Subtests Vocabulary & Sentence Production of the Language Test for Children (van Bon & Hoekstra, 1982) > Pt16.
- Socio-economic status based on the educational level of both parents.
- Diagnosis CWS: min. 3 % WWD and/or MWR, and at least ‘mild’ on the SSI-3, based on a sample of min.300 CWS collected during two free play situations.

4. Procedure
- Participants were all paid volunteers, recruited after initial contact with their fluency specialist (for the CWS) or through their schools (for the CWNS). All tests were conducted in a quiet setting at the home of the children with one or two visits by the first author, a qualified fluency specialist.
- Gonogo-task (De Sonneville, 2005): go-stimulus (50%): children need to press the button as soon as possible, nogo-stimulus (50%): tendency to press must be inhibited (signal duration: fixed, 800ms., valid response: 200-2300ms., events interval: fixed rate: 2800 ms.; 8 practice sessions & 48 trials) (Figure 2).

5. Results
- Independent-samples t-tests were employed to evaluate possible differences on chronological age, SES, IQ-score, and a simple reaction time task. No significant between-group differences were found (p > .55).
- A MANOVA was used to test whether the two groups differed in gonogo-task variables. Participant group was the independent variable. The four dependent variables were: number of hits, misses, false alarms, and premature responses. The overall MANOVA was significant, F (3, 56) = 4.89, p < .005. Tests of between-subjects effects were significant for number of false alarms, F (1, 58) = 6.27, p < .05, and number of premature responses, F (1, 58) = 8.57, p < .005 (Figure 3).
- Mean reaction time for false alarms almost approached significance, t (44) = -1.99, p = .053.

6. Conclusions
- CWS exhibited a less controlled response style, with more frequent reactions to nogo-signals and more premature responses. This is compliant with our earlier CBQ-based findings on IC in CWS.
- Classically, IC was assumed to be triggered by nogo-signals; recent studies however link the go-signal to the release of IC. Inhibition may act proactively during pre-stimulus period, ending with the arrival & identification of a go-signal. Several cortical areas play a modulating role in this proactive inhibition, with the major focus on the subthalamic nucleus (Ballanger, et al., 2009).
- (Low) IC could increase the amount of stress-related situations that CWS encounter. IC could also play a role in linguistic processing, moderating error-detection or error-processing (e.g., Vasic & Wijnen, 2006).
- Clinical considerations are premature since further research is still needed. This may provide additional information on spontaneous recovery and on treatment outcome.

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8. References