

Dr. Wendell Johnson was a leading researcher in the field of speech pathology. A stutterer himself, he was determined to find the cause of stuttering and possibly a cure for the affliction. As a young graduate student, he came to the University of Iowa in 1926 to become a writer and to obtain speech therapy. Stutter therapies available at that time had little or no effect and there was virtually no scientific knowledge on the cause of stuttering. Johnson was obsessed with the subject of speech pathology and ultimately became a Professor at the University of Iowa, specialized in research on stuttering.

The prevailing theories around the 1930's were that stuttering was caused by either a physical disability, or an inborn genetic effect. Through his research, Johnson seriously questioned these theories, and proposed that stuttering had an environmental cause. In two case studies he interviewed parents and their stuttering children, and he concluded that all of these children were already labeled as stutterers at a very young age. Johnson hypothesized that these parents put so much emphasis on their children's speech behavior that they become too self-conscious, and nervous. Or, as he would phrase it: "*The affliction is caused by the diagnosis*"

But Johnson needed evidence for his so called *diagnosogenic theory*; to show that diagnosing and labeling young children as stutterers will turn them into stutterers. In order to do this, Johnson turned to the Iowa Soldiers' Orphans' Home, a state-run facility that was already involved in a number of psychological studies of the university.

Johnson devised a scientific experiment to prove his hypothesis, and selected a graduate student, Mary Tudor to conduct the work. Tudor selected 22 children out of a screening procedure involving 256 orphans. Ten of these children were stutterers, and twelve were "normal" speaking children. Both the normal speaking children and the stutterers were split up in a *test group* and a *control group*. The children in the control group were labeled as normal speakers, and received positive therapy. The children in the test group were labeled as stutterers, and received negative therapy; each time the children repeated a word, Tudor would stop them, lecture them, and sensitize them to their speech behavior.

Of course the test group was unaware that they were lab rats in a psychological experiment. In fact, even the teachers and matrons at the orphanage were under the impression that Tudor was there to *help* the children with their speech. By doing so, the orphanage's personnel unknowingly reinforced the negative label.

The results of the experiment were disastrous. Not because the experiment failed, but because Johnson's hypothesis proved correct. *Three out of five* stutterers in the test group showed increased stuttering, and *five out of six* of the normal speaking children showed deteriorated speech. In the control group, only *one* child had worsened speech. Tudor tried positive feedback therapy to reverse the speech deterioration, but the damage was permanent. Several children became shy and refused to speak up in class. Their grades plummeted, and a few even ran away from the orphanage. The children that were subjected to this cruel experiment are now well in their eighties, and look back on dealing an entire life with stuttering.

Tudor published her thesis, and based on this work Johnson developed a successful therapy against stuttering. But advised by friends, Johnson was reluctant to cite his student's work, or pursue any further research. Johnson's graduate students started to describe the experiment as the "Monster Experiment", and the "Monster Study". World War II had ended, and the world was abhorred by the Nazi experiments that came to light in the Nuremberg Trials. Johnson was afraid that a widespread knowledge of his experiments would ultimately destroy his career, and he covered up the experiment.

In fact, the "Monster Study" did not stop Dr. Wendell Johnson's career. He became one of the most influential speech pathologists until his death in 1965. Only recently did San Jose's Mercury News uncover the story of the experiment on stuttering. The University of Iowa kept quiet about the experiments for 62 years, but issued a formal apology on June 13, 2001 calling the experiment "regrettable". Wendell Johnson's name lives on at the University of Iowa, in the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Center.