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Original Article

Using psychodrama to relieve social barriers in an autistic child: A case study and literature review



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To review and update the evidence for the effect of psychodrama for children with autism, and evaluate the effect of psychodrama on an autistic child with severe social barriers, using the theory of mind and psychodrama methodology as the analytical frameworks.

Methods: A 5 year-old boy, the research object, was diagnosed as severe autism using behavior observation and autism screening tools, with an DSM-IV criteria. Autism symptom severity was usually measured by Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) and Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC) in research of autism. In this study, the autistic boy accepted psychodrama training and was measured with CARS before and after the entire training program. The ABC was adopted to evaluate him after each intervention program. Meanwhile the entire training process was recorded. The evaluation criterion consists of four aspects including eye contact, following instructions, focusing attention and imitation ability. Finally, all live records and changes presented in volume tables were analyzed.

Results: The patient's social barriers were relieved at the end of the third month of the training program. The CARS data shows a shift from the severe to moderate level of autism.

Conclusions: It was possible for autistic children to relieve social barriers by implementing psychodrama training, then to improve the social cognitive ability and enhance the social function of the autistic children. These results provided basic Clinical implications for exploring a new intervention technique to reduce autistic symptom severity.

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1. Introduction

Autism is a kind of extensive developmental disorder; its core symptoms include social barriers, narrow interests and stereotyped behaviors. This kind of disease, resulting from nerve

dysfunction, tends to appear in early childhood, generally around the age of 2 [1–3]. Autism was generally considered to be a lifelong condition. However, recent research demonstrated that, with the help of various interventions, some patients proved to lose their symptoms and the autistic diagnosis as they grew up [4]. Namely, the intervention in

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social function is of far-reaching significance for autistic children.

Theory of mind (often abbreviated as “TOM”) is the ability to attribute mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc. to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions which are different from themselves [5]. In 1981, Simon Baron-Cohen identified the infant's understanding of attention in others, a social skill found by 7–9 months of age, as a “critical precursor” to the development of TOM [6]. In 1985, together with peers, he published a research article suggested that children with autism did not employ a TOM [7]. Individuals who experience a theory of mind deficit have difficulty determining the intentions of others, lack understanding of how their behavior affects others, and have a tough time with social reciprocity. This deficit is caused by their specific cognitive defects stemming from the executive function defects in the brain's frontal lobes, rather than general learning difficulty [8,9].

Psychodrama is a therapeutic discipline, which uses action methods, role training, and group dynamics to facilitate a constructive change in the lives of participants [10,11]. Developed by Jacob L. Moreno, psychodrama includes elements of theater, which is often conducted on a stage where props could be used, and focuses principally on a single participant, known as the protagonist [12]. Protagonists investigate and gain insight into their lives by interacting with the other actors and the leader, known as the director. This is done by using specific techniques, including mirroring, soliloquy, role-playing and role reversal. Psychodrama can be used in a variety of clinical and community-based settings. Combined with cognitive behavioral intervention, the psychodrama process in behavior training can contribute greatly to promote the social cognitive ability [13]. Moreover, TOM is an effective social cognitive instrument, which enables children to adapt to the social environment more effectively and is the foundation of individual to exist in society. Therefore, psychodrama intervention could be relied on to strengthen the

TOM ability and finally improve social skills of autistic children. It is generally believed that the TOM ability of normal children can reach a relatively mature state at the age of 4. Namely, 4-year-old children can understand the behavior of others according to one's wishes, beliefs, etc. [14–16]. This case study demonstrated how the psychodrama intervention was implemented on a 5 year-old boy with autism and relieved his social barriers.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

An autistic child was selected randomly as a research object and accepted psychodrama training. According to the observation records and assessment outcomes, psychodrama plots were designed to train the patient mainly in four aspects: eye contact, following instructions, focusing attention, imitation ability. Ranging from 90 minutes to 2 hours, a psychodrama session typically was implemented once every 2 weeks, and the whole training process lasted totally for 3 months (Patient received intensive training in Special-Education Center for the rest of the time). The entire training process was recorded. The patient was measured with Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) before and after the whole experiment, and Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC) was used to evaluate him after each intervention program. Finally, all live records and changes were analyzed to evaluate whether the psychodrama therapy works. The study design was presented in Fig. 1.

2.2. Case presentation

Lan, male, the only son in the family, was born in Harbin City Heilongjiang Province in February 2008. He was introverted and had almost no active words. He spoke unclearly with few social interaction behaviors and frequent rigid behaviors. Besides, he had good pulley technology and loved strawberries.

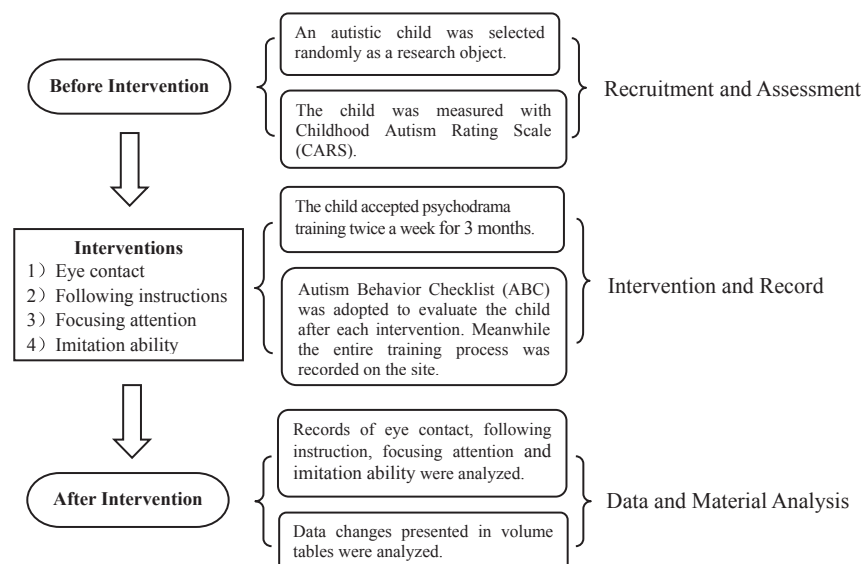


Fig. 1 – Study flow diagram.

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