

TRANSITION RELATED SENSORY ISSUES AMONG ADOLESCENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS: MENTAL HEALTH EXPERT'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) or sensory issues describes the experiences children (and adults) have when their brains interpret the sensory messages they receive differently. During transition phase many autistic adolescents experience sensory issues, meaning they may experience touch, sound, light/seeing, smell or taste in a much more intense or much lower degree than neurotypical teens. The present study was conducted to explore the transition related sensory issues faced by adolescents with the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. Data of the present study was collected qualitatively using structured interview protocols. Data about study variables was taken from mental health professionals having expertise in the field of autism. During thematic, different themes were generated. Categories having the same responses were formed and common themes were dig out from interview content. Mental health professionals reported that transition brings a lot of change in the daily lives of ASD adolescents. They also reported that adjustment to the new environment is the most difficult task for ASD adolescents. They are habitual of their fixed routine. Any change in their fixed routine disturb them mentally and emotionally. They reported that many sensory issues including Repetitive behaviors, meaningless sounds, Irrelevant touch, hyperactivity are more commonly faced by ASD adolescents when they are in their transition phase.

Keywords: Senory issues, sensory overload, Transition.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. It is a lifelong condition that typically appears during early childhood, although it may be diagnosed later in some cases (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Transition refers to the process of moving from one educational setting or life stage to another. For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), transition periods can be particularly challenging due to difficulties in adapting to

change, understanding social expectations, and managing increased academic demands. These transitional periods may include moving from elementary to middle school, middle to high school, or from school to post-secondary education or employment. Students with ASD often struggle with changes in routine and new environments. They may have difficulty adjusting to the physical layout of a new school, understanding the expectations of different teachers, or coping with the increased independence required in higher grades or post-secondary settings (Hume et al., 2009). Moreover, transitioning between educational

settings may also involve changes in support systems. Students may lose access to familiar support personnel, such as special education teachers or therapists, and have to adjust to new sources of support. This change can disrupt the continuity of services and impact their overall well-being (Van et al., 2015).

Method Section

Objectives:

To explore the transition related sensory issues among autistic adolescents.

Utilizing a thematic analysis, the information obtained from the semi structured interviews was examined. This method was used to gather data, interpret it, and then arrange and analyze it in accordance with emerging themes (Engel & Shutt, 2013).

Sample

11 mental health professionals with extensive experience in autism were individually interviewed until the saturation reached out. This carefully selected sample provided the foundation for an in-depth investigation of their real-world experiences, successes, and setbacks in this complex profession.

INSTRUMENT

Following instruments were used in the current study.

Consent Form

Mental health professionals were requested to sign inform consent form which ensured that participants were aware of the goals, methods, possible hazards, and advantages of the study.

Demographic Sheet

Demographic data sheet was designed to gather the basic information about the mental health professionals including age, gender and years of experience etc.

Interview Guide

Interview guideline was developed to gather qualitative data from the mental health professionals. Literature was consulted for developing interview protocol. Interview protocol was made psychometrically sound by evaluating its face validity, content validity and inter-rater reliability.

Inclusion Criteria

- Mental health professionals, notably psychologists, having first-hand experience working with children with autism spectrum disorders, in Rawalpindi-Islamabad were included in the current study.
- Mental health professionals with the minimum experience of 5 years were included in the current study.

Exclusion Criteria

- Professionals who were not psychologists (such as social workers and teachers) were not included in the current study.
- Mental health professionals with less than 5 years of experience were not included in the current study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected from mental health professionals who had minimum 5 years of experience in the field of autism were approached. The ethical foundation, which ensured the participants' dignity and autonomy, was a critical feature of this process. The time slots for the semi structured interviews were agreed upon in advance, taking into account the participants' schedules and preferences, assuring their comfort and convenience. These interviews were carefully planned to be fluid and exploratory in nature, allowing for natural discourse while focusing on essential themes linked to the professionals' lived experiences.

Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes, allowing for a thorough examination of their experiences, problems, and gratifications. All interviews were audio recorded to accurately capture the core of these talks, ensuring the preservation of delicate information and facilitating a full analysis during the succeeding phases of the research (Babbie, 2016).

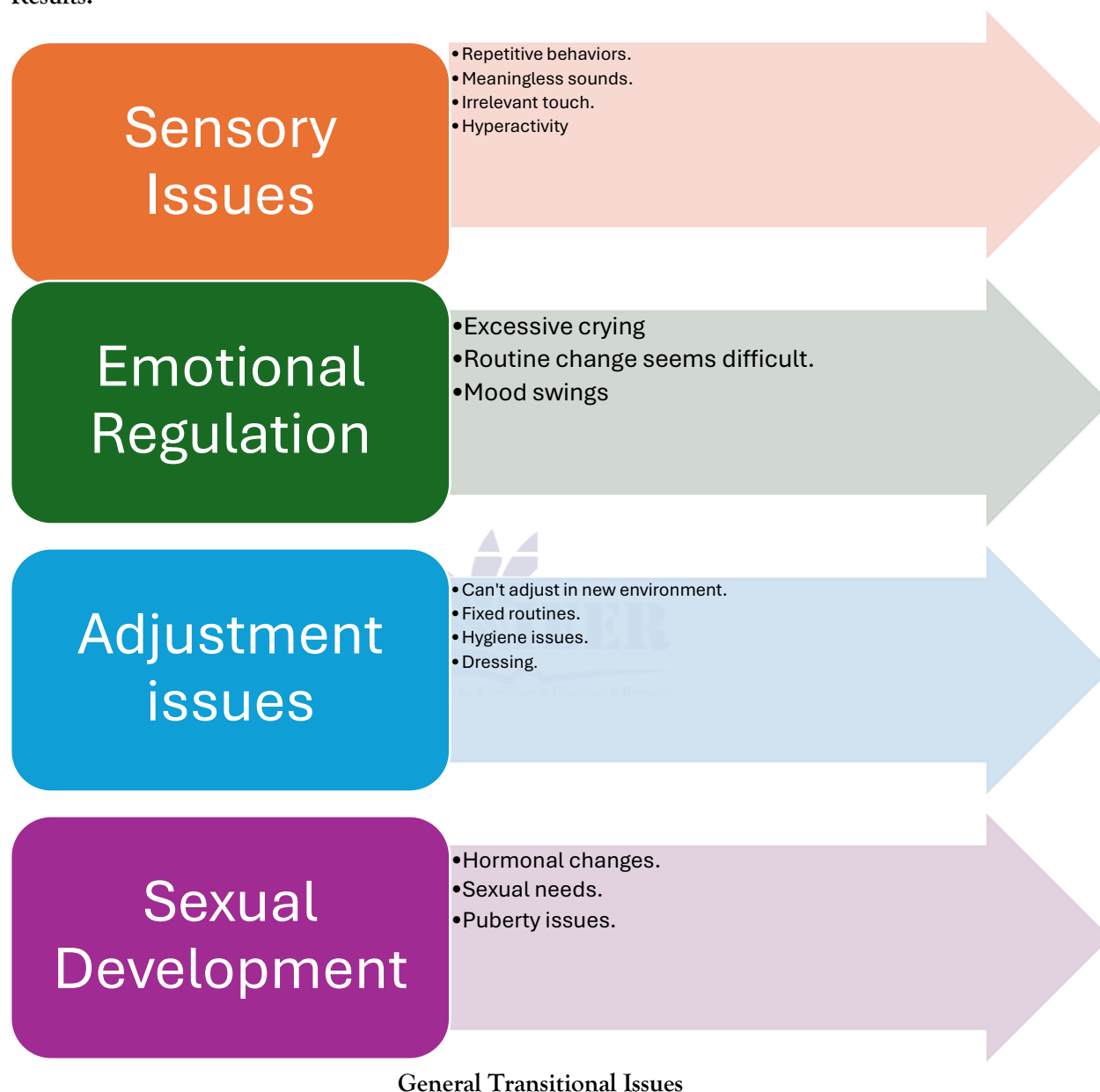
Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used in the data analysis process, and there are certain procedures that help the researcher make sense of the data set (Creswell, 2014). Terry et al. (2019) define thematic analysis as a data analysis technique that identifies the key themes in a qualitative data collection. The thematic analysis was carried out by the researchers using Braun and Clarke's six-phased analytic process (Terry et al., 2019). As

shown in Table I, these processes involved interacting and familiarizing with the data, generating first codes, looking for and reviewing initial themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theme generation entailed a process of

Results:

grouping or compressing themes, which is a critical step in the analysis since the themes must provide a coherent story about the data (Terry et al., 2019).



Sensory issues:

Sensory issues are multicomponent behavioral reactions to the sensory environment. Sensory issues are of three types including sensory seeking, hyporesponsiveness, and hyperresponsiveness (Miller et al., 2007). Sensory seeking behaviors including repetitive touching to different objects having different textures or prolonged visual examination of objects.

Hyporesponsive behaviors are those behaviors which are classified as underreactions to the objects in sensory environments.

Hyperresponsiveness are considered as overreactions to the objects in sensory environments.

Mental health professionals reported that due to transition adolescents face a lot of sensory issues. Research also supports that ASD adolescents have many sensory issues because their senses are either hypo or hyper (Allen, 2021).

Mental health professionals reported that the most common sensory issues faced by ASD adolescents during their transition are Repetitive behaviors, producing meaningless sounds, irrelevant touch, and increased hyperactivity.

Mental health professionals also reported that these sensory issues faced by ASD adolescents in their transition are basically due to their transition-related anxiety.

Discussion:

The present study was conducted to explore the transition related sensory issues among students with autism spectrum disorders. Qualitative data was collected from mental health professionals. Purposive sampling was utilized to gather the desired sample. 11 mental health professionals having experience of at least 2 years were included in the study. The sample was selected by using a structured interview guide. The sample of the current study was selected by using purposive sampling technique which is a non-probability technique.

Sensory issues including repetitive behaviors, irrelevant sounds, hyperactivity and meaningless sound were reported by mental health professionals as general transitional issues. Sensory issues are related to our five senses; touch, hearing, seeing, smelling, and tasting. Any disturbance in these senses can have long-lasting effects on our lives. Children with autism have hyper or hypo sensitivity. In cases of stress and Strom, their sensory reactions increased. As transition is also perceived as a negative and stressful event so transition may also lead to sensory overload among autistic children.

As compared with other disabilities, sensory issues are more common among children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Lord et al., 2012). Sensory issues are more diagnosed among younger children with autism than adolescents or adults with autism (Tomchek & Dunn, 2007).

Sensory issues also follow spectrum just like the symptoms of autism; some autistic people are overly sensitive to a particular stimuli and while some are insensitive (Dunn, 2001). Previous research studies has indicated that as a reaction

to stress causes by transition, autistic children show intensive and excessive sensory response; getting desired stimuli, missing sensory information (for example not noticing pain), avoiding negative stimuli and heightened sensory awareness (Pfeifer et al., 2017). Previous research studies has also indicated that sensory issues of autistic children during transition can have strong negative effects on daily functioning including education, social skills, adaptive behaviors, psychological wellbeing and recreational abilities (Cai & Richdale, 2016; MacLennan et al., 2022). The sensory of autistic children have negative impact of daily living of children as it cause overstimulation to the point of distraction and increase aggressive and maladaptive behaviors (Robertson & Simmons, 2015).

According to mental health professionals, due to social skills and communication deficits among autistic adolescents, they face a lot of issues in their transition. Mental health professionals also suggested that ASD adolescents experience social anxiety, poor relationship quality, poor verbal and non-verbal communication capabilities during their transitional phases and transitional stress even enhances these social and communication issues.

Conclusion: Our study concluded that transition is not easy for ASD adolescents. Their diagnosis makes transition more difficult and uncomfortable. We need to have some transition readiness programs to facilitate ASD adolescents transition easy and comfortable.

Limitation and Future Suggestions: study was done on the sample size of 11 mental health professionals, next level studies can be done on larger sample and more diverse population.

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