

Abstract

Objective: The primary purpose of this article is to introduce Psy-feld, an innovative didactic used to review mental disorders through discussion of the interpersonal relationships of the fictional characters created in Larry David's situational comedy, Seinfeld. To introduce this novel didactic, several peripheral Seinfeld characters were selected, who while not afflicted with a psychotic disorder, demonstrate traits that serve to facilitate discussion to review the different subtypes of Delusional Disorder.

Methods: Psy-feld is a 30-minute faculty-facilitated didactic where a selected episode of the sitcom allows for review of multidisciplinary content areas considered germane to the practice of psychiatry. At Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, 104 third-year medical students rotated on the Consultation-Liaison service from July 2011 – March 2014 and participated in Psy-feld.

Results: Of the 104 students who participated in Psy-feld, 99 completed surveys on the didactic. Students found the didactic to be of high quality, believed it enhanced their learning and thought that it prepared them for their final SHELF exam. Students also found it enjoyable and preferred the didactic to more traditional forms of teaching such as large group lectures.

Conclusions: Psy-feld is an example of an innovative teaching method that medical students found informative in reviewing teaching points of Delusional Disorder.

Key words: Seinfeld, Psy-feld, innovative teaching, delusional disorder

Media has long been utilized to highlight varied areas in the field of psychiatry including the role of the psychiatrist, issues in medical ethics, and the stigma toward people with mental illness.

Furthermore, courses designed to teach psychopathology to trainees have traditionally used examples from art and literature to emphasize major teaching points. The integration of creative methods in medical education is essential as course directors are met with the challenge of captivating students with increasing demands on time and resources. Teachers must strive to create learning environments that give students opportunities to apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information (1). According to Bloom (2), furnishing such opportunities is necessary for integration of knowledge. Research suggests that the incorporation of media (e.g., film cinema) into psychiatry residency curricula is a feasible, acceptable, and an innovative educational tool suitable for the obtainment of this objective (3,4).

Toward this end, at Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, psychopathology is taught to residents in training through creative discussion of examples of mental disorders from film and literature. Our REDRUM (Reviewing [Mental] Disorders with a Rudimentary Understanding of the Macabre) Psychopathology course has been previously described (5). Given its popularity, the Director of Medical Student Education has implemented a modified version of REDRUM into the core Psychiatry clerkship. Goals and objectives were condensed into a 6-week didactic that also includes the media of television. This paper describes one aspect of our new medical student didactic - Psy-feld. While faculty at Rutgers-RWJMS have created an extensive database to track teaching outcomes, the current paper is meant to provide a descriptive example of the Delusional Disorders reviewed through Psy-feld.

The Psychotic Disorders section of the DSM-5 features a group of disorders that include psychotic symptoms as a prominent aspect of their presentation (6). Delusional Disorder is characterized by delusions for at least one month that cannot be attributed to other psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia. Through various discussions, we have identified seven episodes of the TV series Seinfeld that portray peripheral characters who personify themes of Delusional Disorder (Table 1). A closer inspection of the seven characters reveals all are acquaintances of one of the sitcom's core characters, Elaine Benes. This article summarizes the seven Seinfeld episodes in chronological order that portray characters who serve to review course objectives related to the subtypes of Delusional Disorder.

METHODS

Third-year medical students have an opportunity to rotate through the Division of Psychosomatic Medicine for four weeks during their core Psychiatry clerkship. As part of the Consultation-Liaison curriculum, clerks participate in morning Psy-feld Rounds. Participating students are encouraged to watch the syndicated series and be prepared to discuss the plot/theme at the next morning's teaching rounds. At 08:30, students convene in a conference room with teaching faculty and describe the psychopathology highlighted in the selected episode. Students' comments initiate a discussion facilitated by teaching faculty. The goal of the discussion is to reach specific teaching objectives provided in the clerkship syllabus (Table 1). Faculty discussants are provided a manual that details how to reach the stated objectives from subplots of individual episodes. Sometimes, students enrich the dialogue with discovery of novel interpretations of the characters' behaviors. The course director continually updates a database and the course manual for future rotations.

Psy-feld is introduced at the orientation to the clerkship. Our orientation PowerPoint slide is titled, "While the sitcom is funny, mental illness is not." It is specifically clarified that the characters' behavioral and emotional expressions depicted in the sitcom were created for comedic value and are therefore not meant to illustrate psychiatric symptoms or psychopathology. Instead, they form subplots which may be related to themes of mental illness such as Delusional Disorder. The role of teaching faculty is then clarified with the bullet point, "Supervise and facilitate discussion to bring about teaching points recorded in the database." Our primary goal is to discuss aspects of character development that allow for the review of the mental illness. It's the discussion itself that lends to active participation and achieving course goals. Each Psy-feld session begins with an inquiry of who was able to watch the assigned episode. Students are then

asked to give their impressions of the psychopathology depicted in the episode. Since the discussion is facilitated by teaching faculty, all students are able to participate in the didactic regardless if they were able to view the episode or not.

Although we discuss characters portrayed in a situational comedy, measures are taken not to perpetuate the stigma often associated with mental illness. References are made for teaching and transformative purposes only. Therefore, our didactic is considered 'fair use' of material from Castle Rock Entertainment. Students are encouraged to complete anonymous course evaluations that address feelings of being offended. They are specifically asked to share their impressions of all didactic experiences at the mid-rotation meetings with the clerkship director and are reminded they can meet with the course director at any time to discuss their concerns.

Specific episodes, and their associated teaching points related to Delusional Disorder, are illustrated further below.

Episode 49 (1992): The Opera & Jealous Type

The jealous type of Delusional Disorder is characterized by unfounded beliefs based on incorrect inferences. When limited to the delusion that one's spouse has been unfaithful, the term *conjugal paranoia* has been used (7). The theme that one's partner is unfaithful is portrayed by "Crazy" Joe Davola. While significant effort is made to avoid insensitive labels that often promote the stigma of mental illness, we choose to leave the prefix (crazy) in our course syllabus. Our point is to parallel the wrongful use of such judgmental language with Davola's inconsistent history.

Davola's past psychiatric history is established in "The Ticket" (Episode 44, 1992) when Elaine dates her psychiatrist and the two take a trip to Europe. On vacation, Elaine's boyfriend, Dr. Reston, becomes concerned he did not leave an extra prescription for Davola for the time he's away. Since the jealous type usually afflicts those with no prior psychiatric history, Davola's inconsistent history is a focus of discussion. Despite this discrepancy, Reston's concern, "...you don't understand. He could be dangerous (8)" is well-founded when Davola becomes violent and renders his victim with hemispatial neglect.

After she breaks up with Reston, Elaine inadvertently dates Davola in "The Watch" (Episode 46, 1992), and their relationship continues into Episode 49 ("The Opera"). In this episode, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* is juxtaposed with Davola's conjugal paranoia that Elaine is being unfaithful.

Episodes 75, 144, 162 & Somatic Type

In somatic type, the central theme of one's delusions involves bodily functions and sensations. The prevalence of somatic type is less than 0.2%, but may be underestimated. Affected individuals more commonly present to dermatologists, infectious disease specialists or plastic surgeons. Although there is no single character who portrays *monosymptomatic hypochondriacal psychosis*, several of Elaine's acquaintances are referenced to introduce the three main subtypes of delusions seen in this disorder; a) infestation, b) dysmorphophobia and c) foul body odor or halitosis.

Delusions of Infestation

Delusions of infestation are characterized by the belief of infection on or in the skin. In “The Conversion” (Episode 75, 1993), the theme of *delusional parasitosis* is presented when the sitcom’s central character, Jerry Seinfeld, peeks in his girlfriend’s medicine cabinet and finds a tube of fungicide. Jerry’s obsession with the cream compels him to slip the tube into Elaine’s purse, and urge her to consult with her podiatrist-boyfriend. Elaine’s role in the episode is central to the discussion of disease prevalence. Specifically, the 0.2% prevalence is likely an underestimate; similar to Elaine, affected individuals are more likely to present to their dermatologist than a psychiatrist.

Delusions of Dymorphophobia

The theme of misshapeness, personal ugliness or exaggerated size of body parts is central to “The Andria Doria” (Episode 144, 1996). In this episode, Elaine is on a date with her new boyfriend, Alan, when she discovers he’s a “bad breaker-upper.” Having little respect for someone who “doesn’t break up nicely” (8), Elaine terminates their relationship. Alan’s response to Elaine, “...see ya around.. big head (8)” leads to several occurrences that reinforce Elaine’s belief of exaggerated head size. In one of the scenes, a bird flies right into Elaine’s head prompting a bystander to marvel, “He flew right into your head. Like he couldn’t avoid it (8).” While Elaine’s head injury clearly takes place after the onset of dymorphophobia, the scene is highlighted to remind students that younger patients with this subtype frequently have a previous history of head injury (7).

Delusions of Foul Body Odor or Halitosis

Individuals with this subtype suffer delusions of having foul body odor or halitosis. “The Merv Griffin Show” (Episode 162, 1997) introduces Lou Filerman, a new co-worker of Elaine's, who comes to believe he has bad breath. Lou characterizes this disorder in that he's male, single, without past psychiatric treatment and young (mean age of 25 years helps differentiate from other forms of somatic delusions) (7). Elaine identifies Lou as “a sidler” because he silently sneaks up on people. Given several misunderstandings occurring at work that result from sidling, Elaine experiences significant distress in occupational functioning. She is overcome with the belief that Lou is trying to take her job, “...he's getting credit for work I did! He's gonna sidle me right out of a job” (8). Elaine's persecutory beliefs serve as a reminder that while *olfactory reference syndrome* possesses some distinguishing features, subtypes of Delusional Disorder may overlap (mixed).

Episode 113 (1995): The Maestro & Grandiose Type

In his 1921 book *Manic Depressive Insanity and Paranoia*, Emil Kraepelin described megalomania (delusions of grandeur), a major theme of this subtype of Delusional Disorder. The theme of inflated worth and identity is portrayed by Bob Cobb. Elaine's new boyfriend demands to be referred to as “Maestro” given his status as a conductor of the Policeman's Benevolent Association orchestra. Cobb's conviction that he has a great talent is reinforced when he compares himself to Leonard Bernstein.

In addition to his grandiosity, the Maestro also displays obsessive-compulsive personality traits in “The Doll” (Episode 127, 1996) when he removes his pants prior to performances so he doesn't lose the crease when he sits. Maestro's preoccupation with details and perfectionism demonstrates convergence between obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (9). This reference reinforces the teaching point that obsessive compulsive and related disorders may be comorbid with psychotic disorders such as Delusional Disorder (10).

Episode 120 (1995): The Gum & Erotomanic Type

Individuals afflicted with erotomanic type suffer from the delusional belief that another individual is in love with them. Afflicted individuals are usually female, but males are also susceptible (7) as evidenced by Lloyd Braun. This condition is also referred to as *de Clerambault's syndrome* to emphasize its occurrence in different disorders such as major depressive disorder, a diagnosis established in Braun in “The Non-Fat Yogurt” (Episode 71, 1993).

Following hospital discharge, Lloyd helps the Alex Theatre gain historical status in “The Gum.” At this time, Braun's presentation is characteristic; he has a low-level job, is socially withdrawn, and single with few sexual contacts (7). Braun meets Elaine, and proceeds to interpret her neutral actions as evidence that she is still in love with him, “She was practically undressing in front of me at the theatre” (8). His interactions with Elaine also demonstrate *paradoxical conduct* when he interprets her persistent rebuffs as secret affirmations of her love.

Episode 153 (1997): The Yada Yada & Persecutory Type

Along with jealousy-type, persecutory delusions are frequently encountered by psychiatrists. The persecutory theme that an individual is being mistreated in some way is portrayed by Dr. Tim Whatley, “dentist to the stars.” Before he dates Elaine in “The Label Maker” (Episode 98, 1995), Whatley irks Jerry Seinfeld by converting to Judaism “just for the jokes” in “The Yada Yada.” Jerry's indignation causes Whatley to complain that Jerry has it in for him because he's a dentist. Whatley's ideas of persecution (Jerry is accused of being an “anti-dentite”) are systematically elaborated on. This is consistent with patients afflicted with Delusional Disorder, Persecutory type who characteristically demonstrate remarkable logic and clarity (7).

Results

Final clerkship grades in psychiatry are calculated from clinical performance, achievement on the OSCE and the final NBME (SHELF) exam. At the SHELF exam, students are required to complete surveys to provide anonymous feedback on the clerkship. Survey results are reviewed by the Dean of Education and sent to the departmental chairs for distribution to teaching faculty. As part of the routine evaluations, students are asked to answer six questions along a Likert scale ranging from Highly Agree [5] to Highly Disagree [1]. While psychiatry SHELF scores haven't significantly changed since the implementation of Psy-feld, students' feedback has been overwhelmingly positive (Figure 1). A total of 99 of 104 students completed surveys on Psy-feld from July 1, 2011 to March 28, 2014. Survey scores ranged from 4.33 (*I feel prepared to take*

the NBME at the end of my clerkship) to 4.92 (*The method of teaching enhanced my learning*).

Variables such as gender and desire to pursue a career in psychiatry did not influence outcomes.

Conclusions

Course directors in psychiatry are challenged with the objective to teach principles germane to mental illness in an innovative way so as to lead to retention of material. The Delusional Disorders present an opportunity to teach the salient characteristics of different subtypes through the use of media such as the situational comedy, *Seinfeld*. On the Consultation-Liaison service at Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, we review episodes portraying peripheral or minor characters that allow for discussion of subplots that demonstrate the central themes (6) of Delusional Disorder. Since the data base for Psy-feld are continually updated, the didactic is feasible and well-received.

Nonetheless, there are several limitations that necessitate comments. First, the student surveys were limited in their being satisfaction surveys only. While learning outcomes of the didactic were not directly measured, students' knowledge base of psychopathology is assessed by the SHELF exam. The correlation between students' satisfaction with our innovative didactic and their performance on the SHELF exam was not explored and will be a focus of future research. Additionally, pre- and post-testing of Delusional Disorder knowledge was not conducted and would further clarify the didactic's effectiveness. The effect of the binary variable of having watched/not watched the episode could be addressed in the post-test. Another potential limitation of Psy-feld is access to television. Anecdotally, students who did not own televisions

watched the sitcom at peers' residences. Despite limitations of access, responses from student surveys were strongly favorable, and did not identify any variables – including the show's original air date, time investment, or brand of comedy – adversely effecting students' participation and experience (8).

Psy-feld is a novel didactic at Rutgers-RWJMS that incorporates pop culture into teaching fundamental principles of psychopathology. The didactic addresses the core competency of Medical Knowledge, and is well-received by teaching faculty and students.

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Implications for Educators:

- Educators may reference Seinfeld episodes outlined in this paper to generate discussion of the subtypes of Delusional Disorder.
- By referencing this paper, educators may relate other episodes of Seinfeld to additional mental disorders to enhance students' knowledge of psychopathology.
- Educators may use media sources like situational comedies to introduce salient points of psychopathology, thus overcoming time constraints often encountered in clinical practice.

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