Description and measurement of sensory symptoms in autism spectrum

av

Marie Elwin

Akademisk avhandling

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Opponent: Docent Agneta Nydén
Barnneuropsykiatri – BNK, Sahlgrenska universitetssjukhuset, Göteborg

Örebro universitet
Institutionen för medicinska vetenskaper
701 82 ÖREBRO
Abstract


Unusual responses to sensory stimuli have been reported in nearly all children with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). A few studies on adults indicate that the sensory and perceptual problems persist into adulthood. Sensory symptoms have not been included in the diagnostic criteria for ASC but in the new diagnostic manual (DSM-5, 2013) hyper- or hyporeactivity or unusual sensory interests were included in the diagnostic criteria for ASC. Sensory phenomena are mostly investigated in studies involving children and the scales used to measure sensory reactivity have been constructed on the basis of the scientific literature and parents' reports. The experiences of adults with ASC are not well understood and have not been systematically used to develop measures.

The overall aim of the thesis was to capture the first-hand experiences of and perspectives on sensory reactivity and translate them into a self-rating scale. To fulfil this overarching aim the personal sensory experiences of adults with ASC were investigated and the variations and range of atypical sensory phenomena explored and described in two qualitative studies (study I and II). The analyses of the first-person descriptions enabled the development of items for a scale. These were reduced in steps and the final scale which was named the Sensory Reactivity in Autism Spectrum scale (SR-AS) comprised 32 items in four subscales: high awareness/hyperreactivity, low awareness/hyporeactivity, strong sensory interests and sensory/motor. The SR-AS was validated using content and factor analyses. Its discriminative validity was then investigated as well as its reliability in the form of internal consistency (study III). In the final step the scale was used to identify clusters of atypical sensory functioning in adults with ASC by hierarchical cluster analysis (study IV). Three different sensory clusters were found.

The main contribution of this thesis is its presentation of individual experience and perspectives and the creation of an clinical tool to measure atypical sensory reactivity frequently experienced by people with ASC. The ways in which the SR-AS can be used comprise assessment of individual sensory patterns for self-knowledge and awareness, to enable the development of coping strategies and to provide information on environmental adjustments required. In diagnostic processes where other criteria for ASC are fulfilled the SR-AS can be used for assessing sensory symptoms according to the DSM-5.

Keywords: Autism spectrum, sensory, perception, qualitative research, scale development, scale validation, sensory clusters.

Marie Elwin, Örebro University, SE-701 82, Sweden, marie.elvin@regionorebrolan.se