





Dynamics of the Experience of Smart ABA (Smart Applied Behavior Analysis) Therapists Who Have Competence in Dealing with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

Competent Smart ABA therapists conducting therapy in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are needed now and for the future, considering the increasing incidence of Autism throughout the world. This study aims to explore the dynamics of the experience of Smart ABA therapists who have competence in dealing with children with ASD. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand in depth how the dynamics of the experience of being a Smart ABA-based ASD child therapist. Data collection using interviews, observation, and documentation. Three competent Smart ABA therapists participated in this semi-structured interview. Interview transcripts and other data are analyzed through data reduction, presentation, and conclusions. The results of this study produced five themes: knowledge understanding, abilities, values, attitudes, and interests. The findings of this study are crucial in revealing diverse aspects of the valuable experiences of Smart ABA therapists. The practical and theoretical implications of these findings are discussed in the context of an increased understanding of the role of Smart ABA Therapists who have competence in interventions for children with ASD. Furthermore, the results of this study can be used by all professionals who explore the field of Autism and policymakers in terms of therapist competence to provide appropriate therapeutic services for children with ASD.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Smart ABA, ASD, Therapist, Competence*

INTRODUCTION

Autism is a severe neurobiological developmental disorder that occurs in children and causes problems in communicating and relating with their environment, starting in the first three years of life, which continues throughout their lives if not intervened. Autism is a neurological developmental disorder that affects an individual's social interaction, communication, and behavior patterns (Dukpa et al., 2021). The incidence of Autism continues to rise, CDC reports in 2016 (1:54), 2018 (1:44), and 2020 (1:36) (CDC, 2020). The competence of ASD child therapists is needed so that loss generation does not occur.

Therapists are the frontline for therapy in ASD. However, ASD therapists, especially in Indonesia, still have very few competencies, which causes many complaints from parents of ASD children, especially the slow development of their children after therapy (Simatupang, 2022). Also, many ASD children get mistreated or abused by therapists (Nurhasanah, 2023; Restina & Mardiawan, 2017), which must be resolved immediately so that ASD children get therapists who have competence in their fields.

One Solution is the use of Smart ABA. Smart ABA is a development of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) (Anwar et al., 2022). The application of ABA as a therapy for children with ASD was first reported by Lovaas et al. (1967). In Indonesia, the development of ABA into Smart ABA began with the development of Smart *Discrete Trial Training* (Smart DTT) (Anwar et al., 2022). The effectiveness of Smart ABA for treating children with ASD has been widely reported (Savitri et al., 2020; Sutadi et al., 2022).

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Competent Smart ABA therapists are standardized through tiered training and internships, which take approximately three months. It is supported by some research (Granpeesheh et al., 2010; Julimet & Cholid, 2017; Luiselli et al., 2008) that ABA training for Autism took a long time. This study aims to explore the experience of competent therapists in carrying out therapy for children with ASD, which is very beneficial to understanding the role of a competent Smart ABA therapist. The experience of being a Competent Smart ABA Therapist for ASD children is reported for the first time in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Competence is a person's ability to do a job or profession with rules following the standards of a field. Competence is the result of training that produces a person's complex characteristics/qualities that will be applied to their field of work (Nutov et al., 2021). Work competence includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes following established standards. According to Jack and Jordan (1998), competence has six aspects: Knowledge, understanding, abilities, values, attitudes, and interests.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder seen from lack of communication problems, limited interest, and repetitive behavior (Hodges et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a phenomenological qualitative research model. According to Creswell (2018), phenomenological studies aim to interpret the experience of a society or individual about a particular concept established as a phenomenon.

Three informants were selected using purposive techniques, with the main criteria being Smart ABA therapists who already have competence and have carried out therapy on children with ASD using the Smart ABA method for at least 36 months.

Data collection through interviews, documentation, and observation. According to Moustakas (1994), in phenomenological research, interviews are appropriate data collection techniques so that the author can conclude the opinions and perceptions of the phenomenon being studied. Recording devices were used with the permission of the informant.

Data analysis techniques from Miles and Huberman (2014) consist of data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were five themes related to the experience of Smart ABA therapists who are competent in conducting therapy in ASD children: Knowledge & understanding, abilities, values, attitudes, and interests.

Interest

Two informants stated that they were interested in teaching and children's jobs from the beginning, and one informant stated that they became interested in training initially and did not close to children and the environment many children had, according to the following interview excerpts.

"At first, I was not close to children, but after training, I became interested (informant 1)."; "Since college, I have started teaching children (Informant 2)."; "I love teaching work (informant 3)."

Knowledge & Understanding

According to all informants, their knowledge and understanding of Smart ABA was gained from continuous training and internships, and all informants agreed that this knowledge and comprehension was essential in conducting therapy for ASD children:

"Wow, Smart ABA knowledge is very vital (informant 1)."; "It is very crucial to master the knowledge to prepare me to teach later (informant 2)."; "It's very important if I don't have the knowledge of how I will be in front of the child (informant 3)."

Abilities

The skills of informants are obtained after training and internship. Mastery of this ability varies from informant to informant. Mastery of this ability will be an indispensable skill when becoming an ASD child therapist.

Training

The training and internships they participate in are tiered and gradual. Starting from theoretical exams, simulation exams as a therapist assistant, then therapist, practice exams as a therapist assistant, then a therapist. Excerpt from the following interview:

"It took me a month to be declared a therapist (informant 1)."; "three months after the start of training, I was declared able to become a therapist (informant 2)."; "I was able to become a therapist for two months (informant 3)."

About the number of ASD child therapists who do not receive proper and quality training but still become ASD child therapists, the informant explains, according to the following interview excerpts:

"The victims are ASD children who are being treated by those therapists who do not have this competence (informant 1)."; "It is very unkind because this can worsen the condition of the ASD child (informant 2)."; "It should not be allowed to happen, an ASD child therapist needs quality training before they do therapy. Improve our intentions in teaching ASD children (informant 3)."

During training, informants may encounter obstacles. One informant encountered an obstacle because the senior therapist did not want to share knowledge, but after she became a senior, he changed this bad condition for prospective therapists by helping all prospective therapists who needed help; two informants did not encounter obstacles in training, here are excerpts of the interview:

"The obstacle is a senior who doesn't want to share knowledge, but after I met the consultant and explained everything that I didn't understand until I understood. Since then, I have been determined to break the chain of poor teaching, and all senior therapists are reminded to always share their knowledge with prospective therapists. I always remember the message of the KID-ABA Director program: "When we share knowledge with others, then we will understand more about the knowledge, and I also want to follow the mindset of this KID-ABA director program (informant 1)."; "The obstacles during training are almost non-existent, because supervisors and seniors are very helpful, and there are already stages of training (informant 2)."; "The obstacle in memorizing is because I am the type of person who immediately practices, but after participating in the new training I understand why we have to

memorize the theory, so as not to be wrong in implementation, the KID-ABA team is very helpful in training (informant 3)."

Obstacles during the implementation of therapy sessions. The implementation of therapy sessions is the final stage of the initial training, where the Smart ABA therapist must calibrate between theory, simulation, and practice in children obtained during training. At this stage, the skills of the therapist are indispensable. Here's an excerpt from the interview:

"There are many obstacles, especially when I first became a therapist. Yes, I was nervous, but because the therapy sessions were escorted by supervisors, program directors, a team of doctors, and consultants when the therapist encountered problems related to the children's program, the team would immediately help provide a way out of the problem, the term therapist is not released alone but escorted, this is also one that calmed me down when I was a therapist (informant 1)."; "There are of course many obstacles, including children not progressing or even regressing in therapy, but at the KID-ABA because we have supervisors, program directors, consultants and a team of doctors who are always ready to help therapists if there are problems in the implementation of therapist sessions. The supervisor role is very helpful because she was close to therapists daily. The KID-ABA program director and consultant always reminded me that whatever they give to the therapist is solely for the sake of achieving God's love, significantly strengthening me (informant 2)."; "Smart ABA is already evident in theory and practice, so I just follow it, memorize the theory, apply it to the simulation, and then practice. Suppose there is a problem during the therapy session. In that case, the KID-ABA support team will immediately back up the therapist, in this case, the supervisor, program director, team of doctors, consultants, and administration. So, the therapists are controlled in implementing therapy sessions (informant 3)."

Value

In carrying out the duties of ASD children therapists, which are indeed very heavy, how do informants live with it? All three said that Religiosity and competence are the primary keys that make it easier for them to carry out their work as ASD child therapists, as the following interview excerpts:

"The key is Religiosity and competence because these two values will be interrelated. Competence without good Religiosity, people will tend to be irresponsible. Religiosity without competence, people will not do work according to the rules. And my work will later be accountable to Allah (Informant 1)."; "Religiosity is very important so that I am trusted as a child therapist for ASD. Everything we do in the world, including this work, is a responsibility other than in the world, but also a responsibility to Allah in the future. Don't let me stumble later because I treat ASD children unkindly (informant 2)."; "It must be Religiosity; without good Religiosity, then someone cannot work responsibly; it could be just because of the money factor alone doing a job. Remember that later, Allah will ask us to be accountable (informant 3)."

Attitude

In carrying out therapy on children with ASD, related to the behavior or actions of children with ASD, such as behaviors of tantrums, spitting, grabbing, hitting, shouting, damaging things, and others that can provoke the emotions of the therapist, how informants behave:

"Rules in Smart ABA during therapy sessions must be fun for children; every child's behavior has an SOP for the therapist's response/attitude to the child. One more attitude of mine is inseparable from the good compensation and facilities I get from KID-ABA (Informant 1)."; "Various provisions and guidance from training to becoming a therapist from the KID-ABA management, good compensation, comfort at work, improving my competence and making it easier for me to behave to children when carrying out therapy sessions (informant 2)."; "Frankly, Allah chose me to be a Smart ABA therapist, to practice patience and contain my emotions. During the training, everyone was taught how the attitude towards each child's behavior Smart ABA SOP helped me behave towards children. Here, the compensation and facilities are good, so it has a good effect on my competence."

About therapists of ASD children or children with special needs who commit physical or verbal violence on children. At the KID-ABA Autism Center, there are CCTV cameras so that it can be a control for therapists, following the narration of all informants:

"This happens because the therapists who commit violence are not knowledgeable and faithful enough. These children should receive protection and good treatment from a therapist. My advice for people who commit violence against ASD children is to find another job because it is hard to be a therapist for ASD children or children with special needs (Informant 1)."; "The violence perpetrated is very inhumane. This child should get special treatment; I think the key is competence and Religiosity (Informant 2)."; "I was speechless, abusing children with ASD or children with special needs, where this child did not understand anything. I think this happens because the therapist is not knowledgeable enough, not competent, and may also have low Religiosity (Informant 3)."

Discussion

The compensations obtained in the form of salary, food allowance, transportation money, health benefits, and incentives, holiday allowances, and excess facilities such as shelter, uniform clothes (hijab, dress, socks, shoes), underwear, bedding (mattresses, pillows, bed linen, pillowcases, blankets, nightgowns), toiletries (towels, soap boxes), prayer equipment (mukena, sarongs, prayer mats), Qur'an, etc., which all informants obtained in this study including worship facilities and flexibility in carrying out worship, increasing values in themselves to increase enthusiasm in work.

Smart ABA therapists' competencies are standardized through continuous training and internships. This competency is essential for all ASD child therapists (Cooper et al., 2018; Hasanah & Betrik, 2023; Linsao et al., 2023). Competence, Religiosity, and compensation guide Smart ABA therapists in behaving, and job responsibilities play an essential role. If not, then violence can occur in children with ASD or children with special needs therapists, such as in some research (Khaerunnisa et al., 2019; Nurhasanah, 2023; Otto et al., 2021; Restina & Mardawan, 2017).

Obstacles to implementing Smart ABA therapy always exist, but due to the support of supervisors, program directors, team doctors, and consultants who escort them in carrying out Smart ABA therapy sessions, the existing problems are soon resolved. Satisfaction about compensation, such as salaries and all the facilities they get, increased the competence and responsibility of all informants and had an excellent impact on their performance in carrying out therapy in children with ASD.

Another job satisfaction is the success of the ASD children they treat; quality training, supervision, salary, facilities, and opportunities to improve lead to increasing therapist job satisfaction (Kazemi et al., 2015).

Parental compliance and cooperation are important in the success of ASD child therapy, and

sometimes, this is an obstacle as well. Good cooperation from parents in adherence to treatment and the final result of therapy are essential priorities for therapists in overcoming burnout (Novack & Dixon, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

An essential finding of this study is that Smart ABA therapists who have competence in dealing with ASD children are crucial in providing excellent and effective therapy. With continuous training and internships, and support from supervisors, directors, and consultants, it is easier for Smart ABA therapists to face various obstacles in carrying out therapy, using effective strategies to improve the ability of ASD children.

It was also found that therapists who have good knowledge, understanding, abilities, attitudes, values, and interests in the field of Smart ABA-based ASD can provide better therapeutic services to children with ASD.

The compensation and excess facilities they get, including worship facilities and flexibility in carrying out worship, contribute to improving their competence.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of this study have practical and theoretical implications in improving understanding of the role of Smart ABA therapists who have competence in interventions for children with ASD. The results of this study are crucial for all autism professionals and policymakers to provide appropriate therapeutic services for children with ASD.

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