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Psy-feld: An Innovative Didactic Using the TV Show “Seinfeld” to Teach Delusional Disorder Subtypes

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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-min 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.

Keywords Seinfeld · Psy-feld · Innovative teaching · Delusional disorder

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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 the 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

78 Disorder is characterized by delusions for at least 1 month that
 79 cannot be attributed to other psychiatric disorders such as
 80 schizophrenia. Through various discussions, we have identi-
 81 fied seven episodes of the TV series Seinfeld that portray
 82 peripheral characters who personify themes of Delusional
 83 Disorder (Table 1). A closer inspection of the seven characters
 84 reveals all are acquaintances of one of the sitcom’s core
 85 characters, Elaine Benes. This article summarizes the seven
 86 Seinfeld episodes in chronological order that portray charac-
 87 ters who serve to review course objectives related to the
 88 subtypes of Delusional Disorder.

89 **Methods**

90 Third-year medical students have an opportunity to rotate
 91 through the Division of Psychosomatic Medicine for 4 weeks
 92 during their core Psychiatry clerkship. As part of the
 93 Consultation-Liaison curriculum, clerks participate in morn-
 94 ing Psy-feld rounds. Participating students are encouraged to
 95 watch the syndicated series and be prepared to discuss the
 96 plot/theme at the next morning’s teaching rounds. At 08:30,
 97 students convene in a conference room with teaching faculty
 98 and describe the psychopathology highlighted in the selected
 99 episode. Students’ comments initiate a discussion facilitated
 100 by teaching faculty. The goal of the discussion is to reach
 101 specific teaching objectives provided in the clerkship syllabus
 102 (Table 1). Faculty discussants are provided a manual that
 103 details how to reach the stated objectives from subplots of
 104 individual episodes. Sometimes, students enrich the dialogue
 105 with discovery of novel interpretations of the characters’
 106 behaviors. The course director continually updates a database
 107 and the course manual for future rotations.

108 Psy-feld is introduced at the orientation to the clerkship.
 109 Our orientation PowerPoint slide is titled, “While the sitcom is
 110 funny, mental illness is not.” It is specifically clarified that the
 111 characters’ behavioral and emotional expressions depicted in
 112 the sitcom were created for comedic value and are therefore
 113 not meant to illustrate psychiatric symptoms or psychopathol-
 114 ogy. Instead, they form subplots which may be related to
 115 themes of mental illness such as Delusional Disorder. The
 116 role of teaching faculty is then clarified with the bullet point,
 117 “Supervise and facilitate discussion to bring about teaching
 118 points recorded in the database.” Our primary goal is to
 119 discuss aspects of character development that allow for the
 120 review of the mental illness. It’s the discussion itself that lends
 121 to active participation and achieving course goals. Each Psy-
 122 feld session begins with an inquiry of who was able to watch
 123 the assigned episode. Students are then asked to give their
 124 impressions of the psychopathology depicted in the episode.
 125 Since the discussion is facilitated by teaching faculty, all
 126 students are able to participate in the didactic regardless if
 127 they were able to view the episode or not.

Although we discuss characters portrayed in a situational 128
 comedy, measures are taken not to perpetuate the stigma often 129
 associated with mental illness. References are made for teach- 130
 ing and transformative purposes only. Therefore, our didactic 131
 is considered “fair use” of material from Castle Rock Enter- 132
 tainment. Students are encouraged to complete anonymous 133
 course evaluations that address feelings of being offended. 134
 They are specifically asked to share their impressions of all 135
 didactic experiences at the mid-rotation meetings with the 136
 clerkship director and are reminded they can meet with the 137
 course director at any time to discuss their concerns. 138

Specific episodes, and their associated teaching points 139
 related to Delusional Disorder, are illustrated further below. 140

Episode 49 (1992): The Opera & Jealous Type 141

The jealous type of Delusional Disorder is characterized by 142
 unfound beliefs based on incorrect inferences. When limited 143
 to the delusion that one’s spouse has been unfaithful, the term 144
conjugal paranoia has been used [7]. The theme that one’s 145
 partner is unfaithful is portrayed by “Crazy” Joe Davola. 146
 While significant effort is made to avoid insensitive labels 147
 that often promote the stigma of mental illness, we choose to 148
 leave the prefix (crazy) in our course syllabus. Our point is to 149
 parallel the wrongful use of such judgmental language with 150
 Davola’s inconsistent history. Davola’s past psychiatric histo- 151
 ry is established in “The Ticket” (Episode 44, 1992) when 152
 Elaine dates her psychiatrist, and the two take a trip to Europe. 153
 On vacation, Elaine’s boyfriend, Dr. Reston, becomes con- 154
 cerned he did not leave an extra prescription for Davola for the 155
 time he’s away. Since the jealous type usually afflicts those 156
 with no prior psychiatric history, Davola’s inconsistent history 157
 is a focus of discussion. Despite this discrepancy, Reston’s 158
 concern, “...you don’t understand. He could be dangerous 159
 (<http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/>)” is well-founded when 160
 Davola becomes violent and renders his victim with 161
 hemispatial neglect. 162

After she breaks up with Reston, Elaine inadvertently dates 163
 Davola in “The Watch” (Episode 46, 1992), and their rela- 164
 tionship continues into Episode 49 (“The Opera”). In this 165
 episode, Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* is juxtaposed with Davola’s 166
 conjugal paranoia that Elaine is being unfaithful. 167

Episodes 75, 144, 162, & Somatic Type 168

In somatic type, the central theme of one’s delusions involves 169
 bodily functions and sensations. The prevalence of somatic 170
 type is less than 0.2 %, but may be underestimated. Affected 171
 individuals more commonly present to dermatologists, infec- 172
 tious disease specialists or plastic surgeons. Although there is 173
 no single character who portrays *monosymptomatic hypo-* 174
chondriacal psychosis, several of Elaine’s acquaintances are 175
 referenced to introduce the three main subtypes of delusions 176

t1.1 **Table 1** Subtypes of delusional disorder: linking Seinfeld themes to clerkship objectives

t1.2	Subtype	Episode (number, year)	Elaine's acquaintance	Seinfeld theme	Teaching objectives
t1.3	Jealous	The Opera (49, 1992)	"Crazy" Joe Davola	Davola repeatedly calls Elaine "Nedda" and questions her fidelity. He previously demonstrated ideas of persecution, believing Jerry sabotaged his script at NBC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Jealous type delusion is that one's lover is unfaithful • Usually afflicts men • Usually afflicts those with no prior psychiatric history • May predispose to violence • Mixed type category is reserved when no single delusional type predominates
t1.4	Somatic				
t1.5	Infestation	The Conversion (75, 1993)	Podiatrist-boyfriend (unnamed)	Elaine's boyfriend breaks up with her after he finds a tube of fungicide in her medicine cabinet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Somatic type delusion involves bodily functions and sensations • One of three subtypes of Somatic delusions • Infestation subtype is characterized by the belief of infestation of insects • <i>Delusional parasitosis</i> • Prevalence rates underestimate, as affected individuals are more likely to present to other subspecialties
t1.6	Dysmorphophobia	The Andea Doria (144, 96)	Alan	Elaine believes she has exaggerated head size after her blind date calls her "big head".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Somatic type delusion involves bodily functions and sensations • One of three subtypes of Somatic delusions • Dysmorphophobia subtype is characterized by belief in exaggerated size of body parts, misshapeness or personal ugliness • Younger patients frequently have a previous history of head injury or substance abuse
t1.7	Halitosis	The Merv Griffin Show (162, 1997)	Lou Filerman (The Sidler)	A co-worker tells Elaine he has "cankers" after he's convinced he has bad breath.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Somatic type delusion involves bodily functions and sensations • One of three subtypes of Somatic delusions • Halitosis subtype is characterized by the belief of having bad breath • Ramification of the delusion is impairment in occupational functioning • Differs from other subtypes of somatic delusions; patients are male, single, without past psychiatric treatment and younger • Otherwise, the three groups appear to overlap • Differential diagnosis includes Hypochondriasis, Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders
t1.8	Grandiose	The Maestro (113, 1995) The Doll (127, 1996)	Bob Cobb (The Maestro)	Elaine's boyfriend asks to be referred to as The Maestro because of his status as composer of the Policeman's Benevolent Association Orchestra. The Maestro later exhibits perfectionism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Grandiose type delusion is the conviction in having some great talent • Ramification of the delusion is impairment in social functioning • Comorbidity with other psychiatric disorders including OCD and OCPD
t1.9	Erotomaniac	The Gum (120, 1995)	Lloyd Braun	An ex-boyfriend of Elaine believes she is still in love with him given her non-verbal advances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Erotomaniac type delusion is that another person is in love with them • Afflicted individuals are usually female • The term <i>de Clerambault's syndrome</i> emphasizes its occurrence in different disorders • <i>Paradoxical conduct</i>
t1.10	Persecutory	The Yada Yada (153, 1997)	Tim Whatley	Jerry is accused of being an anti-dentite by his dentist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central theme of the Persecutory type delusion is the belief that he is being conspired against • Differentiated from schizophrenia by clarity and logic

177	seen in this disorder; (a) infestation, (b) dysmorphophobia,	distress in occupational functioning. She is overcome	224
178	and (c) foul body odor or halitosis.	with the belief that Lou is trying to take her job, "...	225
179	<i>Delusions of Infestation</i>	he's getting credit for work I did! He's gonna sidle me	226
180	Delusions of infestation are characterized by the belief of	right out of a job" (http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/).	227
181	infection on or in the skin. In "The Conversion" (Episode	Elaine's persecutory beliefs serve as a reminder that	228
182	75, 1993), the theme of <i>delusional parasitosis</i> is presented	while <i>olfactory reference syndrome</i> possesses some	229
183	when the sitcom's central character, Jerry Seinfeld, peeks in	distinguishing features, subtypes of Delusional Disorder	230
184	his girlfriend's medicine cabinet and finds a tube of fungicide.	may overlap (mixed).	231
185	Jerry's obsession with the cream compels him to slip the tube		
186	into Elaine's purse, and urge her to consult with her podiatrist-	Episode 113 (1995): The Maestro & Grandiose Type	232
187	boyfriend. Elaine's role in the episode is central to the discus-		
188	sion of disease prevalence. Specifically, the 0.2 % prevalence	In his 1921 book <i>Manic Depressive Insanity and Paranoia</i> ,	233
189	is likely an underestimate; similar to Elaine, affected individ-	Emil Kraepelin described megalomania (delusions of gran-	234
190	uals are more likely to present to their dermatologist than a	deur), a major theme of this subtype of Delusional Disorder.	235
191	psychiatrist.	The theme of inflated worth and identity is portrayed by Bob	236
192	<i>Delusions of Dysmorphophobia</i>	Cobb. Elaine's new boyfriend demands to be referred to as	237
193	The theme of misshapeness, personal ugliness or exag-	"Maestro" given his status as a conductor of the Policeman's	238
194	gerated size of body parts is central to "The Andria	Benevolent Association orchestra. Cobb's conviction that he	239
195	Doria" (Episode 144, 1996). In this episode, Elaine is	has a great talent is reinforced when he compares himself to	240
196	on a date with her new boyfriend, Alan, when she	Leonard Bernstein.	241
197	discovers he's a "bad breaker-upper." Having little re-	In addition to his grandiosity, the Maestro also dis-	242
198	spect for someone who "doesn't break up nicely"	plays obsessive-compulsive personality traits in "The	243
199	(http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/), Elaine terminates their	Doll" (Episode 127, 1996) when he removes his pants	244
200	relationship. Alan's response to Elaine, "...see ya	prior to performances so he does not lose the crease	245
201	around.. big head (http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/)"	when he sits. Maestro's preoccupation with details and	246
202	leads to several occurrences that reinforce Elaine's	perfectionism demonstrates convergence between	247
203	belief of exaggerated head size. In one of the scenes,	obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and	248
204	a bird flies right into Elaine's head prompting a	obsessive-compulsive disorder [8]. This reference rein-	249
205	bystander to marvel, "He flew right into your head.	forces the teaching point that obsessive-compulsive and	250
206	Like he couldn't avoid it (http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/)." While Elaine's head injury clearly takes place	related disorders may be comorbid with psychotic dis-	251
207	after the onset of dysmorphophobia, the scene is	orders such as Delusional Disorder [9].	252
208	highlighted to remind students that younger patients		
209	with this subtype frequently have a previous history of	Episode 120 (1995): The Gum & Erotomantic Type	253
210	head injury [7].		
211		Individuals afflicted with erotomantic type suffer from the	254
212	<i>Delusions of Foul Body Odor or Halitosis</i>	delusional belief that another individual is in love with them.	255
213	Individuals with this subtype suffer delusions of having	Afflicted individuals are usually female, but males are also	256
214	foul body odor or halitosis. "The Merv Griffin Show"	susceptible [7] as evidenced by Lloyd Braun. This condition is	257
215	(Episode 162, 1997) introduces Lou Filerman, a new	also referred to as <i>de Clerambault's syndrome</i> to emphasize its	258
216	co-worker of Elaine, who comes to believe he has bad	occurrence in different disorders such as major depressive	259
217	breath. Lou characterizes this disorder in that he's male,	disorder, a diagnosis established in Braun in "The Non-Fat	260
218	single, without past psychiatric treatment, and young	Yogurt" (Episode 71, 1993).	261
219	(mean age of 25 years helps differentiate from other	Following hospital discharge, Lloyd helps the Alex	262
220	forms of somatic delusions) [7]. Elaine identifies Lou	Theatre gain historical status in "The Gum." At this	263
221	as "a sidler" because he silently sneaks up on people.	time, Braun's presentation is characteristic; he has a	264
222	Given several misunderstandings occurring at work that	low-level job, is socially withdrawn, and single with	265
223	result from sidling, Elaine experiences significant	few sexual contacts [7]. Braun meets Elaine, and pro-	266
		ceeds to interpret her neutral actions as evidence that	267
		she is still in love with him, "She was practically	268
		undressing in front of me at the theatre" (http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/).	269
		His interactions with Elaine also	270
		demonstrate <i>paradoxical conduct</i> when he interprets	271
		her persistent rebuffs as secret affirmations of her love.	272

273 Episode 153 (1997): The Yada Yada & Persecutory Type
 274 Along with jealousy-type, persecutory delusions are frequent-
 275 ly encountered by psychiatrists. The persecutory theme that an
 276 individual is being mistreated in some way is portrayed by Dr.
 277 Tim Whatley, “dentist to the stars.” Before he dates Elaine in
 278 “The Label Maker” (Episode 98, 1995), Whatley irks Jerry
 279 Seinfeld by converting to Judaism “just for the jokes” in “The
 280 Yada Yada.” Jerry’s indignation causes Whatley to complain
 281 that Jerry has it in for him because he’s a dentist. Whatley’s
 282 ideas of persecution (Jerry is accused of being an “anti-
 283 dentite”) are systematically elaborated on. This is consistent
 284 with patients afflicted with Delusional Disorder, Persecutory
 285 type who characteristically demonstrate remarkable logic and
 286 clarity [7].
 287

288 **Results**

289 Final clerkship grades in psychiatry are calculated from clin-
 290 ical performance, achievement on the OSCE and the final
 291 NBME (SHELF) exam. At the SHELF exam, students are
 292 required to complete surveys to provide anonymous feedback
 293 on the clerkship. Survey results are reviewed by the Dean of
 294 Education and sent to the departmental chairs for distribution
 295 to teaching faculty. As part of the routine evaluations, students
 296 are asked to answer six questions along a Likert scale ranging
 297 from Highly Agree [5] to Highly Disagree [1]. While psychi-
 298 atry SHELF scores have not significantly changed since the
 299 implementation of Psy-feld, students’ feedback has been over-
 300 whelmingly positive (Fig. 1). A total of 99 of 104 students
 301 completed surveys on Psy-feld from July 1, 2011 to March 28,
 302 2014. Survey scores ranged from 4.33 (*I feel prepared to take*
 303 *the NBME at the end of my clerkship*) to 4.92 (*The method of*

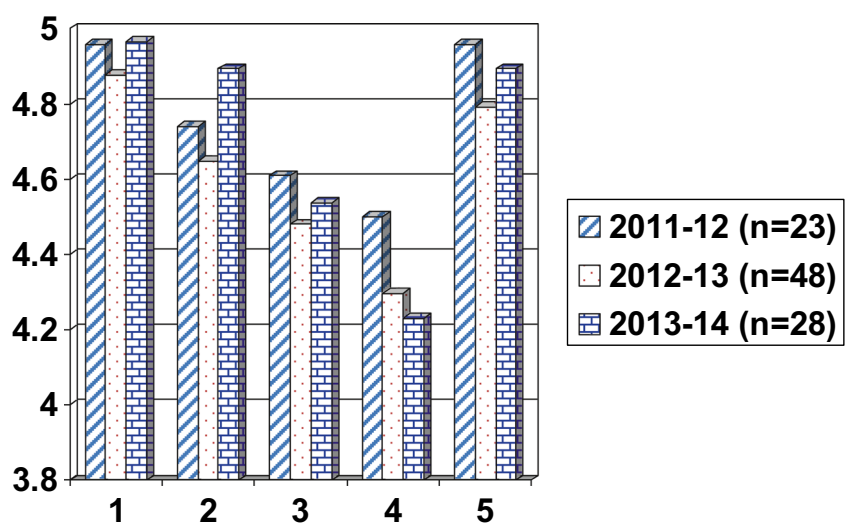
teaching enhanced my learning). Variables such as gender and
 304 desire to pursue a career in psychiatry did not influence
 305 outcomes.
 306

Conclusions

307
 308 Course directors in psychiatry are challenged with the objec-
 309 tive to teach principles germane to mental illness in an inno-
 310 vative way so as to lead to retention of material. The Delu-
 311 sional Disorders present an opportunity to teach the salient
 312 characteristics of different subtypes through the use of media
 313 such as the situational comedy, Seinfeld. On the Consultation-
 314 Liaison service at Rutgers-Robert Wood Johnson Medical
 315 School, we review episodes portraying peripheral or minor
 316 characters that allow for discussion of subplots that demon-
 317 strate the central themes [6] of Delusional Disorder. Since the
 318 data base for Psy-feld are continually updated, the didactic is
 319 feasible and well-received.

320 Nonetheless, there are several limitations that necessitate
 321 comments. First, the student surveys were limited in their
 322 being satisfaction surveys only. While learning outcomes of
 323 the didactic were not directly measured, students’ knowledge
 324 base of psychopathology is assessed by the SHELF exam. The
 325 correlation between students’ satisfaction with our innovative
 326 didactic and their performance on the SHELF exam was not
 327 explored and will be a focus of future research. Additionally,
 328 pre- and post-testing of Delusional Disorder knowledge was
 329 not conducted and would further clarify the didactic’s effec-
 330 tiveness. The effect of the binary variable of having watched/
 331 not watched the episode could be addressed in the post-test.
 332 Another potential limitation of Psy-feld is access to television.
 333 Anecdotally, students who did not own televisions watched
 334 the sitcom at peers’ residences. Despite limitations of access,
 335 responses from student surveys were strongly favorable, and

Fig. 1 Students’ responses to end-of-the-clerkship evaluations. Questionnaire items (ranked on a Likert scale from 1 to 5). 1 The teaching sessions on the C/L service were of high quality. 2 The method teaching through the use of art, literature, and media enhanced my learning. 3 I prefer this method of teaching to more traditional approaches. 4 I feel prepared to take the NBME exam at the end of my clerkship. 5 The method of teaching through the use of art, literature, and media was enjoyable



336 did not identify any variables—including the show’s original
 337 air date, time investment, or brand of comedy—adversely
 338 effecting students’ participation and experience (<http://www.seinfeldscripts.com/>).
 339
 340 Psy-feld is a novel didactic at Rutgers-RWJMS that incor-
 341 porates pop culture into teaching fundamental principles of
 342 psychopathology. The didactic addresses the core competency
 343 of Medical Knowledge, and is well-received by teaching
 344 faculty and students.

345
 346
 347
 348
 349 **Implications for Educators**

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

360
 361
 362

363
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 366

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