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A Review of the Impact of Age and Sex on the Diagnosis of ADHD

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to review the literature on the diagnosis of ADHD. Although attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has been around for over 100 years, there are often difficulties in diagnosing children who have this disorder. Even though ADHD can affect all types of people, research into ADHD has largely been focused on symptoms seen primarily in young boys. This, it will be argued, has created a “stereotype” of those who have ADHD which precludes many with this disorder from being diagnosed. This inequality in the attention given to boys rather than girls or adults is because, in most cases, it is only the boys that are hyperactive. The hyperactive and combined types of ADHD are easily noticeable compared to the inattentive type. Girls suffering from the inattentive type of ADHD typically carry these symptoms undiagnosed into adulthood, potentially resulting in negative consequences. Similarly, adults that have missed diagnosis as a child can have lingering effects. In the last decade, more has been done to adequately diagnose and treat all children and adults. Accurate diagnosis of ADHD is critical to treating those who have it.

Materials and Methods

ADHD, and more specifically the diagnosis of girls and adults, was researched by reading professional articles and online sources. Six articles were selected based on their relevance. These were obtained using PsycArticles, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Key words used in the search included “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder,” “ADHD,” “Diagnosis,” “Age,” “Adults,” “Gender Bias,” and “Females.”

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Results

During the search for literature, it was clear that there was an imbalance between published works studying boys and those studying girls or adults. This is indicative of how ADHD is viewed in those subpopulations. Boys are two to nine times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than girls. This has been attributed to the difference in symptomatology between the sexes. Girls are more likely to exhibit the inattentive subtype of ADHD and are more likely to experience internalizing issues than boys. Evidence of knowledgeable informants (parents, teachers, physicians) comparing females to their male classmates rather than other females without symptoms has also led to a disproportionate number of referrals given to boys rather than girls. Girls are also much less likely to be treated using medication for ADHD (1,5,6). Lack of diagnosis and treatment in children causes symptoms to linger into adulthood. Unfortunately, there is a lack of longitudinal research studying children with the disorder into adulthood. Prevalence of the disorder in adults falls to 2%-3% compared to around 7% in children. Symptoms tend to gradually decrease with age, but many children diagnosed with ADHD report having impactful symptoms as adults. These symptoms tend to be more inattentive than hyperactive, which could explain why diagnosis in adults is uncommon. Symptoms of ADHD in adults can also negatively impact an adult’s relationships, finances, and professional success. Adults are also less likely to be treated than a child. This could potentially be attributed to the increased presence of comorbidities in adults including anxiety and depressive disorders (2,3,4).

Conclusion

While girls and adults present with ADHD symptoms, the less obvious nature of these symptoms has led to an inequality of focus both in research and in clinical settings. More work needs to be done to draw attention to this issue and to refine the process in which ADHD is diagnosed. This could be accomplished by raising awareness in researchers and knowledgeable informants. Although focus has increased in the last two decades, there still needs to be more emphasis placed on accurately diagnosing and treating ADHD in people of all genders and ages.

Variable	Female	Male
Predominant Subtype	Inattentive	Hyperactive, Impulsive
Predominant Symptoms	Internalizing	Externalizing
Common Comorbidities	Anxiety Disorders, Major Depressive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder	Major Depressive Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Substance Use Disorders
Other	Perception that academic problems, inattention, and feelings of depression are more common, Promiscuous behavior more common, Higher self-ratings of problems, Greater incidence of low self-esteem, Difficulty with peer relationships	Perception that classroom disruption is more common, Risky driving more common

Table 1: Differences in ADHD Presentation Between Genders

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