

Everyone knows what attention is, because we use it daily in a variety of contexts; yet, cognitive research reveals that attention is actually a complex and poorly understood construct. In the present study, we highlighted this paradox by examining the relation between participants' self-reported attention skills and individual differences in measured attention-task performance. Undergraduate volunteers (N=263) completed a battery of computer-based assessments designed to measure performance across factors or dimensions of attention. These participants also completed two self-report questionnaires developed for this study: a Likert-scale survey of attention skills (e.g., "I am generally good at concentrating"), and a yes/no list of ADHD symptoms (e.g., "I do not seem to listen to what is being said to me"). Individual differences were observed in the capacity to focus, shift, and sustain attention, as reflected by performance on the computerized tasks. Individual differences were also observed on the two self-report instruments; however, participants' self-reported attention skills were poorly correlated with their actual attention-task performance. Only a few significant correlations were observed between latent variables produced by factor analysis of the questionnaires and task-directed attention skills, and even those reliable correlations were modest (i.e., accounting for about 5% of the variance). That is, participants who rated themselves highest in attention did not perform differently than those who rated themselves as worst. A significant effect of race was found in the survey data. Self-reports of attention were significantly lower for African American/Black students than for Caucasian/White participants; however, no race (or gender) differences were observed in attention-task performance. These data suggest that our impressions of attention strengths and failures may be inaccurate, particularly for some minority students who seemed systematically to under-estimate their capacity for attention. Although the present data do not indicate why this would be the case, we offer some speculative interpretations that could be tested in further research.

Attention! Individual and Racial Differences in Self-Reported and Measured Attention