Reported Prevalence of Attentional Difficulties in a General Sample of College Students

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The present study investigated the self-reported prevalence of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms in 770 college students using the Adult Rating Scale and the Wender Utah Rating Scale. Psychometric properties of these scales were explored. The study also investigated the performance of students with ADHD symptoms, relative to students without ADHD symptoms, on a battery of neuropsychological tasks. Results revealed that 7 and 8% of the students reported significant symptoms (i.e., 1.5 SD above the mean) on the Adult Rating Scale and the Wender Utah Rating Scale, respectively, and 2.5% reported significant symptoms on both the Adult Rating Scale and the Wender Utah Rating Scale. Using more stringent criteria (two standard deviations), fewer (i.e., 4, 3.8%, and 0.5%) subjects reported significant symptoms associated with ADHD. Between-group differences were found on one of the neuropsychological tasks. The construct validity of the rating scales was supported. Limitations and implications for future research are advanced.

KEY WORDS: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms; college students; executive functioning; self-report.

INTRODUCTION

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), characterized by an inability to sustain attention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity (American Psy-
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...ological Association, 1987), was previously believed to be a disorder of childhood, with symptoms disappearing with the onset of puberty (Munoz-Millan & Casteel, 1989). Recent studies, however, suggest that the majority of children with ADHD continue to exhibit ADHD symptoms throughout adolescence and possibly adulthood, and are often beset with academic and social difficulties (Barkley, Fischer, Edelbrok, & Smallish, 1990; Klein & Mannuzza, 1991; Mannuzza, Klein, Malloy, Giampino, & Addalli, 1991; Weiss & Hechtman, 1986). Adolescents with ADHD, for example, have been found to be at greater risk for low academic achievement, grade retention, substance abuse, peer rejection, social skill deficits and antisocial behavior (Barkley, Fischer, Edelbrok, & Smallish, 1990; Fischer, Barkley, Fletcher, & Smallish, 1993; Weiss, Hechtman, & Perlman, 1978). During young adulthood, studies suggest that individuals with ADHD are frequently involved in theft and pranks, verbal abuse toward others, frequent changes in employment, and many are diagnosed as having Antisocial Personality Disorder (Mannuzza, Klein, Bessler, Malloy, & LaPadula, 1993).

In addition to social-behavioral difficulties, research suggests that children and adolescents with ADHD may have neuropsychological deficits, particularly in the area of frontal lobe functioning. Specifically, children with ADHD have been found to perform poorly, relative to controls, on executive function tasks, (i.e., tasks that require planning, problem solving, sustained effort, and impulse control) which are believed to be subserved by the frontal lobes (Luria, 1966). Chelune, Ferguson, Koon, and Dickey (1986), for example, found that children with ADHD performed poorly relative to non-ADHD children on the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST) and Progressive Figures. Similar results were found by Boucagnani and Jones (1989), who investigated the performance of children with ADHD and controls on the WCST, Trail Making Test, and Stroop Test. Research by Parry (1973), Gorenstein, Mammanto, and Sandy (1989), and Shue and Douglas (1989) reported differences between children with ADHD and controls on neuropsychological tasks thought to measure frontal lobe functioning. A number of studies, however, have not found differences between children with and without ADHD on frontal lobe tasks. Loge, Statton, and Beatty (1990), for example, compared the performance of controls and children with ADHD on the WCST, a Continuous Performance Test (CPT), and additional neuropsychological measures and found no difference between groups. Similar null results were reported by Cohen, Weiss, and Minde (1972) and Carlson, Lahey, and Neeper (1986) using the Stroop Test. Thus, it remains equivocal whether neuropsychological deficits are characteristic of children and adolescents with ADHD, and whether the presence or absence of deficits is task specific.