A Thematic Analysis of Diverse University Student Feelings and Communication about ADHD Diagnosis with Campus Community

Mikaela Alderite, B.S., Kevin Akakpo, Naftali Zeilinger, B.S., Henry Bauman, B.S., & Erin Girio-Herrera, Ph.D.

Introduction

- ADHD is one of the most prevalent disorders in the college population and these students encounter increased demands for self-management as they transition from high school to adulthood (DuPaul et al., 2011; Lagadé-Leblanc et al., 2022).
- College students with ADHD are more susceptible to academic impairments, increased dropout rates, unsuccessful relationships, and poor communication skills in college (Perry & Franklin, 2006).
- Previous research shows students feel shame as a result of societal feelings about ADHD and this may limit their self-advocacy with professors (Stamp et al., 2014; Meaux et al., 2009; McKague et al., 2015).
- Although previous research explored how college students perceive their ADHD diagnosis and its impact on their college experience (Perry & Franklin, 2006; Stamp et al., 2014), little research has examined how they feel about their ADHD and communication about the diagnosis. Previous literature has been constrained by small sample sizes and ethnically homogeneous participants.
- This study will examine a diverse sample of college students with ADHD and their feelings and communication with faculty and staff, all students, and students with ADHD about their ADHD. Insight from the results can inform interventions designed to improve the experiences of college students with ADHD.

Analytical Plan

- **Transcription:** Undergraduate research students transcribed the interviews verbatim by hand typing them into a Microsoft Word document.
- **Coding:** Two undergraduates and the PI served as a coding team and are diverse across identities. Students participated in a 3-hour training led by Dr. Girio-Herrera (PI and supervisor). All coders read each interview and wrote analytical notes for the whole transcript as well as the feelings and communication questions. Members implemented line-by-line coding and then met to share analytical notes, discuss codes until all 3 coders agreed, and created a coding framework. The coding framework was collapsed into a larger category of codes and the team individually and collectively identified themes until all 3 met agreement.

Method

- **Participants:** Demographic Measure: This measure obtained information on demographic identities, education, medication, and use of resources used on campus.
- **Methods:** Demographic Results for this poster are based on an analysis of 50 students. Students were majority men (80%), and non-binary (20%) who identified as White (60%), Black/African American (20%), American Indian or Alaska Native (10%), Asian (2%), or Hispanic or Latino (2%). Students and Juniors (20%), Sophomores (10%), and Seniors (5%) were identified. The sample of students ranged from 18-26 years old (M = 21.6; SD = 2.56).
- **Measures:** Demographic Measure: This measure obtained information on demographic identities, education, medication, and use of resources used on campus.
- **Semi-Structured Interview:** This interview was developed for the needs assessment and contained 50 questions on the transition to college, feelings, and communication about ADHD. Support for ADHD and campus services used for ADHD, suggestions for campus improvement, and thoughts on potential interventions. Questions in the feelings and communication section were examined for the current study.
- **Procedures:** A needs assessment of students with ADHD at a 4-year public institution was conducted by undergraduate students taking a psychology service-learning course. The Needs Assessment included focus groups with faculty, staff, and students, as well as individual interviews with students with ADHD, recruited via campus flyers. Psychology students conducted the interviews following training from their course supervisor. Students consented to the interview, completed measures, and were given a gift of TU items.

Discussion

- **How Do Students with ADHD Feel?**
  - **Envious:** People with ADHD feel they have done less on campus than their peers.
  - **Fear Judgement:** People with ADHD worry about potential judgment from faculty and staff.
  - **Insecure:** People with ADHD feel insecure about their ADHD diagnosis.
  - **Misunderstood:** People with ADHD feel they are misunderstood.

- **Themes Derived from Qualitative Analysis**
  - **Avoidance of Negative Feelings:** When asked how they felt about ADHD, students often did not use feeling words and a pattern of minimization and avoidance occurred, as well as mostly reporting negative experiences and challenges.
  - **Fear:** Students did not explicitly state fear but did not share to avoid others’ reactions such as feeling not believed or diagnosis disregarded, judgment, or negative comparisons by professors or other students. Students reported these experiences occurred in response to previous sharing.
  - **Academic Insecurity Hinders Sharing and Help-Seeking:** Students reported frustration with working harder and longer than peers and this comparison often led to embarrassment or isolation that prevented sharing with others, studying with others, or asking for help.
  - **Sharing is Conditional:** The majority do share with faculty/staff and students; however, students were selective with whom and what they shared.
  - **Reactive Sharing:** Sharing their diagnosis or accommodations was typically utility driven to meet a need or in response to class discussions or questions and observations from friends.
  - **Being Understood and Misunderstood:** Although students reported mostly positive responses to sharing, they felt misunderstood and typically only understood by other students with ADHD.
  - **University Accommodations Versus ADHD:** The decision to share with faculty or staff was largely influenced by whether students had University Accommodations. Sharing was limited in part due to fear of their needs or disorder would be invalidated without proper University documentation. Students initially tended to share only accommodations and via email, noting that this does not reveal an actual diagnosis of ADHD.
  - **See Me Not ADHD:** Sharing was prevented by student desire for faculty to see their performance, not their ADHD. Similarly, students reported wanting friends who would see them and not their ADHD and not respond “weirdly” to the ADHD.
  - **Benefits to Sharing:** Sharing about ADHD led to feelings of comfort, feeling less alone, sharing experiences, and trying new ADHD management strategies. Others benefited with students with ADHD shared as it resulted in evaluation and disorder identification in others.

References


Contact Info

Email Dr. Erin Girio-Herrera at egirioherrera@towson.edu