Psychiatric and Developmental Disorders

Symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) emerge during childhood and consist of two clusters (i.e., inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity). While the disorder was once thought to remit by adolescence, more recent research has demonstrated that symptoms continue into adulthood for a substantial portion of cases (Barkley, 2006). Considerably less is known about the manifestation of ADHD during early adulthood. Even less is known about how those with the disorder function within a college setting.

It is well understood that children with ADHD are negatively impacted in their academic functioning. They earn poorer grades and generally demonstrate poorer academic performance (Barkley, DuPaul, & McMurray, 1990). The extent to which such academic impairments persist among young adult college students with ADHD remains an area of open inquiry.

The purpose of this study was to assess the nature and extent to which college students reporting symptoms of ADHD experience academic difficulties, in comparison to a normal control group. It was expected that the diagnostic group would demonstrate a relatively broad pattern of academic difficulties across multiple indicators. It was specifically hypothesized that college students with symptoms of ADHD would exhibit poorer academic performance. They were also expected to experience functional academic difficulties with greater frequency (e.g., failing courses, dropping courses, etc.). Finally, they were expected to exhibit a pattern of greater negative sentiment about their academic experience in college.

**Method**

**Participants**
- 707 college students (247 men, 460 women).
- Age: 18 to 24 years ($M = 19.07, SD = 1.25$).
- Recruited from among the general student population.

**Diagnostic Assessment**

- **Current Symptoms Scale** (CSS; Barkley & Murphy, 2006).
- Based on normative data and author recommendations, those scoring greater than 1.5 SD above the mean on ADHD symptom scales were classified as having "likely ADHD." Those scoring at or below the mean were classified as "normal control." Others were excluded.
- Final diagnostic groups:
  - Likely ADHD ($n = 53$).
  - Normal Control ($n = 345$).

**Academic Assessment**
- Participants completed survey items assessing functional academic functioning along key dimensions.
  - GPA (reported on a 4.00 scale).
  - Survey items, rated on a five-point Likert scale ($1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree), indicating the following:
    - Satisfaction with current academic performance.
    - Worry about academic performance.
    - Tendency to "struggle" with college work.
    - Confidence in completing their academic program.
- Survey items, answered on a "Yes / No" basis, indicating any history of the following, during college:
  - Current or past academic probation.
  - Ever failed a course.
  - Ever dropped a course.
  - Ever received academic tutoring.

**Results**

A series of one-way ANOVAs indicated that, compared to the normal control group, students with ADHD symptoms had lower GPAs. The likely ADHD group also reported lower satisfaction with their academic performance, greater worry about their academic performance, and experienced academic work as a greater "struggle."

**Academic Functioning by Diagnostic Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Dimension</th>
<th>Likely ADHD</th>
<th>Normal Control</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current GPA</td>
<td>2.93 (0.52)</td>
<td>3.18 (0.47)</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied w/ current academic performance</td>
<td>2.85 (1.20)</td>
<td>3.35 (1.12)</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry about academic performance</td>
<td>3.98 (0.97)</td>
<td>3.31 (1.18)</td>
<td>15.58</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College is a struggle, academically</td>
<td>3.26 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.66 (0.91)</td>
<td>19.84</td>
<td>.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A series of chi-square analyses were conducted to assess differences in the frequencies of functional academic problems between the clinical and comparison groups. Results indicated that students with ongoing symptoms of ADHD were more likely to have failed a course or dropped a course. They were also more likely to have received academic tutoring or student disability services (e.g., classroom or testing accommodations).

**Discussion**

The current set of results demonstrates that symptoms of ADHD persisting into young adulthood likely have a substantial and deleterious impact on academic functioning, as broadly assessed by multiple indicators. In addition to poorer academic performance, those with continuing ADHD symptomatology also tend to experience functional academic difficulties with the potential for meaningful ramifications for the individual. They also evidence a pattern of more negative sentiment regarding their own academic performance. While that indicates a degree of insight into their own difficulties, such negative sentiment may also be associated with greater negative affect and maladjustment.

The tendency for children with ADHD to demonstrate academic difficulties is well established (Barkley, 2006). The current results are not only consistent with that existing literature but also extend those findings to young adults with ongoing symptoms of ADHD. Hence, childhood academic difficulties associated with ADHD likely persist well into young adulthood.

**References**

