Attributions of Adolescents with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for their Problem Behaviors and Disorder

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the behaviors and characteristics that adolescents with and without ADHD view as problematic for themselves and the attributions they make for their self-identified most problematic behavior on dimensions of controllability, pervasiveness, stigmatization, and locus of causality. The attributes of adolescents with ADHD and their most problematic behavior were also compared to their attributions for ADHD as a disorder. Participants included 34 male adolescents (17 ADHD, 17 Comparison) 13-17 years of age. Adolescents with ADHD reported having more problematic behaviors, namely symptoms of inattention and academic difficulties, than adolescents without ADHD. Adolescents with ADHD viewed their problematic behavior as more stigmatizing, particularly to teachers and peers, than adolescents without ADHD. Adolescents with ADHD perceived their most problematic behavior as more stigmatizing in relation to their parents than their disorder. Implications for future research and clinical practice are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Stigmatization Means

Adolescents with ADHD: Patterns of pervasiveness, uncontrollability, and internal causes relative to their self-perceptions. *Weiner describes 4 types of attributions in his Attribution Theory:* 

- **Locus of Cause** = internal/external assignment of causes
- **Stigmatization** = events/behaviors viewed as undesirable by others
- **Pervasiveness** = events viewed as controllable/uncontrollable
- **Attribution Theory** = time stable situations

Attribution Research and ADHD

ADHD is a term used to describe individuals who exhibit developmentally inappropriate symptoms of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, in at least 2 settings.

Research indicates that children with ADHD hold stigmatizing, uncontrollable, and pervasive attributions for their problem behaviors (e.g., keeping mind on work) and hypersensitivity-impulsivity (e.g., inattention) relative to children without ADHD. Children with ADHD view their ADHD as a disorder that is more stigmatizing, uncontrollable, and pervasive relative to their problem behaviors. Children with ADHD are, therefore, at risk for facing low self-esteem and expectations for future behavioral difficulties.

CURRENT STUDY

What about Adolescents with ADHD?

**Objective 1:** Attributions for Problem Behavior vs. Disorder in ADHD Group

Between 50 and 80% of children with ADHD continue to meet diagnostic criteria for ADHD in adolescence and continue to encounter behavioral, emotional, social, and academic problems. The ADHD group to assess attributions for ADHD as a disorder.

Participants for the study were recruited through flyers & pamphlets distributed in the community, word of mouth, newspaper advertisements placed in a local newspaper, and from a list of participants from previous studies who agreed to be contacted for future research. Adolescents completed questionnaires in individual testing sessions at OISE/UT with a graduate student. Questionnaires were mailed to parents and teachers.

**RESULTS**

**Objective 1: Problem Behaviors of ADHD vs. Comparison Adolescents**

- Adolescents with ADHD (M = 25.94, SD = 8.53) endorsed more problem behaviors than the Alex Relative to Comparison Adolescents (M = 13.24, SD = 6.28, t(32) = 4.95, p < .01).

**Objective 2: Attributions for Most Problematic Behavior**

- Adolescents attributed more problems of attention & learning problems than Comparison adolescents, p < .05.

**DISCUSSION**

The pattern that emerged in the current investigation indicates that adolescents with ADHD do not view their problem behaviors as any more uncontrollable, pervasive, or internalized relative to Comparison youth. Adolescents with ADHD are primarily concerned about the stigmatizing aspects of their behaviors to teachers and peers, particularly for symptoms of inattention, and perceive these behaviors more as bothersome to their parents than their disorder. The attributional style of adolescents with ADHD in the present study differs considerably from the pervasive, uncontrollable, stigmatizing attributions of children with ADHD. With age, adolescents with ADHD may come to view their behaviors and ADHD as more within their control and less occurring in specific situations. This difference in attributional style could reflect more mature thinking patterns or better coping in adolescence. In sum, these findings suggest that adolescents with ADHD may be at less risk for facing low self-esteem negative self-concept, feelings of hopelessness, and expectations for future difficulties than children with ADHD.

Clinical implications of this research include identifying the problem behaviors of adolescents with ADHD during assessment phases of treatment in order to provide support for areas perceived as problematic. They may also benefit from attribution-focused therapy to help countering these attributions. Parents and teachers who may be necessary to help increase sensitivity to the feelings of young with ADHD.