

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Ethnic Minority Children

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Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a disorder that starts in childhood and with it comes hyperactivity, impulsivity, and high levels of inattention (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). Although ADHD occurs the same amount in African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic children, the ethnic minority children are underrepresented in ADHD diagnoses. This also means that there are fewer minority children in treatment for ADHD. Some believe that minority children are over-represented in this section of special education/mental health issues, but according to a longitudinal study done by Morgan et al. (2015), ethnic minority children are less likely to be diagnosed with any learning disability or mental health issue compared to their white peers. ADHD is underdiagnosed in ethnic minority children because of stigma, lack of awareness, discrimination, and socioeconomic barriers. These issues affect diagnoses because the stigma surrounding mental health and mental health help is high in minority communities. With this stigma comes a lack of understanding and awareness of these mental health issues that minorities might be facing. Ethnic minority children and their parents also face discrimination and racial bias in the medical field which also deters them from getting help or a proper diagnosis. Socioeconomic standing is also a barrier in the way to get quality mental health treatment because parents are not able to afford or have accessibility to quality programs for these concerns. The intent of this paper is to not generalize a specific racial group, but to inform others at the possibility that African Americans and Hispanics are being underdiagnosed with ADHD, and therefore are not getting the treatment they need.

Stigma

Turner et al. (2015) defines mental health stigma as the degree that individuals are worried or concerned about how themselves or others judge those with mental health issues or

those who seek mental health help. Mental health stigma is a huge problem, especially with minorities. Ethnic minority children (in particular African Americans and Hispanics) have the same rate of ADHD as Caucasian children but are less likely to receive treatment for it (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). Stigma plays a big role in these children not getting the treatment they need. Turner et al. (2017) discussed a study that was completed to measure parents' attitudes and stigma towards mental health treatment for mental health issues. It was found that African Americans had a negative attitude and more stigma when it came to mental health treatment. In European Americans, positive attitudes increased a likelihood of seeking services for mental health, but this was not the case for Hispanics or African Americans. Hispanics had a moderately positive attitude towards mental health services, but the stigma on seeking treatment was still present. These findings are consistent throughout studies, as these two minority groups have a greater fear of being judged by their social group of family and friends.

Affiliate stigma is what happens when people internalize stigma, for example a parent of a child with some mental illness avoiding social contact because of their feelings of shame (Mikami et al., 2015). Some parents avoid seeking help and treatment for their child because they feel that other parents make negative presumptions about their parenting. In these cases, sometimes parents of children with ADHD avoid treatment and the diagnosis all together because their shame turns to irritability with their child when they are exhibiting signs of ADHD. This can lead to parents suppressing the thoughts of diagnosis and responding to the child in a more harsh, authoritarian manner (Mikami et al., 2015). This also can lead them to trying to conceal or overcorrect their child's symptoms. Affiliate stigma can have many implications on children like behavioural issues, and issues with adults and rules (Mikami et al., 2015). However,

avoiding the diagnosis and creating affiliate stigma is quite different than having a lack of awareness of mental health issues like ADHD, which some minorities have.

Lack of Awareness of Mental Health Issues

Some minorities may not recognize their child's behaviour as something to be concerned about. Many parents have limited knowledge about ADHD, or have misconceptions about it, which makes them less likely to understand the causes or treatments, and less likely to link their behaviour issues and poor performance in school to ADHD (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). There is also a belief that the symptoms of ADHD, including inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, are temporary problems because of a phase that the children are going through based on many emotional circumstances (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). This could lead parents to increase strictness in their parenting or reach out to other community help. For example, African Americans are more likely to go to a church to talk to a pastor, while Hispanics are more likely to increase family time to try to fix their behaviour. Alvarado and Modesto-Lowe (2017) discussed a study that found that African parents discovering ADHD in their child prolong the initiation of treatment because they did not see the behaviour as something the child cannot control, but a behaviour that can be fixed. Hispanic families lack of awareness however it is greatly influenced by a language barrier, because the primary language of many Hispanic households is Spanish. This means that symptoms might not be communicated properly to parents by teachers or others around them (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). It might also be difficult to recognize ADHD in minority children because of the environment that they grow up in. For example, some think that the conduct problems that an ethnic minority child is displaying could be linked to neighbourhood factors depending on the child's living situation. Since African Americans and Hispanics face the highest poverty rates in the United States, the environment

that these children may grow up in could be a factor that parents and caregivers put the blame on. Despite popular belief, neighbourhood factors are not linked to a greater chance of ADHD (Moldavsky & Sayal, 2013). Ethnic minority parents may also believe that their child will not get the treatment or diagnosis that they deserve when they go to professionals for help. Teachers and clinicians may both unconsciously create a racial bias for the child's behaviour. This leads to discrimination in the classroom and also in the hospital.

Discrimination

Ethnic communities have a long history of racial discrimination in social, economic and education areas. A poll conducted to measure trust of the medical community showed that minorities believed that race could compromise the care provided for their children with ADHD. 36% of African American and 19% of Hispanic parents believed this, and also stated that the reason that their child was not getting the treatment and diagnosis they needed was because they were afraid that the label would negatively affect their child (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). These feelings of discrimination discourage ethnic minorities to use the health care system. Parents however may not be wrong that their child may not be treated the same as others with their diagnosis. Unconscious bias plays a big role in the underdiagnosis of ADHD because clinicians, psychiatrists or teachers may notice these behaviours in a child but diagnosis or associate it to a conduct disorder or disruptive behaviour disorder (Fadus et al., 2019). Unconscious biases are formed by past experiences and stereotypes, but the people who form unconscious biases are not aware that they are forming them. People may be antiracist and reject prejudice but unconsciously form beliefs that affect ethnic minority children in getting proper diagnoses and treatment. Fadus et al. (2019) suggests that clinicians often link behaviours of ADHD to behaviour disorders because they may unconsciously view ethnic minorities as more

disobedient or dangerous. These children who are wrongfully diagnosed are less likely to ever receive the proper medication or treatment, and the conduct disorder puts them at a greater risk for juvenile justice systems and failure in school (Fadus et al., 2019). Some minorities may not even get the chance to receive a diagnosis at all, because of the trouble they have to get to a proper doctor or psychiatrist.

Socioeconomic Barriers

A parent could recognize and acknowledge their child's behaviour, do research on it, understand what is going on, and even get input from educators about the next steps to take, but access to quality mental health care is far from reach in many minority families. African Americans and Hispanic people have some of the highest rates of poverty. Low socioeconomic status is connected to lack of access to health care. Many families are socioeconomically disadvantaged and have limited access to care simply because they cannot afford it. Lack of insurance and having to pay out-of-pocket can deter these families from seeking mental health help for their child (Alvarado & Modesto-Lowe, 2017). Socioeconomic barriers have connections in the other barriers with one being language and citizenship. With a language barrier it may be hard for people find high paying jobs, or jobs that provide insurance. On top of this without citizenship you are not able to receive insurance, which puts many immigrant families at risk (Young & Rabiner, 2015). Without a citizenship you are also not allowed to have a license. This adds transportation issues to the list of socioeconomic barriers. Hispanic parents are more likely to rate barriers that were related to socioeconomic status a bigger issue than the other barriers like discrimination or stigma (Young & Rabiner, 2015). Health care on its own presents these socioeconomic barriers, but mental health care has an even higher mountain to climb. Socioeconomic and cultural stigma are the two hardest barriers for ethnic minorities, and

they go hand in hand. Even if minorities had proper insurance and transportation to help them go get the mental health care they need for their child, stigma still could and most likely would be present. Parents could however ignore their stigma and try their best to get help for their child experiencing ADHD, but without proper insurance and with the high costs of care, it might just be out of reach for them.

Overcoming Barriers

These issues that children that are minorities face when it comes to mental health care and in particular, diagnoses for ADHD is something that can be overcome with the help of teachers, clinicians, psychiatrists and others. Getting these children the treatment and diagnosis they need can lead them to a better life. Untreated mental health issues and more specifically ADHD puts children at risk for greater problems in life such as substance abuse, education loss, other mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or suicide, and involvement in the justice system (Turner et al., 2015). For clinicians, it is important for them to understand cultural differences, so they know how to properly inform parents and caregivers of children with ADHD. With the proper knowledge of stigma and the alternative treatments that some parents use, clinicians are better able to create a treatment plan that can help parents overcome cultural misperceptions regarding treatment and the diagnosis (Moldavsky & Sayal, 2013). Parents who are able to reduce their stigma and mistrust in health care can then accept the use of behavioural and possibly medication treatments for their child with ADHD. Slobodin and Masalha (2020) suggest that it is equally important that teachers build strong relationships with parents and try at all costs to avoid bias and discrimination. They should report all their concerns to the parent with adequate explanations to try to help parents who might not understand ADHD. Another way to get ethnic minority children the help they need with ADHD and other mental health issues is

greater diversity in tools to help parents understand what they are dealing with. This means various surveys, self-reports and measures should be translated into different language to help parents whose first language is not English. Help seeking and problem recognition interventions are currently being used to help parents understand ADHD and other disorders that they would otherwise grant as problem behaviour or a phase. Alvarado and Modesto-Lowe (2016) state that focus and goal is to tear down stereotypes of ADHD in minorities to help these children live full productive lives. It starts with cultural recognition and helping parents understand help seeking and problem recognition.

Conclusion

The underdiagnosis of ADHD in ethnic minority children is a problem that extends to many issues. These children are underrepresented and therefore are not receiving adequate support that they need to be able to help them live their life. Diagnoses bring great joy and relief to people because they can feel like there is answer to what they are feeling is. A misunderstanding of the diagnoses in ethnic minority children leads people to believe that minority children are more likely to have conduct issues than ADHD, while their white peers are more likely to have an ADHD diagnosis than a conduct issue. This creates problems in stereotyping and racial bias, because the conclusion that is drawn is that all minority children are “bad” kids. When in reality there are many barriers that minority children face before they can come to a proper diagnosis. Cultural stigma, lack of awareness of ADHD, discrimination in health care and education, and socioeconomic factors all play a huge roll in the lack of diagnoses for these children. The effects of this are greater chances of these children being misdiagnosed, which leads to them having a greater chance of dropping out of school, entering the criminal justice system, and developing more severe mental health issues. Overcoming these barriers are

important to the children and society as a whole. It starts with the professionals who can put effort into educating parents and caregivers, developing intervention plans for parents of children who are a minority, creating better access to these mental health services, and helping people understand the importance of seeking help and how to properly recognize behaviour that may be linked to some disorder that can be treated. It is believed that the proper amount of diagnoses of ADHD and other mental health issues could save the lives of many minority children who otherwise could live a very difficult life.

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