Sluggish Cognitive Tempo Symptoms Contribute to Heterogeneity in Adult Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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Abstract

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) persists into adulthood in over 50% of cases, although its associated symptom profiles, comorbid problems, and neuropsychological deficits change substantially across development. Sluggish cognitive tempo (SCT) symptoms may contribute to associations between ADHD and comorbid problems and may partially explain the substantial heterogeneity observed in its correlates. 349 adults aged 18–38 years (M = 23.2, SD = 4.5, 54.7% male, 61.03% with ADHD) completed a multi-informant diagnostic procedure and a comprehensive neuropsychological battery. Adults with ADHD (n = 213) were retained for analyses. Latent class analyses (LCA) revealed three profiles of SCT symptoms among those with ADHD, which we classified as minimal, moderate, or severe SCT. Multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) revealed significant differences among these profiles, which remained when controlling for persistence of ADHD symptoms and sex. In general, adults with ADHD combined with SCT symptoms (moderate and severe) had significantly more symptoms of anxiety, depression, and persistent inattention, and had more severe professional and relational impairment compared to ADHD adults without SCT. Compared to those with moderate or minimal SCT symptoms, the severe SCT group had the most symptoms of depression and internalizing disorders, and the most impairment in the domain of daily responsibility. No significant differences based on externalizing symptoms emerged when controlling for sex and persistence of inattention symptoms, suggesting the moderate and severe SCT groups do not simply reflect more symptoms. Moreover, follow-up mediation analyses revealed that SCT might at least partially explain the heterogeneity in ADHD. Findings have implications for refinement of etiological conceptualization, assessment methods, and intervention strategies.