

Hyperactive Around the World? The History of ADHD in Global Perspective.

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Abstract

A recent study has claimed that the global rate of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is 5.29%. Any variation in such rates in specific studies, argue the authors, was due to methodological problems, rather than differences in the actual distribution of ADHD. Such reports strengthen the flawed notion that ADHD is a universal and essential disorder, found in all human populations across time and place. While it is true that the concept of ADHD has spread from the USA, where it emerged during the late 1950s, to most corners of the globe, such superficial pronouncements mask profound differences in how ADHD has been interpreted in different countries and regions. In this paper, I compare ADHD's emergence in Canada, the UK, Scandinavia, China and India, arguing that, while ADHD can be considered a global phenomenon, behavioural and educational imperfections remain very much a product of local historical, cultural and political factors.