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CONFIRMATORY BIAS IN
THE DIAGNOSIS OF ADHD.

An Exploratory Study and Survey of New Zealand
Clinicians' Protocols & Practices in the Diagnosis of
Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

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2000
Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a heterogeneous syndrome of childhood, with primary symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. In recent years, numbers of children diagnosed with ADHD have increased. While many factors may be associated with this increase, one possibility is increased false positive diagnoses due to confirmatory bias (CB) in the diagnostican. CB occurs when a clinician pays attention to positive symptoms with disregard of disconfirmatory symptoms. The present study used a quasi-experimental approach to investigate whether CB was present in the diagnosis of ADHD. Diagnostic decision making was examined in three hypothetical case studies where the ratio of positive to negative ADHD symptoms varied. Results demonstrated CB in the diagnosis of ADHD for many participants. Forty-three percent of clinicians gave no indication of considering disconfirmatory symptoms. Additionally, for all symptoms but one, more attention was paid when they were positive rather than negative. Gaining knowledge from psychological literature and completing an internship increased the likelihood of considering disconfirmatory data. CB was related to clinicians' real-world belief of ADHD prevalence, although this was limited to a statistical trend. The majority of clinicians gave a tentative ADHD diagnosis for all case studies. For clear (i.e. not tentative) diagnoses, clinicians who demonstrated CB were significantly more likely to give a positive diagnosis than a negative diagnosis, whether or not this diagnosis was correct. Results suggest possible misdiagnosis of ADHD in some cases, with concerns of this study being support for the potential of overdiagnosis as a function of CB. Some additional hints of underdiagnosis by a few clinicians merit further research, with the phenomenon of a possible disconfirmatory bias raised and discussed. In addition, clinicians were surveyed regarding ADHD assessment and treatment in actual practice. Clinicians indicated using an average of 7 assessment steps, with school information, parent or family interview, and rating scales being the most popular tools. Clinicians who took disconfirmatory data into account used more assessment steps in actual practice than the CB group. There was a mean of 4 treatment options listed, with the most utilised being medication and
behavioural treatment. Findings are limited by the survey-based, correlational nature of the study. The ability to generalise findings to actual practice is considered and discussed.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the help and support received for this research from the following people:

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Kevin Ronan, for his support, expertise, enthusiasm and encouragement.

To those clinicians who took the time and effort to participate.

To Dr Claire Budge, for advice regarding research design and statistics.

To Professor Nigel Long (Head of School) of the School of Psychology, Massey University, for his support of this project by making the necessary funding available.

To Dr Amanda Mitchell, for medical consultancy.

To Robyn Girling-Butcher, for educational consultation, resources, assistance and support.

To Peter Pratt & Dr Pat Tuohy, Medsafe, for their helpfulness, interest, and time spared.

To Dr John Podd, for consultation and assistance with information on statistical power.

To Greg Waite (Medical Council), Olina Carter (NZCCP), & Jill Blomfield (NZPS), for the provision of contact data.

To pilot study participants - Susan Watson, Cheryl Woolley, Malcolm Johnson, Dr. Claire Budge, Dr. Llew Richards-Ward, Dr Donald Budge, Christine Murphy, Jo Taylor, John Barclay, Denise Kingi, Nick Lascelles, Nik Kazantzis, Liz Chambers, Duncan Babbage, & Caryl Huzzif - for feedback received.

To the friends who helped along the way – especially Denise, Liz, Nick, Robyn & Tricia – with grateful thanks for everything.

To Dean, for clarifying, challenging, supporting, arguing (!), and being there. Words just aren’t enough.

To my children - especially Philippa and James - for living with me through all this, and for their love and support generally through my many years of academic study.

And to Danny, for helping me to be all that I am. And because it isn’t right without you.
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