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Cognitive and behavioural predictors of adolescents' communicative perspective-taking and social relationships



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ABSTRACT

Given the pivotal role that social interactions play for adolescents' well-being, understanding the factors that influence communication is key. The present study examined relations between adolescents' communicative perspective-taking, executive function skills, and ADHD traits and explored the role communicative perspective-taking plays in peer relations. Data was collected from a community sample of 15 to 19-years-olds ($N = 46$) in Waterloo, Canada. Two communicative perspective-taking tasks required participants to infer speakers' communicative intentions. A battery of tasks assessed adolescents' working memory and inhibitory control. Elevated ADHD traits were associated with weaker working memory, inhibitory control, and communicative perspective-taking. Working memory was the strongest predictor of communicative perspective-taking. Highlighting the importance of communicative perspective-taking for social interactions, adolescents with weaker skills in this area reported worse peer relations. Findings underscore the importance of communicative perspective-taking for adolescents' social relations and have relevance for understanding the social difficulties faced by adolescents with elevated ADHD traits.

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Adolescents' social relationships play a crucial role in their psychological well-being (Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Hay & Ashman, 2003; Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2006; Sarkova et al., 2014; Vernberg, 1990). Thus, difficulties with socio-communicative skills may be particularly detrimental within this developmental stage. The present study examined adolescents' ability to successfully decipher communicative intentions, specifically, whether executive functioning and behavioural traits predicted ability in this area and whether this skill related to social relations with peers.

Effective interactions require that conversational partners appreciate each other's perspective during the production and comprehension of utterances (i.e., communicative perspective-taking). Within our language system the same utterance can give rise to different meanings depending on a speaker's intentions, which necessitates that listeners reason about speakers' perspectives to successfully interpret messages. For example, if someone said, "Nice job!" after a presentation, you could use his cues (e.g., facial expression, tone of voice) to determine whether he was intending to be sarcastic or sincere. Though communicative perspective-taking can appear effortless, it is a complex process that requires conversational partners to rapidly manage the flow of information while simultaneously tracking social, linguistic, and contextual information (e.g.,

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What does the other person know? What can they see? What verbal/nonverbal cues are they providing? What is happening in the current situation? Etc.). Thus, it is proposed that successful use of a conversational partner's perspective to guide communicative behaviour requires the support of executive functions (Nilsen & Fecica, 2011), referring to a set of higher-order cognitive skills (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, planning), which aid in monitoring control of thought and action and facilitate goal-directed behaviour (Burgess, 1997; Carlson, 2005; Miyake et al., 2000; Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996).

Several components of executive functions may facilitate individuals' ability to utilize information about their conversational partner's perspective during communicative exchanges. For instance, inhibitory control may allow for an individual to suppress his/her own perspective to attend to the perspective of a communicative partner. Working memory may allow for an interlocutor to hold a communicative partner's perspective in mind throughout a conversation. If the process of using a communicative partner's perspective during the act of comprehending or producing statements generates too much cognitive load, an individual may revert to a more 'egocentric' communication style. Supporting this premise, when the cognitive demands of a task are increased, speakers and listeners show less appreciation for communicative partners' perspectives (Lin, Keysar, & Epley, 2010; Roßnagel, 2000). Moreover, children and adults with weaker executive functioning (e.g., working memory and inhibitory control) have more difficulty using the perspective of a speaker to successfully interpret their statements (Apperly, Samson, & Humphreys, 2009; Lin et al., 2010; Nilsen & Graham, 2009).

The proposed importance of executive functions for communicative perspective-taking has implications for adolescents with weaker executive functioning, such as youth with elevated ADHD traits (Martel, Nikolas, & Nigg, 2007). Indeed, though not a diagnostic criteria of ADHD, communicative weaknesses are commonly found in children with a diagnosis of ADHD (Bignell & Cain, 2007; Bishop & Baird, 2001; Geurts, Broeders, & Nieuwland, 2010; Green, Johnson, & Bretherton, 2014; Leonard, Milich, & Lorch, 2011), including on tasks that require attending to the perspective of a conversational partner (Nilsen, Mangal, & MacDonald, 2013; Nilsen, Varghese, Xu, & Fecica, 2015). While the communicative abilities of adolescents with ADHD have not been examined extensively, Sibley and colleagues (Sibley, Evans, & Serpell, 2010) found that adolescents (with a mean age of 12 years) with ADHD were impaired in their comprehension of the social intentions of others, suggesting that using a partner's perspective during communicative exchanges may be difficult.

Past research provides a guide to understanding the interplay between the aforementioned cognitive, behavioural, and social characteristics; however, several questions remain unanswered. For example, while both executive functioning and communicative perspective-taking show continued development into adolescence (Anderson, Anderson, Northam, Jacobs, & Catroppa, 2001; Dumontheil, Apperly, & Blakemore, 2010; León-Carrión, García-Orza, & Pérez-Santamaría, 2004; Luna, Garver, Urban, Lazar, & Sweeney, 2004), their relation to each other is unknown. It is also not known whether adolescents with elevated ADHD traits are more challenged by communicative perspective-taking, and if so, whether this difficulty may be attributable to weaker executive functioning. Certainly, previous work has found associations between executive functioning and socio-communicative skill in children with ADHD (Bunford et al., 2015; Chiang & Gau, 2014; Kofler et al., 2011) and typically developing children (McQuade, Murray-Close, Shoulberg, & Hoza, 2013), but these studies have tended to rely on report measures which assess general social functioning as opposed to a specific skill and have not been examined in adolescent samples. Finally, while adolescents with elevated ADHD traits are rated as less socially competent in their interactions with peers (Bagwell, Molina, Pelham, & Hoza, 2001; Hinshaw, Owens, Sami, & Fargeon, 2006; Sibley et al., 2010), the degree to which difficulties relate to communicative perspective-taking is unclear.

Addressing these gaps, this study had two main aims. First, the degree to which aspects of executive functioning (working memory and inhibitory control) related to adolescents' communicative perspective-taking was assessed. We anticipated that adolescents with more proficient executive skills would be better able to decipher the communicative intentions of speakers. Moreover, the unique contributions of executive functioning and the behavioural correlates of executive difficulties, namely, ADHD traits, on communicative performance was examined. We were interested in determining whether adolescents with elevated ADHD traits showed less proficient communicative perspective-taking, with weaker executive functioning accounting for this proposed relation. Second, the degree to which communicative perspective-taking related to the general social competencies of adolescents, namely their prosocial behaviour and peer problems, was explored. We anticipated that adolescents with weaker communicative perspective-taking would report less successful social outcomes. Extending this inquiry, mediation analyses investigated whether communicative-perspective taking could account for the relation between ADHD traits and poor social outcomes that has been previously found (e.g., Hoza et al., 2005). Our investigation focused on adolescents given that few studies have focused on such relations in this developmental period. Moreover, it represents a time when social relationships with peers becomes increasingly important (Bryan, Puckett, & Newman, 2013, pp. 167–188) and social interactions, particularly with peers, impacts adolescents' psychological health (Corsano et al., 2006; Hay & Ashman, 2003; Parker et al., 2006; Sarkova et al., 2014; Vernberg, 1990).

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants were 46 adolescents, 15- to 19-years of age, who were recruited with flyers posted at community organizations in a small city in Canada (i.e., Waterloo, Ontario; $M_{\text{age}} = 17$ years; 1 month; $SD = 16$ months; 23 females). All adolescents were fluent in English and parental occupations reflected a middle to high socioeconomic status sample (See Table 1

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