

Reflections

Reflections on being an academic with ADHD

Byron Rangiwai

ABSTRACT

My reflections on being an adult with ADHD and an academic contribute insights into living with, and managing the everyday reality of, this neurodevelopmental disorder. Narrating my personal story from struggles to successes within the education system and on to academia, I believe there is a gap in the literature with regard to Māori perspectives on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

KEYWORDS

Adults with ADHD, impulsivity, executive dysfunction, self-awareness, Māori perspectives

Introduction

I was born in Gisborne and grew up in Murupara and Waiōhau. Throughout my schooling, I struggled academically, receiving low grades and comments from teachers such as “Byron is a bright child but needs to focus,” or “Byron is a delight to have in the classroom but needs to follow instructions more carefully.” Looking back, I now understand that one of the main reasons for my difficulties was due to undiagnosed ADHD, which stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by various levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity (Rosso et al., 2023; Scholz et al., 2023), often

accompanied by coexisting psychiatric disorders and functional difficulties (Biederman et al., 2006; Gjervan et al., 2012; Kooij et al., 2012). While previously believed to affect children primarily, recent studies indicate that many cases may persist into adulthood (Simon et al., 2009; Song et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023).

Undiagnosed ADHD significantly impacted my ability to concentrate and stay attentive in the classroom. I recall countless instances where even the slightest noise or visual distraction would divert my attention, making it difficult to understand the material. Those with ADHD commonly struggle with inattention (Ahlberg et al., 2023), finding it difficult to focus, stay organised, and complete tasks (Scholz et al., 2023; Worden & Tolin, 2023). Poor time management (Mette, 2023), forgetfulness (Worden & Tolin, 2023), and impulsivity are also prevalent (Rivas-Vazquez et al., 2023). My impulsivity often led me to act without thinking, resulting in rushed assignments, impetuous responses, and careless mistakes. For those with ADHD, impulsivity manifests as spontaneous decision-making (Chen et al., 2023), interrupting conversations (Majarwitz & Perumareddi, 2023), and speaking without thinking (Dohrmann & Schneider, 2023).

I also struggled significantly with executive dysfunction. Executive functions encompass a range of skills that govern cognitive control over emotions, behaviour, and information processing necessary for learning and memory (Miguel et al., 2023). For those with ADHD, executive dysfunction poses challenges in planning, organising, and prioritising tasks (Ogrodnik et al., 2023; Skymba et al., 2023). Furthermore, executive dysfunction is associated with emotional dysregulation (Soler-Gutiérrez et al., 2023), which may lead to heightened reactivity and mood swings (El Archi et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2023). These factors may impact relationships (Ginapp et al., 2023), work performance (Martin et al., 2023), education (Oram et al., 2023), and mental health (El Archi et al., 2023; Hartman et al., 2023).

Struggles and successes

As a result of my struggles in school, my self-esteem suffered greatly. I doubted my intelligence and capabilities, internalising the belief that I was not capable enough.

Seeing my grades decline despite my sincere efforts to improve was demoralising. This downward spiral created a cycle of negativity, exacerbating my ADHD symptoms. Indeed, the challenges faced by those living with ADHD may lead to low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, irritability, and problems dealing with daily stressors (Bodalski et al., 2023).

Although others saw potential in me, I only obtained School Certificate in English and a Sixth Form Certificate in English upon completing high school. Adults with ADHD may exhibit attention, executive function, and cognitive impairments (Boonstra et al., 2010; Fuermaier et al., 2015, 2022; Onandia-Hinchado et al., 2021; Torgalsbøen et al., 2021; Tucha et al., 2017) which may negatively impact on educational achievement (Oram et al., 2023). While I aspired to attend university, I lacked the necessary qualifications for admission.

At age twenty, I was permitted to enrol in university as a mature student. I faced numerous failures in various courses and papers, resulting in significant student loan debt. I imagined becoming a lawyer or a well-paid executive, but my inability to focus hindered my attempts at success, and my inability to recall information made exams impossible. In the early 2000s, after five years of full-time study, I finally graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in education studies, but my grades were inconsistent.

After my undergraduate degree, I pursued and failed several other qualifications. Whenever I lost interest or confidence in my abilities, I would withdraw from courses or stop attending. However, a family tragedy brought me back to Waiōhau, and it was at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi in Whakatāne where I discovered my academic voice within the Master of Indigenous Studies programme.

Postgraduate study at the Wānanga suited me well because it allowed me to choose topics and focus on developing arguments that I found compelling. Significantly, I was introduced to Kaupapa Māori theory and had the privilege of interacting with the academics who designed and developed the theoretical framework. Seeing numerous Māori academics in one place was validating and inspiring, as I could see myself represented in the faculty as a Māori and Indigenous person.

Success in the master's program at the Wānanga eventually paved the way for successful doctoral study. While my late success may inspire others, I often wonder what might have eventuated if I had been diagnosed with ADHD earlier in life. Certainly, early diagnosis and treatment may benefit academic success (Henning et al., 2022) and a recent Aotearoa New Zealand study showed that ADHD severity may not be an indicator of academic success in children (Carrasco et al., 2022), which is encouraging.

Academic with ADHD

Since 2017, I have worked in academia teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Being an academic is demanding, requiring elevated levels of focus, organisation, and attention to detail. However, when combined with undiagnosed ADHD, the challenges can be overwhelming and often misunderstood.

I first encountered the term ADHD when I worked at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. Colleagues noticed I was different in the way that I seemed to have boundless energy for some topics and activities. I was passionate about teaching and research but considerably less about compliance and administration. Over the years, I considered seeking a diagnosis, which is a complex process (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Barkley, 2019; Fuermaier et al., 2019; Lange et al., 2014; Mapou, 2019; Marshall et al., 2021). By this, I quickly discovered that adult ADHD diagnosis in Aotearoa New Zealand is generally not supported by a publicly funded health care system fraught with budgetary restraints (Gauld, 2020) and overworked staff (Blair, 2021). This means that most adults with ADHD need to fund their own diagnosis—in the vicinity of \$1,000 at the time of writing this paper—the high costs of which are prohibitive for many. However, even in the private sector, those seeking ADHD diagnosis and treatment must contend with long waiting lists.

Increased awareness of ADHD and the benefits of diagnosis and treatment have led to a rise in adults seeking assessment for ADHD (Grazioli et al., 2019; Katzman et al., 2017; Mucci et al., 2019; Paris et al., 2015; Rosso et al., 2023; Song et al., 2021; Xenaki &

Pehlivanidis, 2015). This factor led to my seeking a diagnosis, which I received in May 2023.

Being an academic with ADHD has been a journey filled with unique challenges and triumphs. Through self-awareness, support, and determination, I am learning to navigate these obstacles and harness the strengths that come with having being diagnosed with ADHD. The nature of academia demands prolonged periods of concentration, reading, and studying, which can be particularly challenging for those with ADHD. Staying engaged with complex material and coherently organising my thoughts can be difficult, as I find myself easily distracted by external stimuli or my own racing thoughts.

Research gap: Māori perspectives

ADHD can make it difficult to plan and prioritise tasks, which in turn can lead to feeling overwhelmed and procrastination. Time management tools and strategies, such as calendars and to-do lists, have become essential for me. ADHD also impacts memory and information retention. Remembering key concepts or details can be challenging, and I often rely on notetaking and doodling to reinforce my understanding and retention of information.

Despite these struggles, being an academic with ADHD has also brought unique strengths and insights. One of the most significant advantages is the ability to think outside the box and generate innovative ideas. ADHD often fosters creativity and a willingness to explore unconventional approaches to problem-solving. My mind constantly generates new connections and perspectives, which can be valuable in academic research and intellectual pursuits. Furthermore, the hyperfocus—described by Ashinoff and Abu-Akel (2021) as a state of intense concentration—that can accompany ADHD can be an asset in academic endeavours. When I find a topic or project that captures my interest, I can dedicate intense hours of concentration and be productive research wise. Immersing myself fully in a subject has allowed me to produce high-quality work and contribute significantly to my academic field.

Fortunately, some stories are emerging online about academics living with and embracing ADHD. For example, Megan Shaw (n.d.) from Deakin University signs off her emails with: "As someone with ADHD, I only check my emails twice a day to ensure I'm not too distracted during the working day. If I miss your email or something is urgent, please feel free to send me a reminder" (n.d.). Another example comes from Kathryn Ross (2021), from Curtin University, who commented:

So many of my ADHD traits actually help to make me a better scientist. I am able to remember absurd amounts of facts and details relating to a specific topic, I often make obscure seemingly unrelated connections, have creative problem-solving skills, love learning new techniques and skills, and working on multiple projects (n.d.).

In late 2022, I actively embraced my ADHD before I was officially diagnosed in mid-2023. I started declaring my ADHD status and sought support from the health care system and my employer. In December 2022, I attended a religious studies conference in Wellington, where I spoke as part of a plenary panel on wairuatanga, meaning Māori spirituality. Before I spoke, I stated: "I have ADHD. My working memory is often impaired. So, if I don't think I can answer your question at the end of this session, please take one of my business cards and I will answer your question by email." I also informed my colleagues of my suspected ADHD and asked them to make some accommodations for me concerning meeting lengths and format: for example, a walking meeting can be more effective. Anecdotal information from bloggers and YouTubers suggests that accessing support and creating strategies can be of practical help to those with ADHD.

My journey illustrates the impacts of undiagnosed ADHD. Despite struggling at school due to concentration difficulties, impulsivity, and executive dysfunction, I was determined to pursue higher education and discovered my passion for teaching and research. While ADHD continues to pose challenges, now that I know why I am different, I can use the strengths that ADHD provides to my advantage. There is a dire need for more research, particularly concerning Māori perspectives around ADHD, as I have only

found two references describing ADHD from a Māori perspective (Cherrington & Rangihuna, 2000; Rangihuna et al., 2018). As well, increased awareness and support for adults with ADHD is needed. In my experience, an essential part of my ADHD journey was becoming self-aware, seeking help, and developing strategies to manage the symptoms in everyday life.

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