

# Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Identity

## *Narratives of ADHD Experiences and the Impact of Diagnosis on Self-Perception in AFAB Individuals*

Arianna Michaud, Department of Anthropology

Dr. Jara Carrington, Department of Anthropology, University of North Texas

### Individuals assigned female at birth are underdiagnosed.

Despite 45 years of research on ADHD in those assigned female at birth (AFAB), they continue to be under and misdiagnosed. Studies fail to take into account the effects of hormonal fluctuations on symptoms and as a result are inconclusive. Diagnostic criteria presented by the DSM-V focuses on external symptoms, failing to include the internal symptoms that AFAB individuals experience. The need to rule out other disorders, adding a barrier for those with comorbidities, further delays diagnosis and results in emotional turmoil.

Leading to the question...  
How does receiving an ADHD diagnosis later in life shape identity in AFAB individuals?

### Exploring ADHD in depth requires multiple methods.

**Photovoice** is a method where participants use photography to express and reflect on their experiences. They take photos, choose five, and provide written or recorded explanations for added context. In this study, nine individuals (ages 19–33) with cis female, genderqueer, trans man, and nonbinary identities across White, Hispanic, and mixed race backgrounds participated. For neurodiverse people, this method offers flexibility and space for non-verbal expression. Photovoice supports intuitive, spontaneous communication through visual storytelling and group discussion.

During **interviews** with 12 participants, the researcher’s ADHD allowed them to to match participants’ energy and follow non-linear thought patterns. This fostered a comfortable environment where participants could speak openly.

**Literature reviews**, while useful to understand the academic landscape, revealed gaps in ADHD research for AFAB individuals- referred to as women in the literature. The gap is not only for genderqueer identities, but also in areas examining the effects of socialization as a woman (ex: internalizing pressure to be a caretaker) on ADHD symptoms and internal ideas of the self.

*Sources at [bit.ly/adhdidentitybibliography](https://bit.ly/adhdidentitybibliography)*

### Gendered ADHD experience



**Left:** “I found comfort in being able to decorate myself how I wanted.”  
**Right:** “While I am not broken, I am not perfect and will not strive to be.”

Participants raised as women faced significant cultural and social barriers intensified by gendered expectations, such as being the “eldest daughter,” and stigma surrounding medication. Being able to “sit still [and] do fine in school,” led to a dismissal of participants’ experiences. The relief and validation of diagnosis frees individuals to engage in active exploration of identity and gender expression.

### Understanding and sharing



**Left:** “I feel as if I am simply a reflection of the things I love.”  
**Right:** “It can feel like a community, and I feel more understood...[I] feel at home”

The rise of neurodiverse representation on social media allowed participants to identify and validate their experiences. Shared knowledge, described by one participant as a “peer-reviewed diagnosis,” and mutual understanding among neurodiverse individuals fosters a community where participants feel seen and understood.

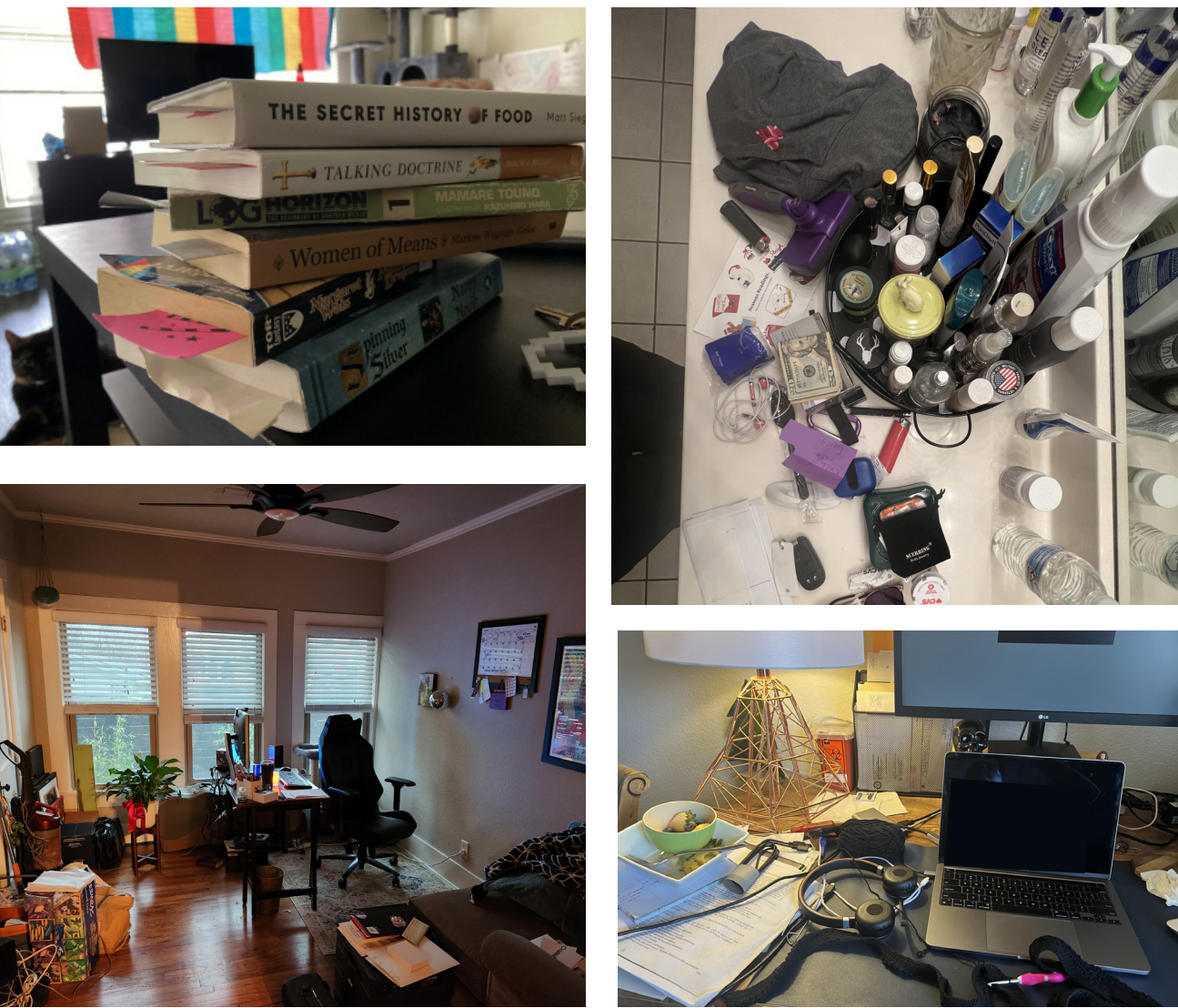
### Empowerment and acceptance



**Top left:** “I don’t have to meet societal expectations when in my house... which brings me relief.”  
**Top right:** “[Building fires and collecting sticks are] creative ways to use my ADHD to create something and bring me joy”  
**Bottom left:** “A lot of my mental health journey has involved me healing (and continuing to heal) my inner child.”

After interfacing with the complex feelings of diagnosis, participants are able to identify their strengths and reframe ADHD not as a hindrance, as it had been for most of their life, but as a strength. One participant referred to it as “hacking [her] life.” Everyday experiences that were once self-judged, like the couch formerly viewed as “a prison,” transformed into comforting spaces of relief and joy. This self acceptance has led to deeper self healing in some participants and reframing of negative cognitions.

### Internalizing external expectations



**Top left:** “I feel like my ADHD stops me from fully enjoying things I genuinely try to engage in.”  
**Top right:** “This often looks like clutter to others, and feels like it for me sometimes too, but it is a way I am organized too.”  
**Bottom left:** “I struggle...to keep my thoughts and belongings in order.”  
**Bottom right:** “My workspace often looks like stacks of things I need to go through later, snacks, and something to do with my hands. Many random objects that have no other logical place to go make their home here.”

External expectations from family, society, and education heavily shape participants’ identities and behaviors. Masking provides temporary relief socially but creates a need to later “[dissect] those layers” to rediscover their authentic selves. Denial of a diagnosis from family and medical professionals who claim “you don’t meet the criteria” further compounds feelings of loss and regret. One participant wondered, “maybe I could have felt like less of a failure for most of my life” if they had been diagnosed sooner.

### Invisible labor to function



**Top left:** “I’ve almost been trained to never call things what they are, because normally they’re stereotyped as something much worse.”  
**Top right:** “I feel the things I want to do...are so in reach, but so far away.”  
**Bottom left:** “This is one of my work arounds for executive dysfunction... it’s not perfect, but it’s better than before.”

There is extensive work done by those with ADHD to mimic neurotypical functioning. The adaptations that AFAB individuals specifically make to keep a home, a typically feminine task, is unseen. The extra work done often doesn’t feel like enough and leaves individuals burnt out and exhausted. In turn, their self perception is warped and often laced with frustration.