

The Response of African Americans to the Rorschach: A Review of the Research

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Studies exploring the performance of African Americans on the Rorschach were reviewed. The review revealed the limited number of studies done in this area of study, as well as the fact that the research paradigm for all of this research has been limited to comparing the Rorschach performance of African Americans to that of Whites. However, no one has offered a rationale for such a research paradigm. Without a scientific reason to expect personality to be a function of race, another research design was recommended, one that explores the effect of a variety of aspects of living conditions on the development of the personality of African Americans.

In spite of the fact that the United States is a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural society, it is as if we have developed a concept of a *cultural norm*, a standard way of being with which all people are supposed to identify. The influence of this concept for psychology is that it led to the development of norms (i.e., a standard way of responding) for tests with parameters broad enough so that all normal people would fall within these boundaries regardless of their sociocultural differences.

In the contemporary sociopolitical scene in this country, cultural diversity is now being celebrated; hence, respect for cultural diversity is developing in contemporary psychology (e.g., Goodchilds, 1990). As a consequence, it has become important to illuminate the uniqueness of the psychological functioning of different sociocultural groups. Americans of African descent constitute one such sociocultural grouping; hence, in response to developments in our society and in our science, psychologists have begun to summarize the response styles of African Americans to a variety of psychological tests (e.g., Bryan, 1989; Choca, Shanley, Peterson, & Van Denburg, 1990; Dreger & Miller, 1960; Edwards, 1974; Greene, 1987; Gynther, 1989; E. E. Jones, 1978a). In regard to personality

tests, psychologists have summarized the performance of African Americans on the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory (MCMI; Choca et al., 1990) and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, (MMPI; Greene, 1987; Gynther, 1989). Thus far, however, the performance of African Americans on the Rorschach has not been thoroughly reviewed. Although Dreger and Miller addressed the performance of African Americans on a number of tests including the Rorschach, their review dealt only with a limited number of studies with the Rorschach; moreover, their review is now over 30 years old. Because no one has looked at this particular body of research since, this means that this body of research was unreviewed. The purpose of this article is to fill this gap.

The first published study of the performance of African Americans on the Rorschach was published by Hunter (1937). In this study, the Rorschachs of 100 African-American men and women were compared to an equal number of White men and women. These were the days just after the Depression; hence, both groups of subjects were drawn from the ranks of semiprofessionals and white-collar workers who had lost their jobs and were now working in government-financed positions in the community (mainly as clerical help in public schools). There was, therefore, a kind of built-in comparability between these two groups as far as intelligence, education, and vocational status was concerned. The results of this comparison showed that the two groups were quite similar in how they responded to the Rorschach cards. There was a tendency for White Americans to give more little details than their African-American counterparts: Both groups tended to give more color than movement responses, but the African Americans gave fewer movement responses than their White counterparts.

The 1940s saw the publication of only two more studies in this area. Stainbrook and Siegel (1944) compared the Rorschachs of African-American and White-American high school and college students. Although Stainbrook and Siegel acknowledged that the schools were not strictly comparable, there was an effort to equate the group intellectually by a group intelligence test (the Otis Self-Administering Test of Mental Ability). The results of comparing the Rorschachs of these two groups was that the African-American students gave fewer responses (*R*), fewer detailed responses (*D* and *S*), fewer form-dominated color responses (*CF* was greater than *FC*), fewer shading responses, and fewer human movement (*M*) and inanimate movement (*m*) responses. This was the first study to indicate an awareness of the possible role of the race of the examiner in Rorschach testing; Stainbrook and Siegel indicated that all of the African Americans were given the Rorschach by an examiner who was African American, whereas the Rorschach administered to the Whites were administered by Whites.

Abel, Piotrowski, and Stone (1944) compared the Rorschachs of African-American and White-American adolescents who were in an institution for the intellectually retarded. The groups were matched for intellectual level and length of institutionalization. In this comparison, the African-American ado-

lescents gave fewer *Rs*, fewer *Ds*, made less use of space, gave fewer movement responses and more *CFs* than their White-American counterparts.

There were no studies in this area published in the 1950s; there were three published studies in the 1960s. Weatherly, Corke, and McCary (1964) compared the Rorschachs of African-American and White-American college students (both groups drawn from the populations of large urban colleges) and found no statistical differences between these two groups regarding location, determinants, or content. Price (1962) compared the Rorschachs of African-American and White-American elementary school students. The groups were matched for gender and equated for age and community background. An interesting finding was that the Rorschachs of both groups of 6-year-olds were quite the same; differences between the groups emerged at 10 and 14 years old. At this older age, the White students gave more *Rs*, their *Rs* reflected higher levels of organization (*Z*), and they gave more movement and shading responses than their African-American counterparts. The two groups were similar in form level (*F+* %) and kind of content.

Ames and August (1966) also studied the Rorschachs of African-American and White-American elementary school children. They found results similar to those found by Price (1962); namely, the Rorschachs of the younger children (5-year-olds) for both groups were more similar than the Rorschachs of the older children (10-year-olds). In this study, the African-American children were found to have given fewer *Rs* in general, fewer *Ds*, fewer *Ms* and fewer animal movement (*FM*) responses, and fewer responses of animal and human content than their White-American counterparts. The African-American children gave more form-determined (*F*) responses than the White children. Ames and August noted the differences in the socioeconomic status of the two groups and wondered about the possible influence of this variable on the response style differences of these two groups.

No research in this area was published in the 1970s, and in the 1980s there was only one (Krall et al., 1983). Krall et al. presented the Rorschachs of 3- to 12-year-old African-American children. Their sample consisted of 272 children, grouped by age and gender, all drawn from inner city schools. They compared the performance of these children with the normals for similar-age subjects as presented in Ames, Metraux, Rodell, and Walker (1974); Ames, Metraux, and Walker (1971); and Exner, Weiner, and Schyler (1976). In comparison to the normals, the African-American children gave responses that reflected fewer *F+* % responses, fewer color and shading responses, lower whole detail (*W*%) but higher large detail (*D*%).

It appears that no other research in this area has been published since 1983.

DISCUSSION

The first observation one can make from this review is how few studies there are exploring the response styles of African Americans on the Rorschach. The

research exploration in this area, begun in the 1930s, eventuated in what appears to be just seven published studies in 60 years. Whatever the reason for this dearth of study, the limited number of studies performed certainly implies a lack of representativeness of the sampling of African Americans to be studied. Moreover, with the exception of Hunter (1937), these studies did not use people from the general population. All of the studies made use of the Rorschachs of elementary and high school students; even the adults were college students. None of the studies sampled the performance of adults living and working in contemporary mainstream America. This restricted sampling imposes serious limitations on the conclusions one can draw. Nevertheless, seven studies constitute the sum of the published research on the performance of African Americans on the Rorschach, and results of these studies and their implications are discussed here.

Only the Krall et al. (1983) study showed lower $F+$ % responses and only the Price (1962) study showed fewer Z responses for the African Americans, compared to their White counterparts. Abel et al. (1944) and Stainbrook and Siegel (1944) showed that the African-Americans gave more CF than FC responses, compared to their White counterparts. But the findings with regard to $F+$ %, Z , or CF responses are only found in a small number of the studies; therefore, they cannot be reported as trends in the data. The only somewhat consistent trend that should be reported is that the African-American subjects gave fewer detailed responses and fewer shading and movement responses than their White counterparts. However, before we interpret these findings, note that there was also a significant trend for the African-American subjects to give fewer R s in general than their White counterparts. Because the number of detailed, movement, and shading responses have been found to be a function of R (Barry, Blyth, & Albrecht, 1952; Fiske & Baughman, 1965; Kalter & Marsden, 1970), I conclude African-American adolescents and adults give fewer responses R s than their White counterparts, and, as a consequence, give fewer detailed, M , and shading responses as well as a function of lower R s.

The question now becomes: What is the implication of the comparatively lower R in the Rorschachs of adolescent and adult African Americans? Klopfer and Kelley (1942) suggested that low R could reflect low intelligence; Rapaport, Gill, and Schafer (1946; following the suggestion made by Rorschach, 1921/1951) reasoned that low R could be a function of depression, and both Klopfer and Kelley and Rapaport et al. hypothesized that low R could also suggest inhibitedness in self-disclosure.

In regard to a lower R reflecting lower intelligence, effort was made to match the groups of African Americans and Whites for intelligence in each of the seven studies. This was accomplished either by matching them in terms of educational level and vocation or by scores on an intelligence test. Although matching for intelligence certainly does not guarantee absolute similarity of intelligence between the two groups, it does serve as a control against significant group

differences in intelligence. Therefore, it is rather unlikely that the significantly lower *R* in the African-American protocols means that they had a lower level of intellect than their White counterparts.

Lower *R* may reflect depression; however, supporting data for this hypothesis is lacking. For example, data from the MCMI (Choca et al., 1990) and the MMPI (Greene, 1987; Gynther, 1989) indicate that African Americans do not describe themselves on these tests as being particularly depressed. One may argue, however, that because the MCMI and the MMPI are self-report measures they are susceptible to denial; hence, the Rorschach should be considered to reflect the truth. However, there also does not appear to be corroborating data for depression from the Rorschachs of African Americans. No one has reported that the Rorschachs of African Americans contain a significant number of dark color (*C*) responses or responses involving depressive content. Thus, depression is not a reasonable explanation for the comparatively lower *R* in the Rorschachs of African-Americans as compared to those of Whites.

The third possibility is that low *R* may reflect low self-disclosure. There are data supporting this hypothesis. In the first place, low *R* has been found to be mainly characteristic of the Rorschachs of African-American adolescents and adults, but not of African-American children. The Rorschachs of 5- and 6-year-old African-American and White subjects resemble each other, including *Rs* (Price, 1962). Thus even the limited number of studies in this area already suggest that low *R* becomes more characteristic of the Rorschachs of African Americans when they have grown up. Furthermore, low *R* has been found to be characteristic of the Rorschachs of minority groups in this country in general (Howes & De Blassie, 1989). Moreover, this hypothesis is supported by the findings that, compared to Whites, African Americans are less self-disclosing in clinical interviews (e.g., Carkhuff & Pierce, 1967; Grantham, 1973; St. Clair, 1951; Vontress, 1971) and psychotherapy (e.g., Adams, 1950; Banks, 1972; Gardner, 1971; Hall & Malony, 1983; Jackson, 1973, 1983; A. Jones & Seagull, 1977; E. E. Jones, 1978b; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Rosen & Frank, 1962; Sager, Brayboy, & Waxenberg, 1972; Turner & Armstrong, 1981). Thus, the most perspicacious interpretation of the comparatively lower *R* in the Rorschachs of African Americans seems to be that they have learned to limit their self-disclosing to strangers, particularly the usually White strangers administering the Rorschach to them.

The finding that the Rorschachs of African Americans, as a group, reflect restricted self-disclosure is an important but limited finding to be derived from as complex an instrument as the Rorschach, even from only seven studies. One possible explanation for this observation is that because such conscientious effort was made in each study to ensure that the two groups were similar psychosocially, as a consequence, they were so similar as groups that their Rorschachs may not have reflected much difference. The fact that little difference between the groups emerged from the analysis of their Rorschachs seems

compatible with the comments made by Greene (1987), "The more rigorously that moderator variables . . . are controlled by an investigator, the less likely it becomes that Black-White differences will be found" (p. 503), and by Edwards (1974).

No significant and meaningful differences were found between black students and white students on replicated studies of self-esteem, internal external control, social desirability, or social exploration. The findings suggest that . . . race is not a relevant variable for personality research or theory. (p. 39)

Thus, the overall conclusion from the seven studies is that as adults, African Americans have learned to limit their self-disclosure to strangers, certainly the White strangers who usually administer the test to them. That this matches what happens in clinical interviewing and psychotherapy means that even this limited finding from this small body of research should be given serious consideration.

An overview of a body of research should not only provide information regarding the particular issue in focus (in this instance, the Rorschach performance of African Americans) but should also provide an awareness of methodological and/or conceptual issues the research reviewed might illuminate.

The most obvious methodological issue that emerges from this overview is the possible effect of cross-cultural clinicians on the self-disclosure of African Americans on the Rorschach. Because studies have already shown this effect in clinical interviewing and psychotherapy, it seems like the right time to assess this effect on the Rorschach formally, rather than just presume its effect as we have done.

The overview of this research on the response style of African-Americans to the Rorschach raises these questions: Why is this research being done? What is the rationale for this study? Note that at no point in the literature has anyone provided a rationale for the research or for the paradigm used in this research.

When we try to infer the rationale for these studies from the research, we find that all of the studies compare the Rorschach performance of African Americans with that of Whites. Obviously, these investigators believe that something valuable will emerge in this kind of study; they think that there is reason to believe that the Rorschach performance of African Americans should be compared to that of Whites in order to learn something about African Americans. In comparing the performance of African Americans to that of Whites, when other psychosocial factors are equal, one may expect that race will be the factor that accounts for whatever differences might be found. However, there is no scientific reason for one to expect that race defines personality and/or psychological functioning. Therefore, a research paradigm based on the comparison of the psychological performance of people by race is not a tenable procedure. If, however, the rationale for conducting this research is to explore

the effects of living conditions on personality, then this is a most justifiable quest; still, this quest can be actualized without introducing the issue of race.

We know that attitudes toward African-Americans changed over the decades. Therefore, the age of any person (65, 45, or 25) implies that they will have been exposed to different psychosocial conditions in growing up. We also know that attitudes toward African Americans are influenced by their socioeconomic status, education, and geographic environment. Therefore, one could just as meaningfully (if not more) explore the effects of living conditions on personality by comparing the Rorschachs of African-Americans of different ages, socioeconomic status, educational levels, and geographic environments during their early development. This would necessitate a complex analysis of variance design to assess the influence on the response style to Rorschach's blots due to the variables just noted and their interaction. This kind of research can illuminate the effect of psychosocial conditions on the development of personality without employing racial stereotyping.

Sometimes the issue is raised that maybe minority groups should have different norms than Whites. If, however, the research continues to show that race is not a factor in defining personality, then norms by race are unnecessary. However, if the research demonstrates a significant influence on Rorschach performance due to, for example, socioeconomic status, then we may think through the issues of norms and develop norms for different socioeconomic status levels, regardless of other psychosocial variables. Only further research can help us address this issue.

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