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Notes and Shorter Communication

New data on black infant precocity

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Abstract

The theory that black infants are developmentally advanced, as compared with white, during the first 15 months of life, was examined by comparing the means obtained by black infants on the South African standardisation sample of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development with the means of white American infants obtained on the American standardisation sample. It was found that black infants are significantly advanced in both motor and mental development up to the age of 15 months. From 18–30 months, there are no differences between the two groups.

1. Introduction

The theory of black infant precocity states that black infants are more advanced than white in mental and motor development during the first fifteen months or so of life. Positive evidence for the theory was first advanced by Falade (1955) on the basis of a study in Senegal in which infants tested with the Gesell test were found to be more advanced in motor development than white American infants. Similar results were obtained in a study of Ugandan infants by Geber (1958) and of Nigerian infants by Freedman (1974), while Bayley (1965) found in the United States that black infants were ahead of whites between birth and 15 months on both motor and mental development tested with her Scales of Infant Development. On the other hand, when Warren (1972) reviewed the research on this issue, he concluded that the evidence was not sufficiently strong to justify the conclusion that black infant development is ahead of white. During the last quarter century there does not appear to have been any further research on this issue and it may be regarded as still unresolved.

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The issue is of some theoretical interest because if it could be established that black infants are ahead of whites in the first 15 months or so, the problem arises of why they have this advantage and of how they come to lose it and fall behind white children on intelligence tests by the age of 3 years, as reported by Peoples, Fagan and Drotar (1995) in an analysis of the standardisation sample of the Stanford-Binet 1V. An explanation for these differences has been advanced by Rushton (1995), who regards the evidence for the precocious development of black infants as persuasive and as a component of a general theory of race differences in intelligence and a number of other phenomena. Nevertheless, the empirical base for the conclusion that black infants are more advanced than whites in infancy is not conclusively strong. Further evidence on the theory is presented in this paper.

2. Method

The methodology of this paper consists of a comparison between the mean scores obtained by white American infants and black African infants on the respective standardisation samples of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development. This test was constructed and normed in the United States by Bayley (1969) and normed on black infants in South Africa by Richter and Griesel (1988). The test consists of two scales measuring motor development, e.g. manual dexterity, and mental development, memory, talking and classification. Both tests were normed on representative samples of the population. The norming procedures are described in the two test manuals. In the South African standardisation sample, the test was precisely the same as the American test. The test provides motor and mental quotients similar to IQs for 14 age groups covering the age range 2–30 months. The number of children in the American standardisation sample was 1262 and in the South African standardisation sample 722.

3. Results

Both the American and the South African manuals provide the mean scores, standard deviations and numbers of children for each of the 14 age groups. From these it is possible to calculate for each age group the differences, expressed in standard deviation units (*d* scores), between the American and the South African infants, and the statistical significance of the differences using *t* tests. The results of these calculations are shown in Table 1.

The salient features of the results are

(1) On motor development, the black infants are significantly in advance of the white infants from the age of 2–10 months; their advantage falls to non-significance between 12–15 months and from 18 months onwards there are no differences.
(2) On mental development, the black infants are significantly in advance of the white infants from the age of 4–15 months; the differences at 2–3 months are not statistically significant, but possibly the concept of mental development at this age is not meaningful; there is a sharp fall from the substantial advantage of black infants in mental development at the age of 15 months to the absence of any advantage from the age of 18 months onwards.

Table 1
Differences expressed as *ds* between the means of black and white infants on the Bayley Sales of Infant Development

Age (months)	Motor ability	Mental ability
2	0.46*	0.29
3	0.78*	0.01
4	1.09*	0.64*
5	1.81*	0.76*
6	0.90*	0.45*
8	0.61*	0.70*
10	0.39*	0.56*
12	0.16	0.56*
15	0.16	0.79*
18	−0.19	0.02
21	0.11	−0.07
24	0.25	0.05
27	−0.04	−0.09
30	−0.07	0.07

Positive numbers denote higher means of blacks, negative numbers higher means of whites. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences at the 5% level.

4. Discussion

There are four points of interest in the results. Firstly, they provide rather substantial corroboration for the thesis that black infants are developmentally advanced, as compared with white infants, during the first 15 months or so of life, and that this advantage is present for both motor and mental development. Comparison studies of this kind depend on representative samples and the two samples compared in the present study appear to have been carefully drawn.

Secondly, the black developmental advantage in the first 15 months or so of infancy is substantial. The mean black advantage over the age range 2–15 months is 0.71 *d* for motor ability and 0.53 *d* for mental ability.

Thirdly, the early black advantage is evidently replaced by no black-white difference between the ages of 18 and 30 months. It can be inferred that the white advantage on mental tests begins to appear between the ages of 30–36 months because it is statistically significant at the age of 36 months, as shown by Peoples et al. (1995).

Fourthly, the developmental advantage of black infants in the first 15 months of life poses problems for environmentalist explanations of the black IQ deficit from the age of 3 years onwards. Environmentalists have frequently posited poverty as the cause of the black IQ deficit (e.g., Mercer, 1973). How explanations along these lines can be reconciled with the developmental advantage of black infants in the first 15 months of life presents a difficult problem. It may be considered that

genetic factors offer a more plausible explanation for the different developmental trajectories of white and black children.

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