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Race differences in psychopathic personality: a reply to Skeem and Zuckerman

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Abstract

A discussion is presented of the issues raised by Skeem and Zuckerman regarding whether psychopathic personality can be regarded as a unitary construct, the validity of the distinction between psychopathic personality and anti-social personality, the adequacy of the Psychopathic Deviate scale of the MMPI as a measure of psychopathic personality, the validity of results of the community studies of the prevalence of anti-social personality disorder, and the evolutionary theory of race differences.

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Skeem makes a useful start by defining psychopathic personality as “a construct defined by a relatively distinct constellation of affective, interpersonal and behavioural characteristics”. This construct has been recognised for almost a century. She then draws a distinction between psychopathic personality and anti-social personality disorder, but it remains doubtful whether any useful distinction can be made between these two terms. When the American Psychiatric Association introduced the term Anti-social Personality Disorder in 1984 it was as a replacement for Psychopathic Personality and not as an additional and distinct condition. Skeem draws a further distinction between the personality component (callousness, failure to form close emotional bonds, etc.) and the behavioural component (social deviance) of psychopathic personality. This is a valid distinction but the quoted correlation of 0.5 between the two constructs shows that they are usefully viewed as components of the same higher order factor of psychopathic personality.

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1. The MMPI Psychopathic Deviate Scale

Both Zuckerman and Skeem raise objections to my use of the norms of the Psychopathic Deviate Scale of the MMPI. Their first objection is that groups should score high on the Hypomania Scale as well as the Psychopathic Deviate Scale for a diagnosis of psychopathic personality. This objection is met by the fact that the same race differences are present in the MMPI Hypomania scale as in the Psychopathic Deviate Scale. Table 1 gives normative data on race differences on the Hypomania scale. Rows 1 and 2 show race differences expressed as *ds* in relation to whites for males and females for the first version of the MMPI. Blacks and Hispanics score substantially higher than whites and East Asians score fractionally higher (this is the only anomalous result in the table). Rows 3 and 4 give results for the standardisation sample of the MMPI-2 showing Native Americans with the highest Hypomania score followed by blacks, Hispanics, whites and East Asians. Rows 5 and 6 give results for 116 blacks and 116 whites matched on demographic variables which reduce the differences but nevertheless show blacks more hypomanic than whites.

Zuckerman says that Greene's (1987) review shows no black–white differences on the Psychopathic Deviate scale. This review is unsatisfactory in that it gives no information on the nature or size of the samples or of effect sizes. In so far as it provides any useful information, it shows that among normal samples showing race differences, six show blacks score higher than whites on the Psychopathic Deviate scale while only one shows whites score higher than blacks. This gives some further support for theory of race differences in psychopathic personality, but the results of the standardization samples are more satisfactory.

A further objection raised by Zuckerman is that the Eysenck Psychoticism scale is a measure of psychopathic personality and that studies in different countries show no consistent race differences. The explanation is probably that comparisons of means obtained in different countries have little validity because of translation and sampling problems. Responses to questions about feelings are affected by subtle nuances of word meaning that are likely to differ in different cultures and are virtually impossible to capture in translation. The best way to examine the prediction that there should be race differences in Psychoticism consistent with those in psychopathic personality would be to test groups in the same country. The only study that has been done has been reported by Eysenck and Eysenck (1976) on employees working for London transport in which blacks scored significantly higher than whites.

Table 1

Race differences in Hypomanic personality in normal populations measured by the MMPI (*ds*)

	Test	Sex	Black	E.A	Hisp	N.Am	White	Reference
1	MMPI	M	0.47	0.13	0.62	–	0.00	Dahlstrom, Lachar, and Dahlstrom, 1986
2	MMPI	F	0.39	–0.16	0.62	–	0.00	Dahlstrom et al., 1986
3	MMPI-2	M	0.40	–0.14	0.28	0.47	0.00	Hathaway and McKinley, 1989
4	MMPI-2	F	0.50	–0.07	0.44	0.95	0.00	Hathaway and McKinley, 1989
5	MMPI-2	M	0.36	–	–	–	0.00	Timbrook and Graham, 1994
6	MMPI-2	F	0.31	–	–	–	0.00	Timbrook and Graham, 1994

E.A. = East Asian; N.Am. = Native American.

A widely used questionnaire for the measurement of psychopathic personality is the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) for which no data were given in my paper because no race differences for community samples have ever been reported. Skeem says she has carried out a meta-analysis of 16 studies of black–white differences on this instrument among correctional and clinical samples from which they calculate that blacks have higher psychopathic personality by 0.11*d*. But because these samples are psychopathic or sub-clinical psychopathic, it would not be expected that there would be much or any difference between blacks and whites in psychopathic personality. Similarly, among samples of the mentally retarded, it would not be expected that there would be much or any difference between blacks and whites in mean IQ, even though there is a considerable difference in community samples.

2. Prevalence of anti-social personality disorder

Two studies of the prevalence of APD in the community found the lifetime prevalence of APD was some 5–10% lower in blacks than in whites. These are the Environmental Catchment Area (ECA) and the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS). The results are an anomaly for the theory that blacks are higher on psychopathic personality than whites. The most probable explanation for the results is that the diagnoses were made on the basis of interviews in which the interviewers asked the respondents whether they had ever committed a series of criminal and anti-social acts. In interviews of this kind it is likely that many respondents will not disclose the full extent of their past criminal behaviour. Because “no regard for the truth” is a central feature of psychopathic personality, according to the criteria of the American Psychiatric Association, groups such as blacks that are higher on psychopathic personality would be expected to conceal the truth more than those such as whites that are lower on psychopathic personality. The effect of this can be that assessments of psychopathic personality from disclosures given in interviews may fail to detect the race difference.

This problem of race differences in under-disclosure of the extent of past criminal behaviour has appeared in studies of self-reported crime. In general these studies have found that there is virtually no difference between blacks and whites in the extent to which they report having committed crimes, although blacks have considerably higher conviction rates than whites. This raises the question of whether there is really a race difference in rates of crime, as shown by police records and court convictions, or whether there is no difference, as indicated by self-reports. This problem has been addressed by [Hindelang, Hirshi, and Weis \(1981\)](#) who analyse two studies where samples of juveniles have been assessed for the extent of delinquent activities by self-reports obtained from interviews and for whom police records of offences are also available. The first of these is the Richmond Youth Project. In this the black–white ratio for offences in the police records was 2:1, while the ratio for self-reported offences was 1.1:1. The authors conclude that blacks under-report the amount of crime they have committed. The second study is the Seattle Project. In this the black–white ratio for offences in the police records was 1.6:1, while the ratio for self-reported delinquency was 0.95:1. Taking the two studies together, for self-reported crime there is no black–white difference, just as for self-reported psychopathic behaviours in the ECA and the NCS studies. But for actual crimes, black youths commit about twice as many as whites. In a detailed analysis of race differences in types of offences, [Hindelang et al. \(1981\)](#) show

that blacks and whites both under-reported the offences they had committed, but blacks under-reported these to a greater extent than whites. For serious offences (burglary, vehicle theft, assault, and use of weapons) 20% of white males and 57% of black males did not admit the offence for which they had been convicted. For females, 27% of blacks failed to report offences for which they had a police record, compared with 15% of whites. The authors conclude that “blacks failed to report known official offences at a much higher rate than whites” (p. 180). The authors point out that victimization surveys show higher rates of crime by blacks, consistent with the evidence from convictions for criminal offences, and suggesting that the higher rates of conviction of blacks does not arise from discrimination against blacks by the courts and police. The conclusion that blacks under-report the extent of criminal offences to a greater extent than whites has also been reached by [Huizinga and Elliott \(1984\)](#).

Race differences in disclosure of illegal activities have also been found in studies of substance abuse. [Hindelang et al. \(1981\)](#) report that in the Seattle study, in which data were available for self-reported drug use and criminal convictions for drug use, it was found that white juveniles reported their drug use accurately, but 7% of blacks had convictions for drug use but denied ever having used drugs in self-report interviews. Similar results were found for alcohol abuse, for which whites reported their experiences accurately but 6% of blacks denied abuse for which they had been convicted. The same conclusion on race differences in the disclosure of drug use has been reached by [Mensch and Kandel \(1988\)](#) in a study of inconsistencies in self-reported marijuana use. They found that 18% of blacks who admitted having used marijuana in one survey denied having ever used marijuana in a subsequent survey, as compared with 9% of whites. The authors observe that in all interview surveys blacks report lower levels of illegal drug use than whites but that “these lower rates in general population samples contrast with the over-representation of blacks among drug users who come into contact with various institutions, those in drug treatment programs and general hospital admissions for a drug related problem, and of blacks and Hispanics among arrestees with a urine test positive for drugs” (p. 120).

The two prevalence studies whose results were based on interviews produced conflicting results regarding black–white differences in substance abuse. In the ECA study the prevalence of substance abuse was approximately one third greater among blacks than among whites (6.80 vs. 5.32; [Robins, Helzer, Weissman, & Orvaschel, 1984](#)), while in the NCS study the prevalence of substance abuse admitted by blacks was only one third that of whites. The inconsistency between the results of the two surveys shows the unreliability of data on prevalence rates obtained from interviews. Both results are inconsistent with death rates from substance abuse which are more than two and a half times higher in blacks than whites ([National Center for Health Statistics, 1991](#)). Once again the objective records show a much greater prevalence of this form of psychopathic behaviour by blacks than by whites, but the interviews show no difference or even lower behaviour by blacks. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that blacks massively under-disclose the extent of their past psychopathic behaviour in interviews and, almost certainly, in answering questionnaires. This conclusion is further supported by the higher Lie scores of blacks as compared with whites on the MMPI-2 ($d=0.31$). Although the questionnaire data all show higher psychopathic personality in blacks, the magnitude of the race differences can be more reliably obtained from differences in objective psychopathic behaviour such as crime, exclusions from school, loan default, unstable marital relationships, etc.

Zuckerman’s findings that blacks score lower than whites on sensation seeking may also be partly attributable to lower self-disclosure of criminal activities by blacks, since his sensation

seeking questionnaires contain questions on the use of illegal drugs. However, the main reason for the lower scores of blacks on sensation seeking is probably their lower IQ because sensation seeking is positively associated with intelligence (Zuckerman, 1994).

3. Controls for socio-economic status

Both Skeem and Zuckerman propose that race differences in psychopathic personality should be controlled for socio-economic status. If this is done, the race differences in psychopathic personality are reduced and may disappear because blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans have lower socio-economic status than whites and low socio-economic status is associated with higher psychopathic personality. Hence the adoption of this proposal obfuscates the relation between race and psychopathic personality. Skeem shows that she is aware of this when she writes that this procedure “overcontrols” for race differences. The call to control race differences in psychopathic personality for socio-economic status is a variant of what is known as “the sociologist’s fallacy” (Jensen, 1998) in the explanation of race differences in intelligence. The fallacy consists of treating socio-economic status differences as a cause of the association between race and IQ when it is largely an effect. The application of the sociologist’s fallacy to the association between race and psychopathic personality similarly “overcontrols” for the association because the most plausible explanation for the associations between race, psychopathic personality and socio-economic status is that race differences in psychopathic personality are partly a determinant of differences in socio-economic status.

4. Evolution of race differences

Skeem and Zuckerman dispute that race is a meaningful concept and Skeem cites the assertion of Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi and Piazza in support of this contention. These writers do, however, conclude on the basis of their extensive genetic analysis that the human race can be divided into genetically distinct “clusters”. These “clusters” are the same as what for the last two and a half centuries have been called races. Their six major clusters are the Negroids, Caucasoids, Mongoloids, Native Americans, South East Asians, and Australian Aborigines (see their Fig. 2.3.2A and B). Their preference for the term “clusters” is apparently an exercise in political correctness. It has been well established that these races or “clusters” differ in intelligence (Lynn, 1997) and that Mongoloids, Caucasoids and Negroids differ in a number of life history characteristics such as the rate of maturation and brain size (Rushton, 2000). These associations make race an important explanatory concept for the understanding of population differences in a number of important phenomena.

Zuckerman argues that even if the validity of the concept of race is accepted, the theory of race differences in psychopathic personality is inconsistent with the evolution of the races because the Native Americans are of Asiatic origin and should therefore score like Asiatics and have low psychopathic personality. The explanation of this problem is as follows. Modern humans evolved in central East Africa around 200,000 years ago. About 100,000 years ago some groups of these peoples migrated northwards into the Near East; by around 60,000 years ago further groups had

migrated into North East Asia, South Asia, North Africa, the Pacific Islands and Australia. Around 40,000 years ago groups had migrated into Europe and the Americas (these time estimates are taken from Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi and Piazza). The Mongoloids of North East Asia and the Native Americans split around 40,000 years ago when ancestors of the Native Americans migrated across the Bering Straits and occupied the Americas. About 28,000 years ago the last ice age began, introducing some 18,000 years of intense cold in North East Asia and Europe in which the climate and terrain were similar to those of present day Alaska, northern Canada and Siberia. The severe conditions exerted selection pressure for an increase in intelligence in the Mongoloids and European Caucasoids to deal with the cognitive problems of survival such as hunting large animals, making improved tools and keeping warm. The severe conditions also exerted selection pressure for a reduction of psychopathic personality by increasing the genetic propensities for observing moral rules and for forming stable long-term pair bonds between men and women to rear children as a co-operative enterprise. This explains why the highest mean IQs and lowest mean psychopathic personality are found in the Mongoloids and European Caucasoids, with slightly higher mean IQs and lower psychopathic personality in Mongoloids because these were exposed to the most severe environments.

The ancestors of the Native Americans spent around 20,000 years in the cold environment of North East Asia which would have exerted selection pressure on them for an increase in intelligence and a reduction in psychopathic personality, but they had crossed into the Americas well before the onset of the last ice age, so their IQs were not raised and their psychopathic personality was not reduced to the same degree as in the Mongoloids and European Caucasoids. The Hispanics are largely racial hybrids with mixed Native American and Caucasoid ancestry. Hence they fall intermediate between the two parent races on both intelligence and psychopathic personality. Thus the five racial groups fall into the same rank order for IQ and (inversely) for psychopathic personality, with Mongoloids having the highest mean IQs and lowest psychopathic personality, followed by European Caucasoids, Hispanics and finally with Native Americans and American blacks about equal. American blacks are about the same as Native Americans because they are a hybrid population with about 25 percent of Caucasoid genes (Reed, 1969). The theory requires that African blacks should fall at the opposite extreme of this continuum and have the lowest IQs and the highest psychopathic personality. This requirement is well established for intelligence, for which the mean IQ is about 70 (Lynn, 1997) but remains to be examined for psychopathic personality.

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