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The Recognition Memory Test Examination of ethnic differences and norm validity[☆]

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Abstract

The possibility of racial bias in neuropsychological test materials has received increasing attention in recent years. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether an own-race recognition bias would provide an advantage for Caucasian participants over African American participants on the Faces subtest of the Recognition Memory Test (RMT). Thirty Caucasian and 30 African American undergraduates completed the RMT, Shipley Institute of Living Scale (SILS), and Symbol Digit Modalities Test (SDMT). No significant group difference was found on RMT Faces. However, mean RMT Faces scores for both groups were below the 10th percentile in spite of average scores on the SDMT and SILS. A second study was conducted to further examine the validity of the RMT norms for this age range (i.e., 18–24) and to provide 2-week test–retest reliabilities. The mean RMT Faces subtest score was 39.78 (10th percentile), and 28% of the sample scored at or below the fifth percentile. Test–retest reliabilities were .63 and .64 for RMT Words and Faces, respectively. Results of these studies suggest that re-examination of the current norms for RMT Faces is warranted for adults aged.

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1. Introduction

The Recognition Memory Test (RMT; Warrington, 1984) is used to assess material-specific recognition memory deficits in adults ages 18–70. The RMT consists of two subtests: Recognition Memory for Words (RMW) and Recognition Memory for Faces (RMF). Each subtest is comprised of 50 target stimuli, which are displayed for 3 s and rated as pleasant or unpleasant by the examinee. Next, the examinee is shown each of the 50 target stimuli paired with a distracter and asked to point to (or read aloud) the target stimulus. Advantages of the RMT include its ease of administration and scoring, lack of reliance on verbal responses, minimal demands on other cognitive functions (e.g., attention, organization, and motor functioning), and relatively low vulnerability to the effects of depression and anxiety (Warrington, 1984).

Although the RMT offers these advantages and is widely used, concerns about the basic psychometric properties of the test have been raised. As noted by Kapur (1987), no information about internal consistency or test–retest reliability of the RMT was reported in the manual, interexaminer reliability has not been established, and ceiling effects, especially for younger subjects, were evident on RMW. More recently, its validity as a measure of lateralized memory dysfunction has been questioned (Hermann, Connell, Barr, & Wyler, 1995; Kelly, Johnson, & Govern, 1996; Kneebone, Chelune, & Jueders, 1997; Naugle, Chelune, Schuster, Lueders, & Comair, 1994; Sweet, Demakis, Ricker, & Millis, 2000).

In addition to the above psychometric concerns, it is possible that a racial bias exists on the RMT because the RMF subtest consists of White male faces only. Studies of facial recognition have routinely demonstrated an own-race recognition bias (Brigham & Barkowitz, 1978; Chance, Goldstein, & McBride, 1975), with few exceptions (Lindsay & Wells, 1983). An own-race recognition bias is suggested when a racial group exhibits a superior recognition for own-race faces than for other-race faces (Barkowitz & Brigham, 1982). This bias has been shown to occur equally in Caucasian and African American subjects, accounting for 10 and 11% of the variance, respectively, in recognition ability (Bothwell, Brigham, & Malpass, 1989). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether an own-race recognition bias would provide an advantage for Caucasian participants over African American participants on the RMF subtest of the RMT. We hypothesized that Caucasian examinees would score higher than African American examinees on the RMF but that there would be no significant group difference on RMW.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Sixty undergraduates at a large southern university participated in this experiment in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. Every participant signed written informed consent to participate in the study. Thirty of the participants were Caucasian (5 males and 25 females) and 30 were African American (3 males and 27 females). The average age of the Caucasian group was 19.77 years (S.D. = 1.87), and the average age of the African American

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