

Nested language ideologies: Does context affect accent bias?

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“The moment an Englishman opens his mouth, another Englishman despises him.”

(George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion, 1916)



- Long-standing patterns of **inequality** in professional hiring in the UK

Ashley et al. 2015

- Accent is a **key signal** of social background and can impede access to elite professions

Giles et al. 1975; Kalin et al. 1980; Giles et al. 1981; Alemoru 2015; Roberts et al. 1992

- Specific role of accent in perpetuating unequal outcomes in contemporary Britain **under-explored**

- No large-scale surveys to date of accent attitudes in the UK using **audio stimuli**

cf. Giles 1970; Hiraga 2005

- Little understanding of how attitudes vary by context



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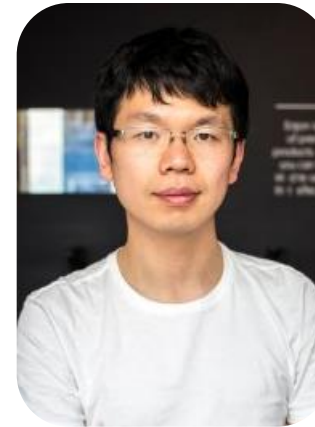
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Attitudes to **accent labels** among general UK public



Attitudes to **audio stimuli** among general UK public



Attitudes to audio stimuli among **legal professionals**



Examining perceptual evaluations in **real-time**



Designing and testing different anti-bias **interventions**



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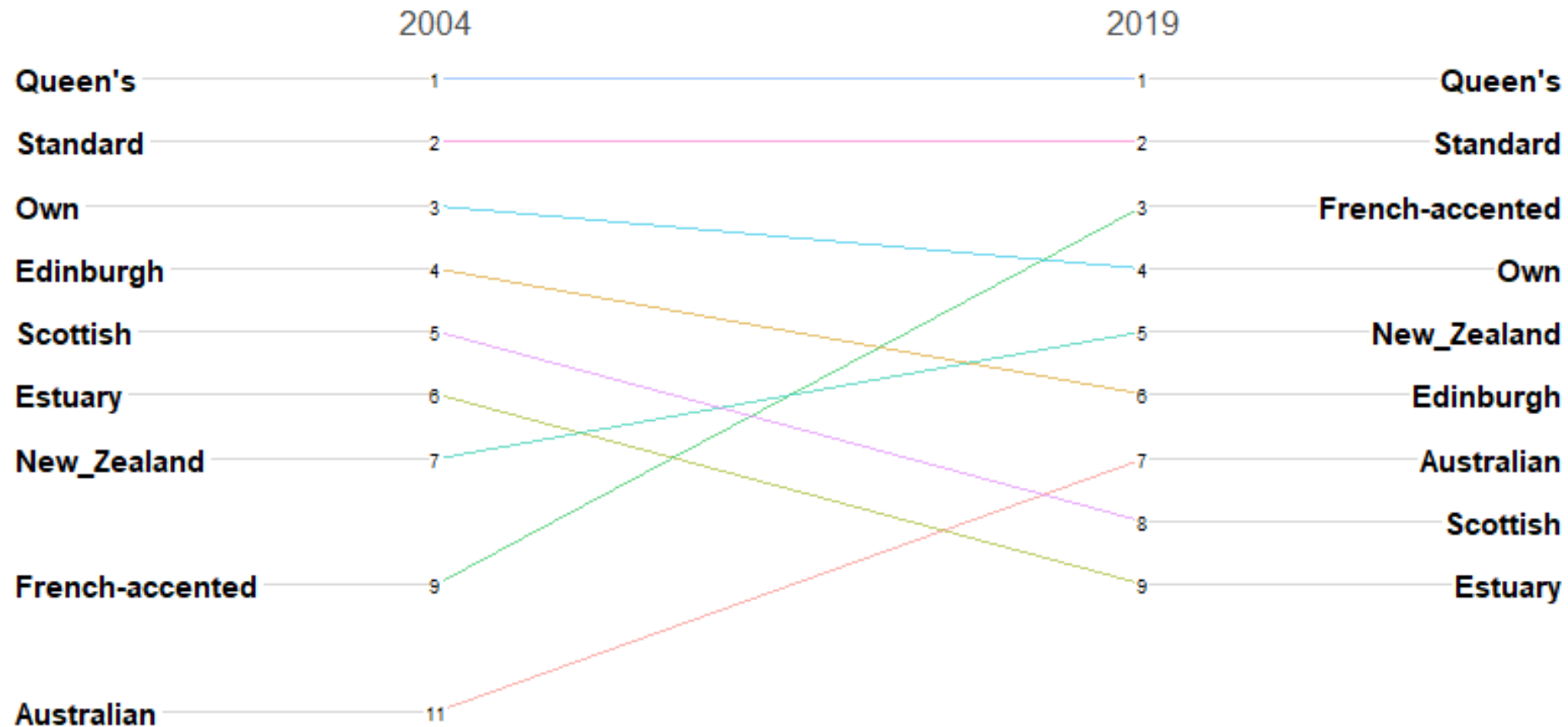
Designing and testing different anti-bias **interventions**

ATTENUATION OF
BIAS BY CONTEXT



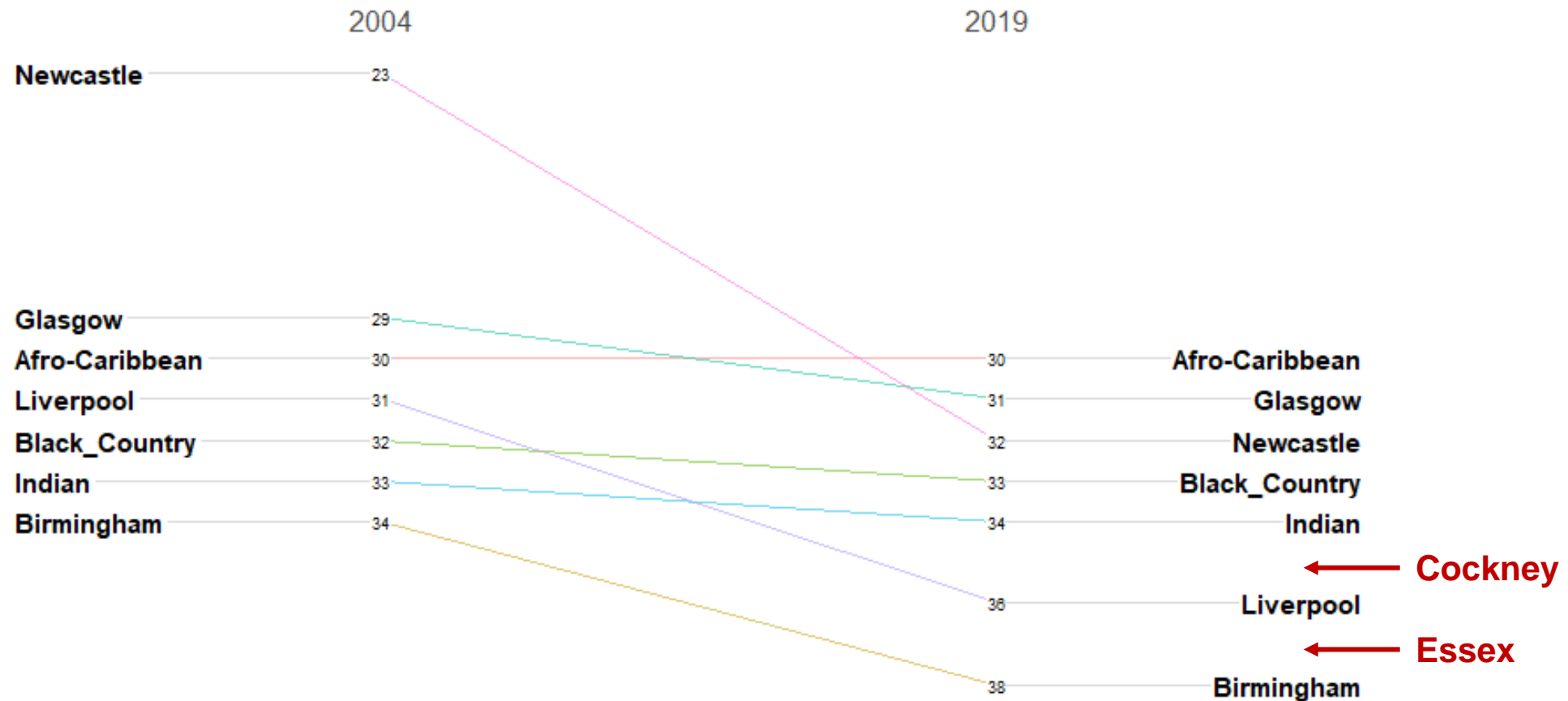
Study I Attitudes to Accent Labels

- Replicated Bishop et al.'s (2005) study of attitudes to accent labels (cf. Giles 1970)
- Nationally representative sample of UK public (N=827)
- Respondents rated 38 accent labels for **prestige** and **pleasantness**



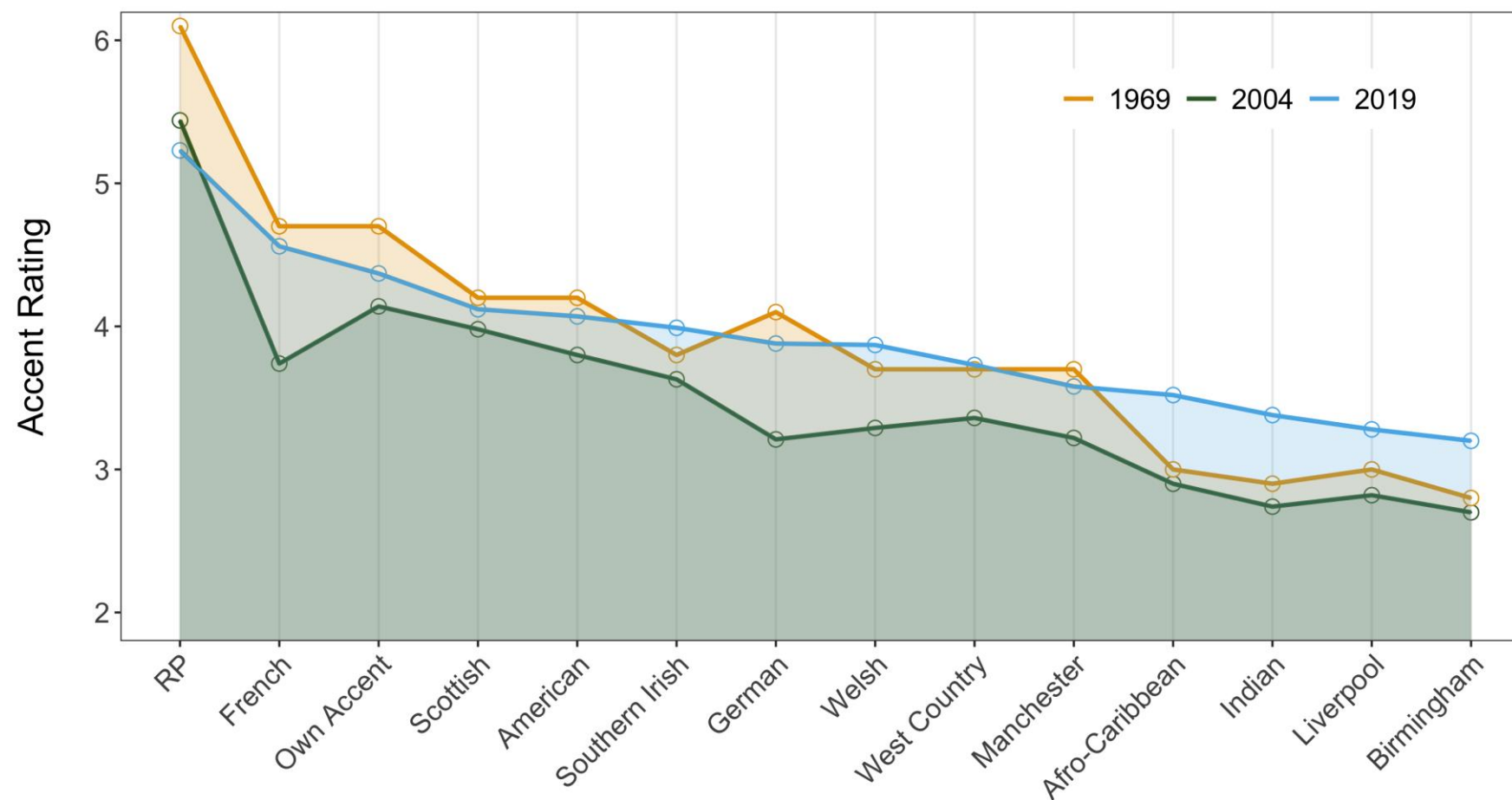
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Study I Attitudes to Accent Labels

- Enduring **hierarchy** of prestige over half a century: 2019, 2004, 1969
 - ↳ National + Inner Circle top-ranked; Industrial + ethnic varieties bottom-ranked
 - ↳ Relative **rankings stable**, slightly lower range of contrast



Age

- A third of accents show a significant age difference, all at the **age 45** boundary.
- Young people “less embedded in the conservative ideology of positively evaluating ‘standard’ accents” (Coupland & Bishop 2007):

→ Mostly younger have higher ratings:

Foreign + ethnic heritage

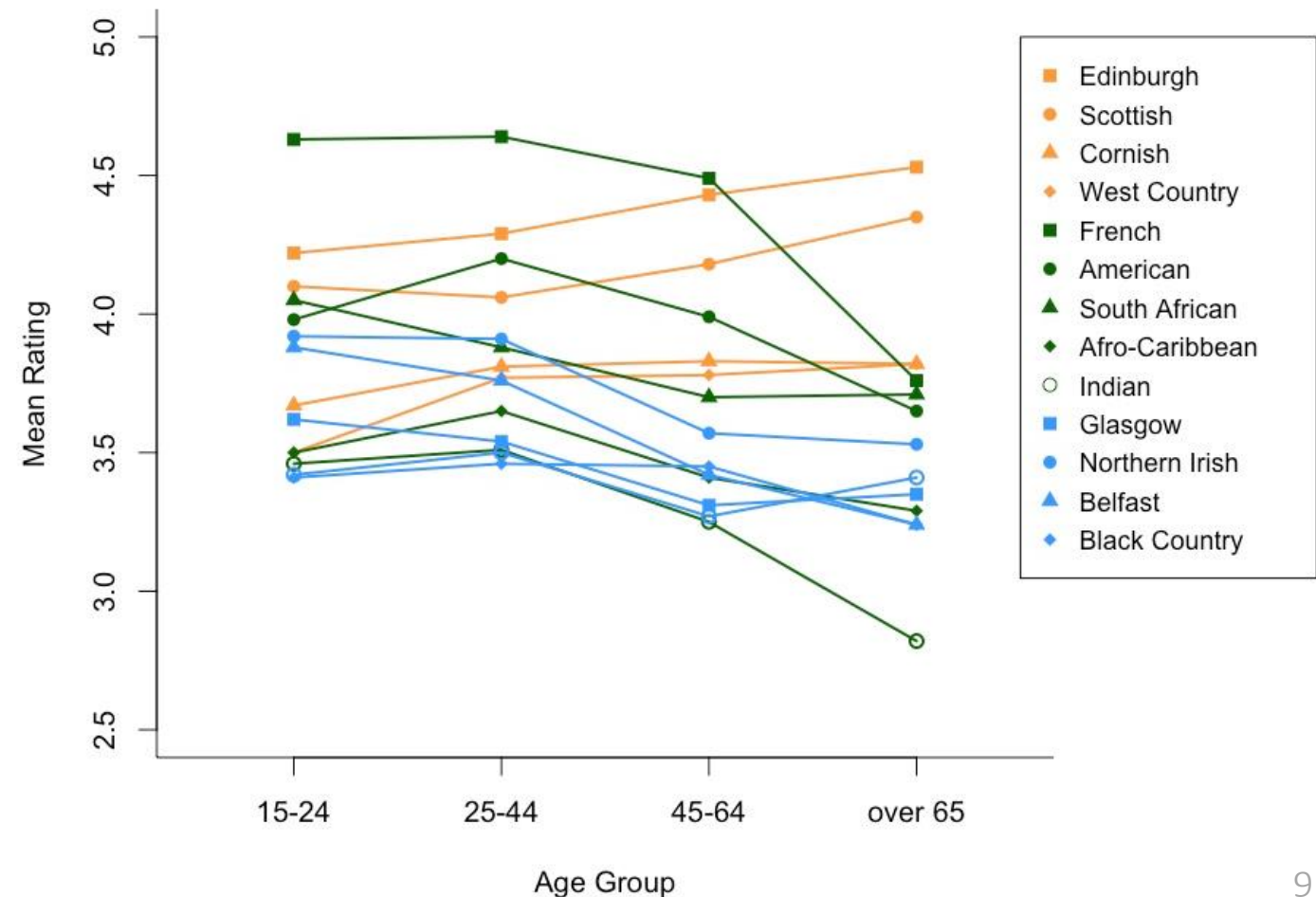
Working class + industrial

→ Older have higher ratings:

UK national + traditional rural

→ Parallels in 2004 data, so not real-time change: age-grading

→ **Normativity in mid-life**



- Further observations (MANOVA and post-hoc testing parallel to Bishop et al. 2005):
 - **Loyalty**
 - In-group loyalty: Scottish, Edinburgh, West Country, Cardiff, ethnicity, working class
 - Out-group bias: Scottish listener ratings of many other regions
 - Self-directed bias: Swansea, Belfast, Black Country (all working class)
 - **Stance towards diversity** Significant effect on ratings, except for Queen's English
 - **Gender** Most change, almost complete disappearance of gender effects
 - **Ethnicity** Not analysed due to replication design, but Black listeners highest, White lowest

*“Conceptual accent evaluation arguably taps into deeply conservative ideologies of language, obscuring socio-psychological shifts over time and **contextual effects**.”*

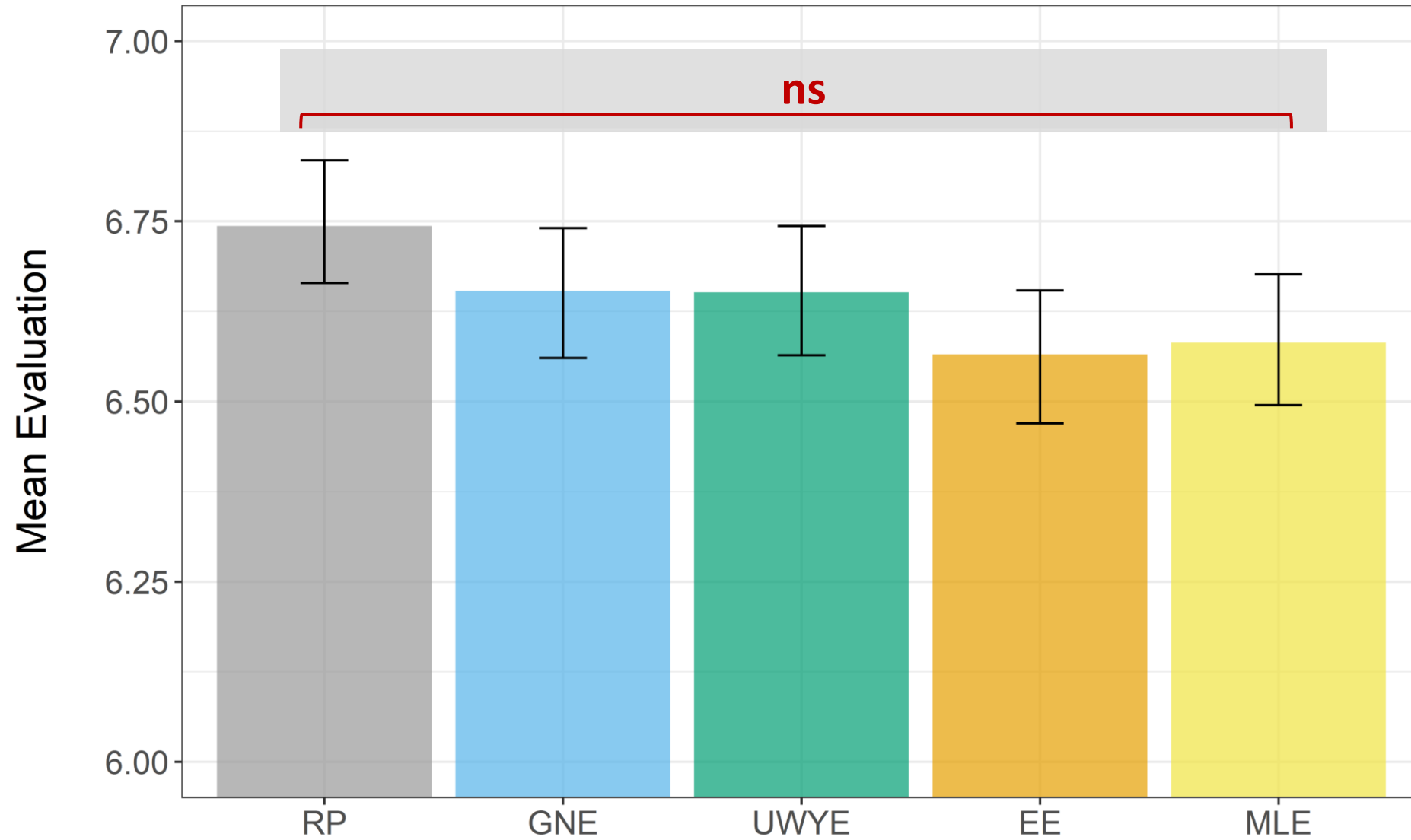
(Bishop et al. 2005)

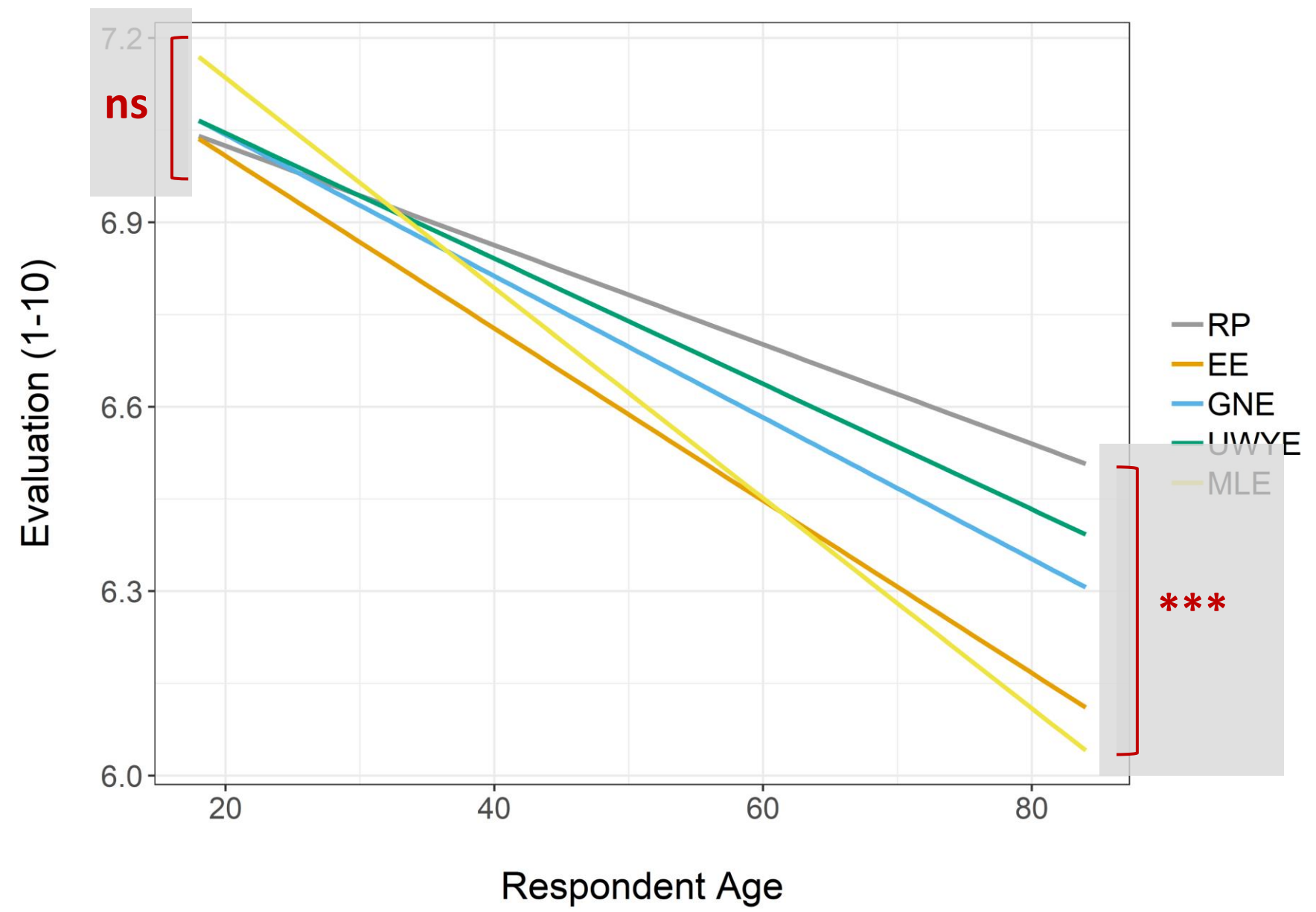
Are such accent preferences equally evident with **audio** stimuli?
in relation to an actual **person**?
in a **situated** context?

Methodology

- Verbal guise study with representative sample of population in England (N=848)
- Listeners evaluated interview performance of “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at a corporate law firm
- Candidates were young men, native speakers of 5 English accents (2 speakers/accents):
 - **Received Pronunciation** (RP)
 - **Estuary English** (EE)
 - **Multicultural London English** (MLE)
 - **General Northern English** (GNE)
 - **Urban West Yorkshire English** (UWYE)
- Stimuli were audio responses to interview questions, some requiring legal expertise and others focussing on more general professional skills (developed with lawyer consultants)
- Listeners rated all 10 speakers (each responding to a different interview question) on response quality, expertise, likelihood for success and likeability = overall evaluation score
- Listeners also provided demographic and social network information, and beliefs about social mobility and diversity more generally

	MIDDLE CLASS	WORKING CLASS
NORTH	GNE	UWYE
SOUTH	RP	EE white MLE multiethnic





Interim summary

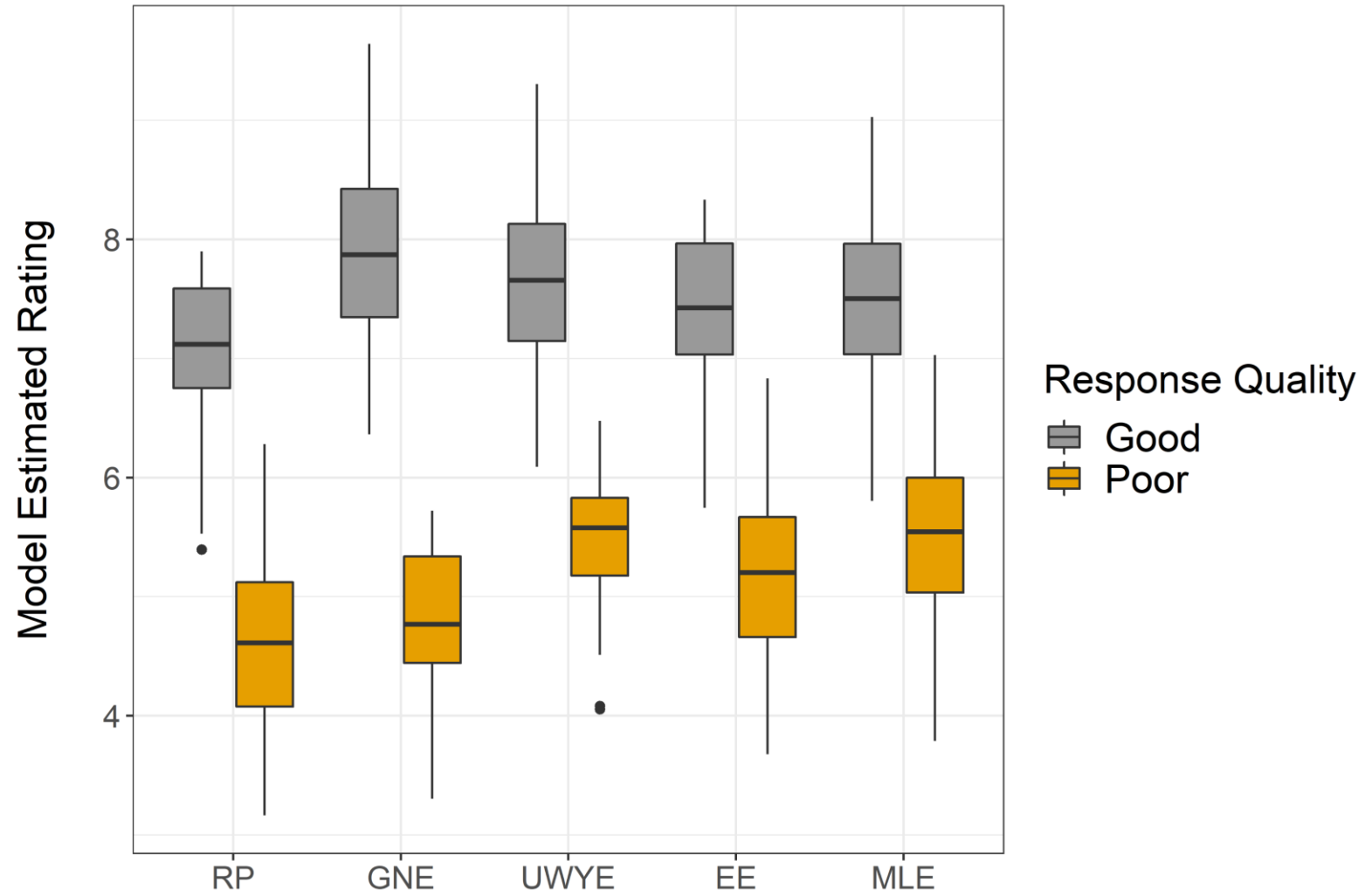
- Hierarchy of accent prestige **mitigated** when in the context of **audio stimuli in mock interview** contexts (milder effects than for accent labels, less variability in ratings)
- Accent evaluations are **moderated by respondent age** — indicative of age-grading than societal change over time (same as for accent labels)
- Effects mitigated by **expert content** and by **motivation to control prejudiced response** (Dunton & Fazio 1997)

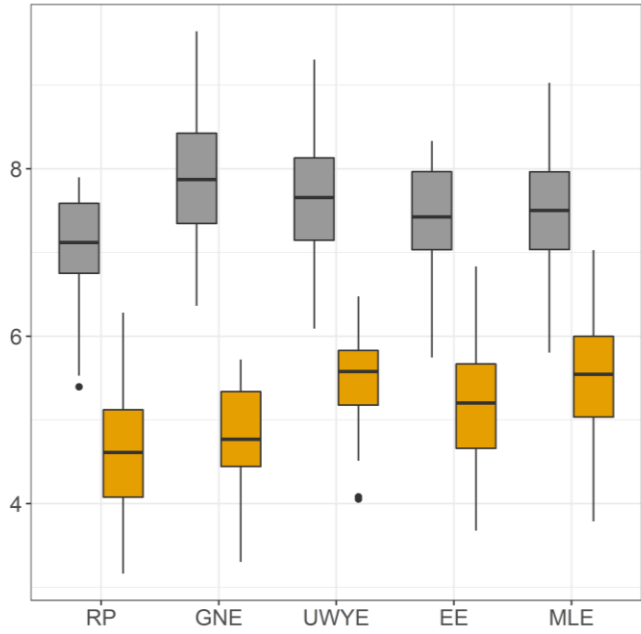
Hearing real voices in a situation with real consequences still shows bias, but to a reduced extent as compared to accent labels.

Are these milder biases found equally among **professional recruiters**?
focusing on **quality**?
in a real **workplace**?

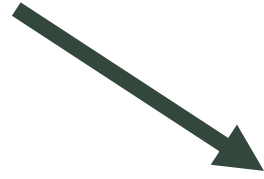
Methodology

- Verbal guise study with lawyers and legal recruiters (N = 61) via fieldwork in commercial law firms (London, Leeds, York)
- Again, interview performance of “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at a corporate law firm
- Same candidates with 5 same accents
- Unlike prior study, all 10 questions required **technical expertise**
- To avoid simple social desirability bias, **quality** of responses varied
 - Developed “better” (6.5/10) and “worse” (4.5/10) responses to questions
 - Pre-tested in written form with 25 experienced lawyers unconnected to project
 - Respondents could not simply ‘up-vote’ non-standard accents; had to judge quality

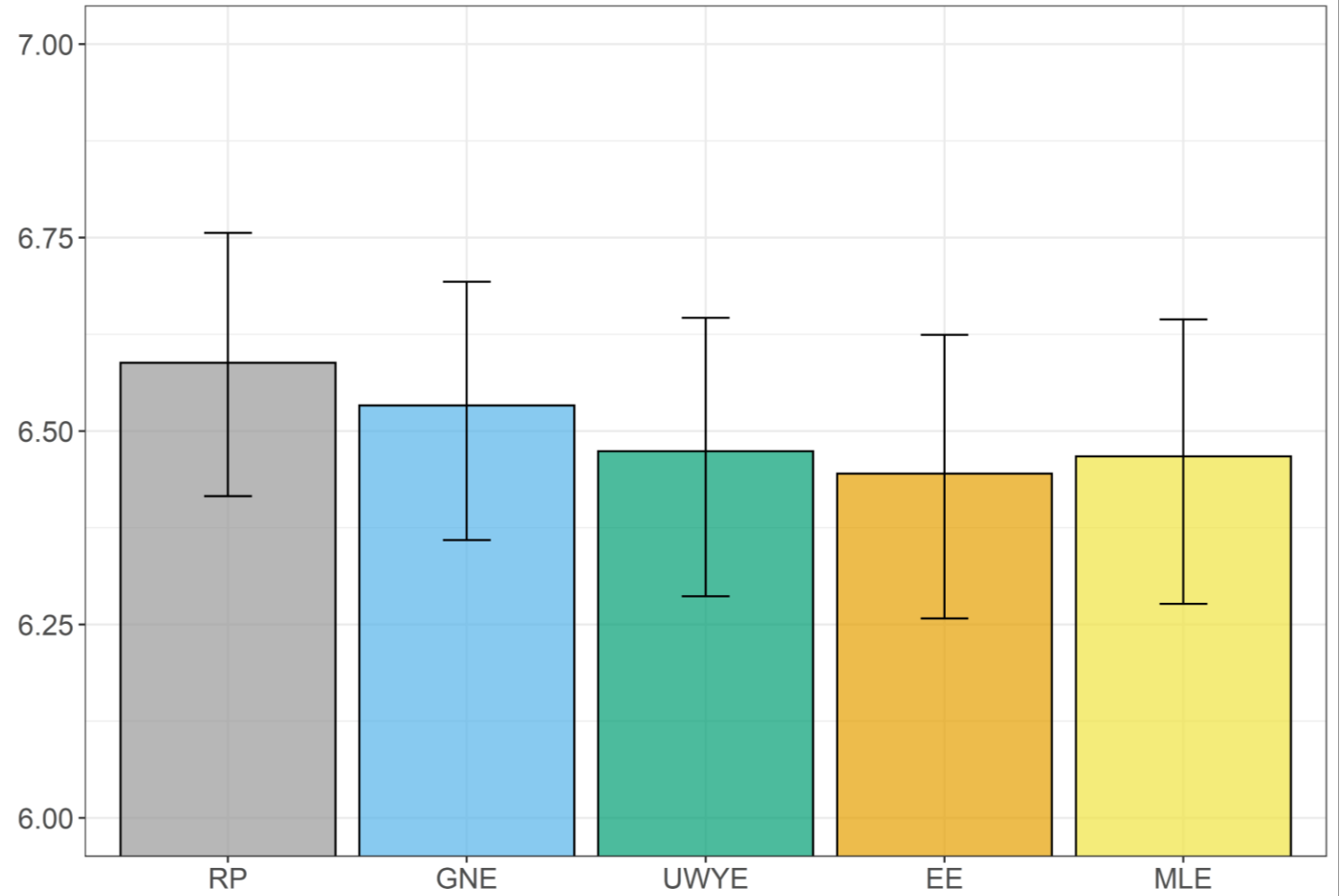




WORKPLACE

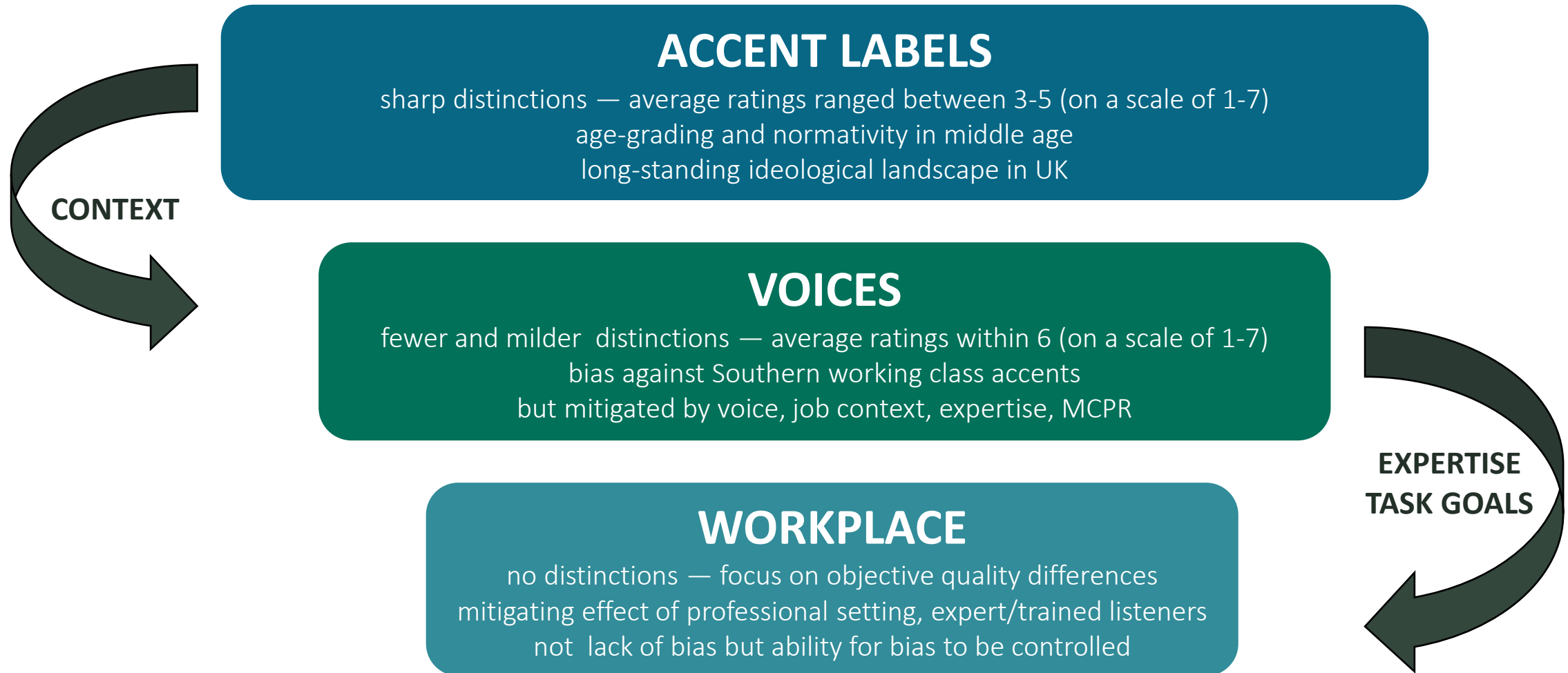


PROFESSIONALS WITHIN NATIONWIDE SURVEY

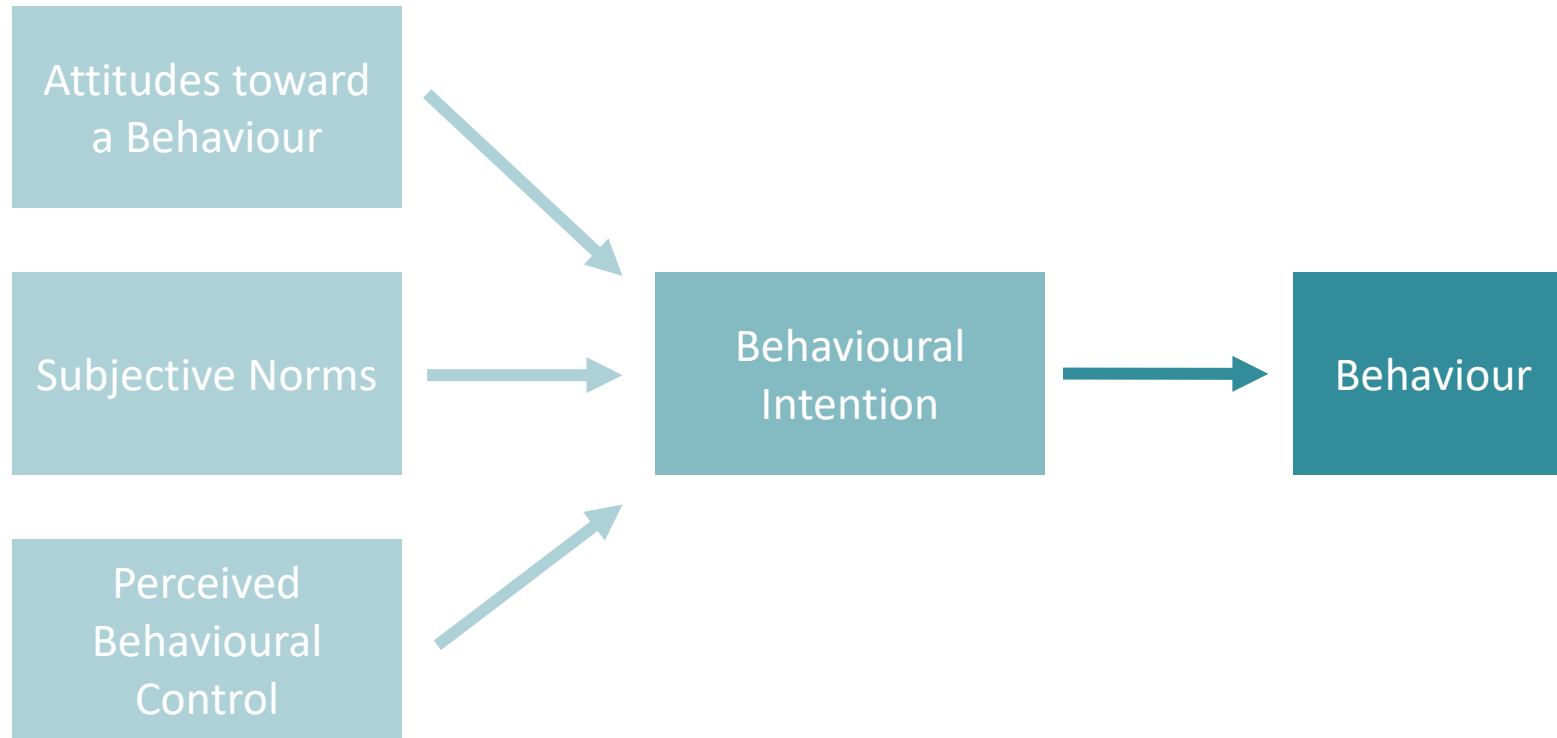


- **No evidence** of bias among lawyers in workplace
- **Quality of response** is sole factor
- We do not conclude that lawyers have no accent bias (cf. professionals in nationwide data) but rather that biases can be controlled
- **Situated context** and **goal-directed behaviour**, possibly also training, increases focus on objective indicator of quality, rather than on accent

“when there is little contextual information, participants rely more heavily on the target linguistic feature to form impressions of the speaker” (Hilton & Jeong 2018)



Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991, 2005)



ACCENT LABELS

general attitudes
decontextualised from behaviour
not as sensitive to norms or control

VOICES

link to behaviour:
action [hiring], context [interview],
target [person speaking]
**effect of attitudes to behaviour,
norms, & control**

WORKPLACE

more direct link to behaviour
**sharper norms for conduct/content
enhanced perceived control**

Thank You!

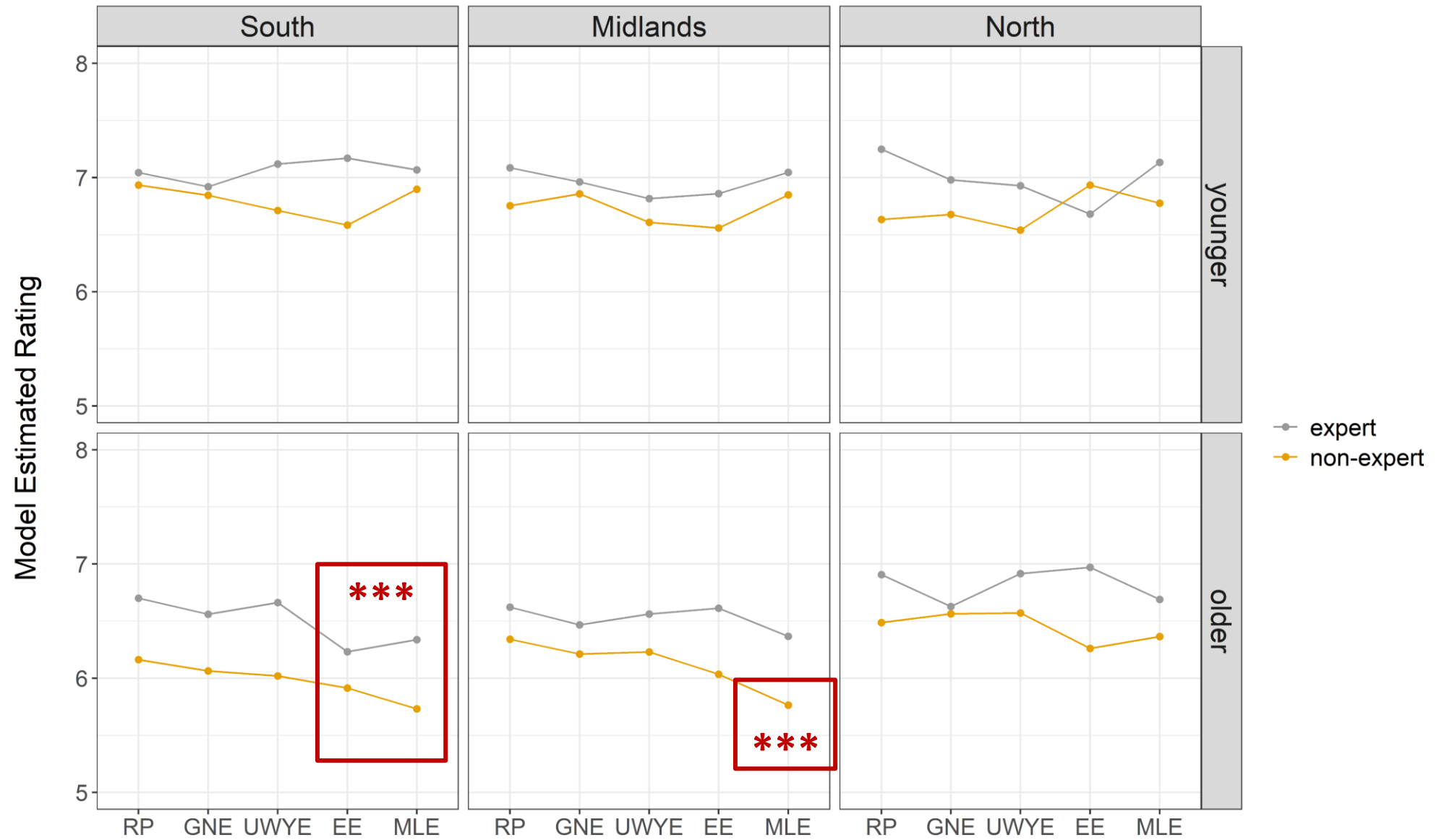


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Study II Attitudes to Voices



Study II Attitudes to Voices

