

Accent Bias in Britain: **Why accents matter**

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What is the problem?

- Accent bias vs. accent discrimination
- Legal status and public awareness of language bias

What is the evidence?

- How does accent bias impede social mobility?
- Effects of recruiting and workplace bias on professional advancement

What can we do about it?

What is the problem?



Accent bias

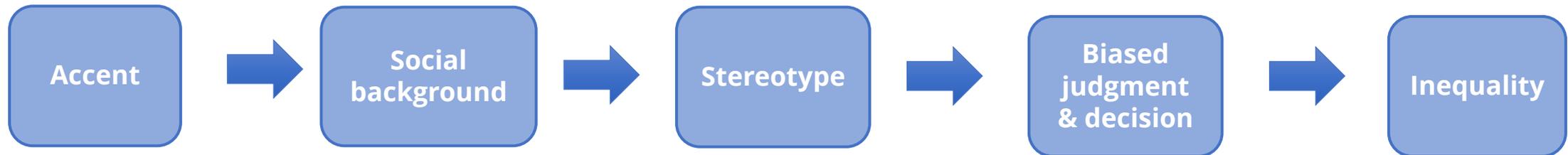
Accent All language vary in accent and grammar — we all have an accent

Bias All humans have systematic deviations in judgement, for fast processing

- Accents trigger social stereotypes — ‘shortcut’ guesses about a person

Discrimination

- Reliance on these stereotypes to judge professional skills is discriminatory



Unconscious bias training

- To increase awareness of (and limit influence of) automatic biases

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

Shaw, *Pygmalion*, 1916

- Accent discrimination has long structured British society and socioeconomic prospects in this way
- Charlene White (first black woman to present ITV's News at Ten)
 - “I don't have the South London accent any more because my parents sent me to elocution lessons from the age of nine – I guess they had foresight.”
- Expected to assimilate to white middle class accent norm
 - Not easy — cognitive pressure for those already at a disadvantage
 - Erasure — of diverse voices in elite professions
 - Isolation — from own social group





Legal status

- Accent is not a protected characteristic under Equality Act 2010
- Yet signals an intersection of many protected characteristics — ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality (also socioeconomic status)
- Accent can be a route for discrimination against these social groups

Public awareness

- Awareness of unconscious accent bias is low
- People express open bias against accents
- Even when it targets groups that they would not express overt bias against



Erez Levon (PI)



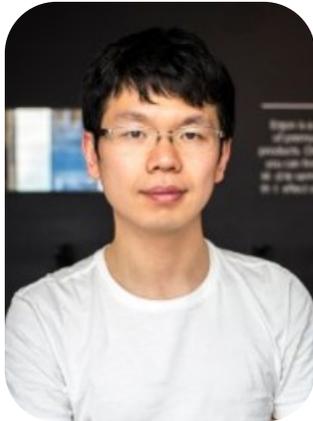
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What is the evidence?



Social Mobility &
Child Poverty
Commission

A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions

June 2015

Dr Louise Ashley, Royal Holloway University of London
Professor Jo Duberley, University of Birmingham
Professor Hilary Sommerlad, University of Birmingham
Professor Dora Scholarios, University of Strathclyde

Cultural Fit

“ This focus on cultural fit can be exclusionary as consciously or otherwise, individuals tend to **recruit in their own image**, or seek the characteristics most associated with professionalism, which in turn map on to social class.

”

Talent and polish

“ Many of the features which signal ‘talent’ are more likely to be possessed by individuals who have been **socialised into middle-class norms** ... Applicants from non-traditional backgrounds are more likely to present to the firm as less confident and/or may seem less articulate than peers who have been privately educated or attended fee-paying schools.

”



2015 SMC Report

“Are they someone you want to share a room with? ... Could I put them in front of the client? ... Are they speaking confidently? ... Do they look uncomfortable? ... Are they doing things outside of their studies that make them well-rounded and people you’ll want to have around?”

“I’m sorry to say it but if you deal with someone who is of similar background to you, one of the most fundamental things that occur in that exchange is efficiency. And, I’m sorry, but it is absolutely true that homogeneity breeds a huge amount of efficiency in organisations... You get my jokes. There’s not a risk that I’m going to offend you by saying something, because we get each other and that’s hugely efficient.”

“If you go back six or seven years ... very occasionally you would get people saying “we couldn’t possibly have this person in the office because of their accent”. And it tended to be that it was a cockney accent or an Essex accent and on a couple of occasions I heard “well, they sound a bit like they’re a used car salesman.” ... That has changed. I’d be very surprised if you heard that anywhere now in the City.”

Our initial surveys

“I hate to admit it, but I’m sure that almost every week my assessment of people I have only just met is affected by their accent. I will assume that someone with a **posh accent is better educated, more intelligent and reliable** than someone with a less smart accent. I should emphasise that I don’t think it’s right to do this, it’s just one of a series of **snap judgements** I make about people I meet.”



Accent bias in Britain

- What are current attitudes to accents in the UK?
- Have they changed?

Consequences for fair access

- Do these biases influence recruiters' judgements of employability?
- Would they rate a **poor** answer as good if it's in an RP accent?
- Would they rate a **good** answer as bad if it's in an under-represented accent?



1: The UK has a well-established hierarchy of accent prestige.

National Standard

Received Pronunciation
Queen's English
Scottish
Welsh
Australian
New Zealand
American

Local Non-Standard

Norwich
Bristol
Leeds
Manchester
Birmingham
Newcastle
Cockney

Foreign & Ethnic

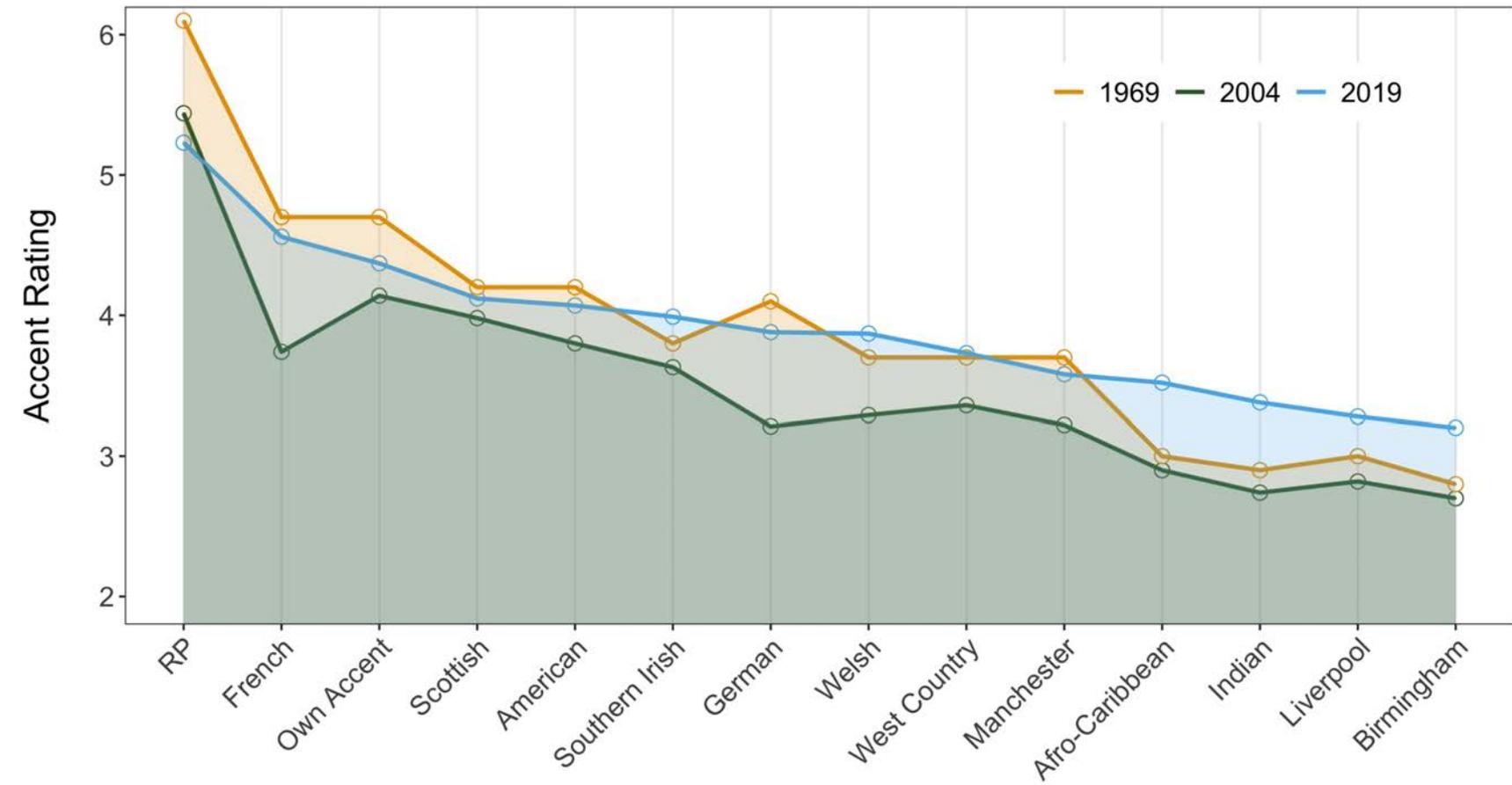
Afro-Caribbean
Chinese
Indian
French
German
Spanish
Multicultural London

- 38 accent labels, 828 adults across UK
- Representing demographic balance of age, region, gender, social class, ethnicity
- Rated accent labels on a scale of 1-7:

How prestigious is this accent?

How pleasant is this accent?

1: The UK has a well-established hierarchy of accent prestige.



- Preference for
 - RP
 - National standard accents
 - French accent
- Bias against
 - Working class accents
 - Minority ethnic accents
- Little change over 50 years

2: These biases affect judgements of competence when people hear job candidates speaking.



Received Pronunciation



Estuary English



Multicultural London English



General Northern English



Urban West Yorkshire English

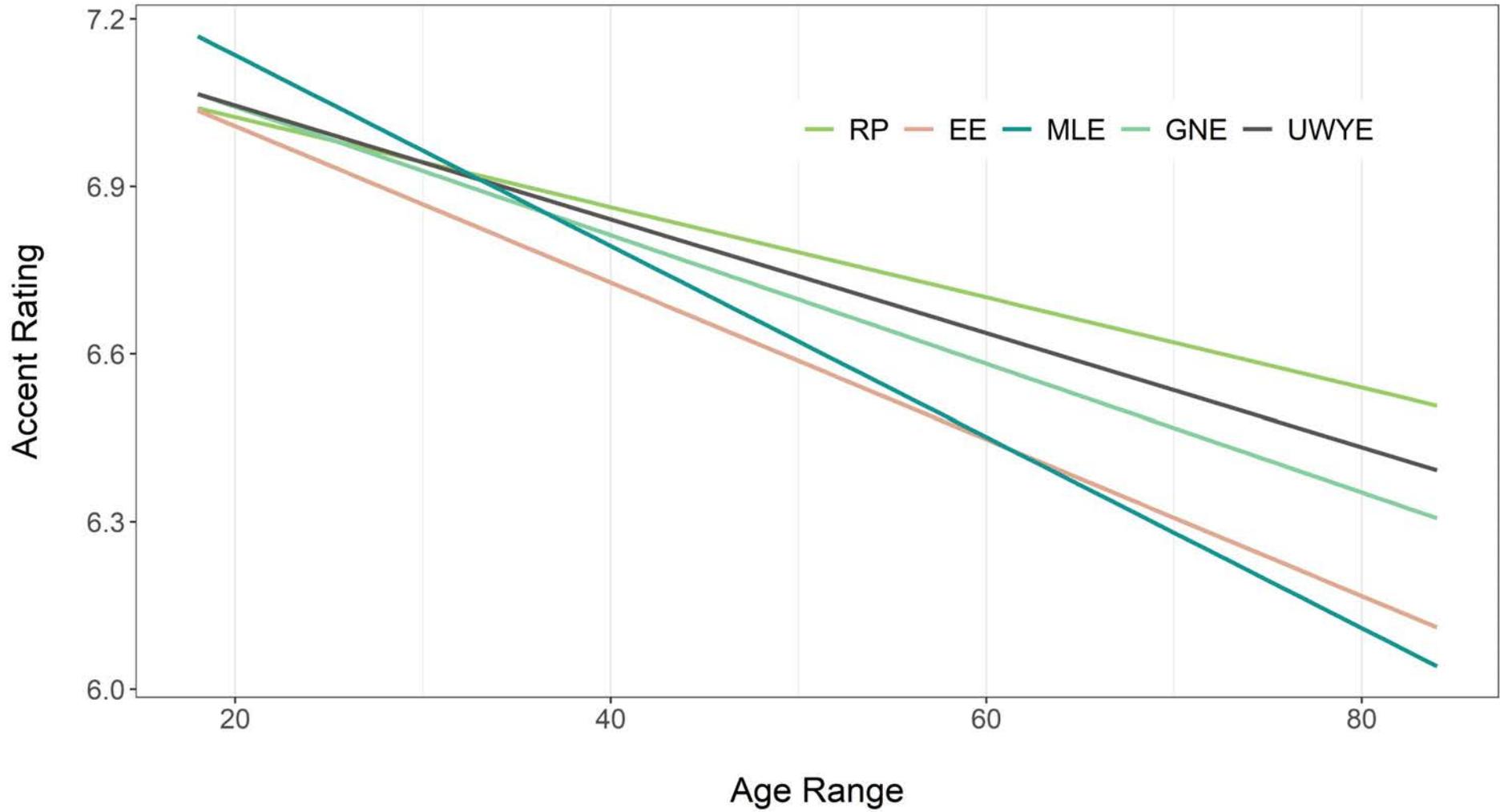
INTERSECTIONALITY OF ACCENT

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

Study design

- 2 “job candidates” per accent, all male
- Answering questions for trainee position
- Content and grammar identical
- Rated for **competence**, **expertise**, **likelihood of success** and **personal likeability**
- N=1062, across UK, all occupational domains

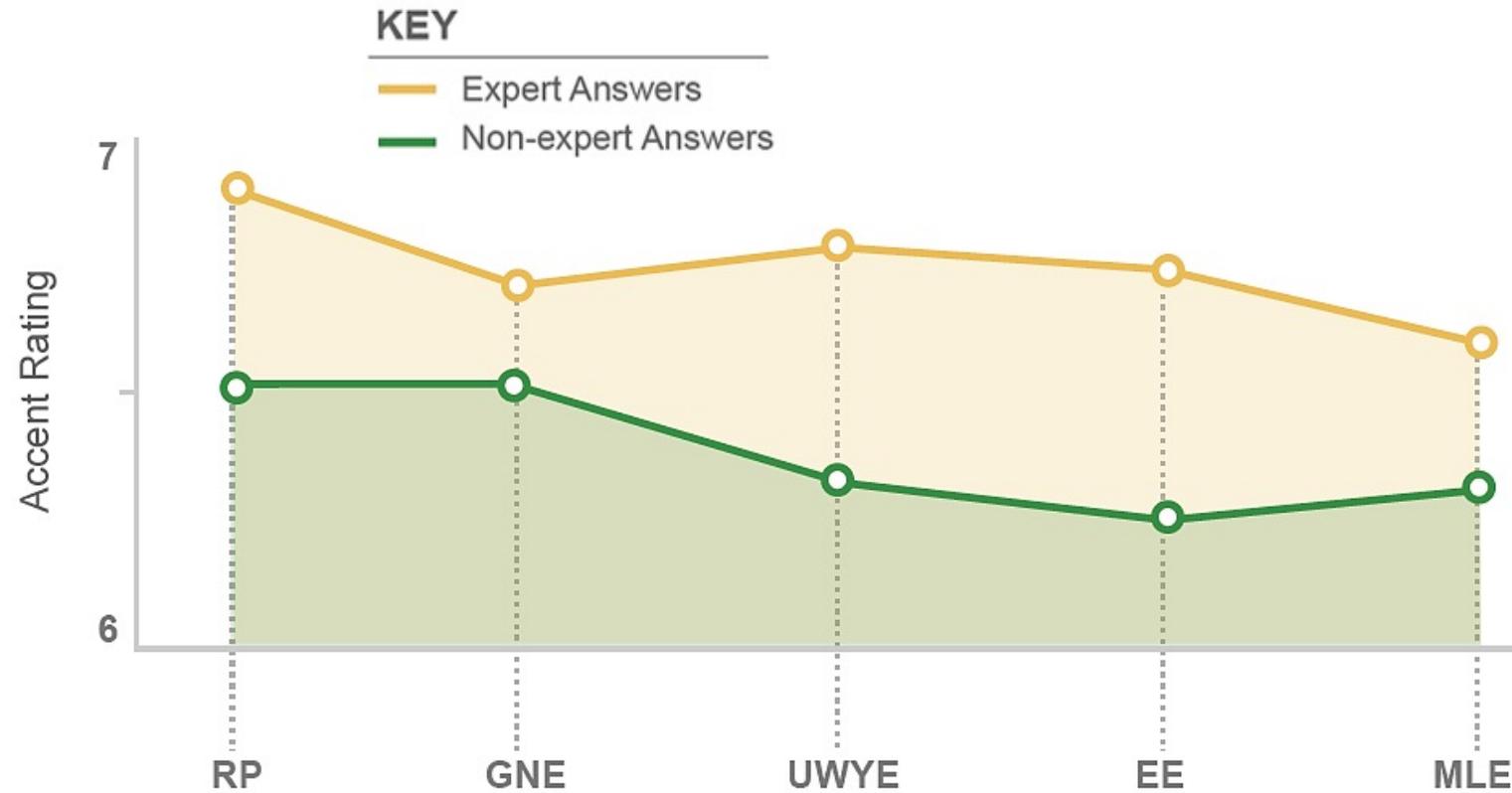
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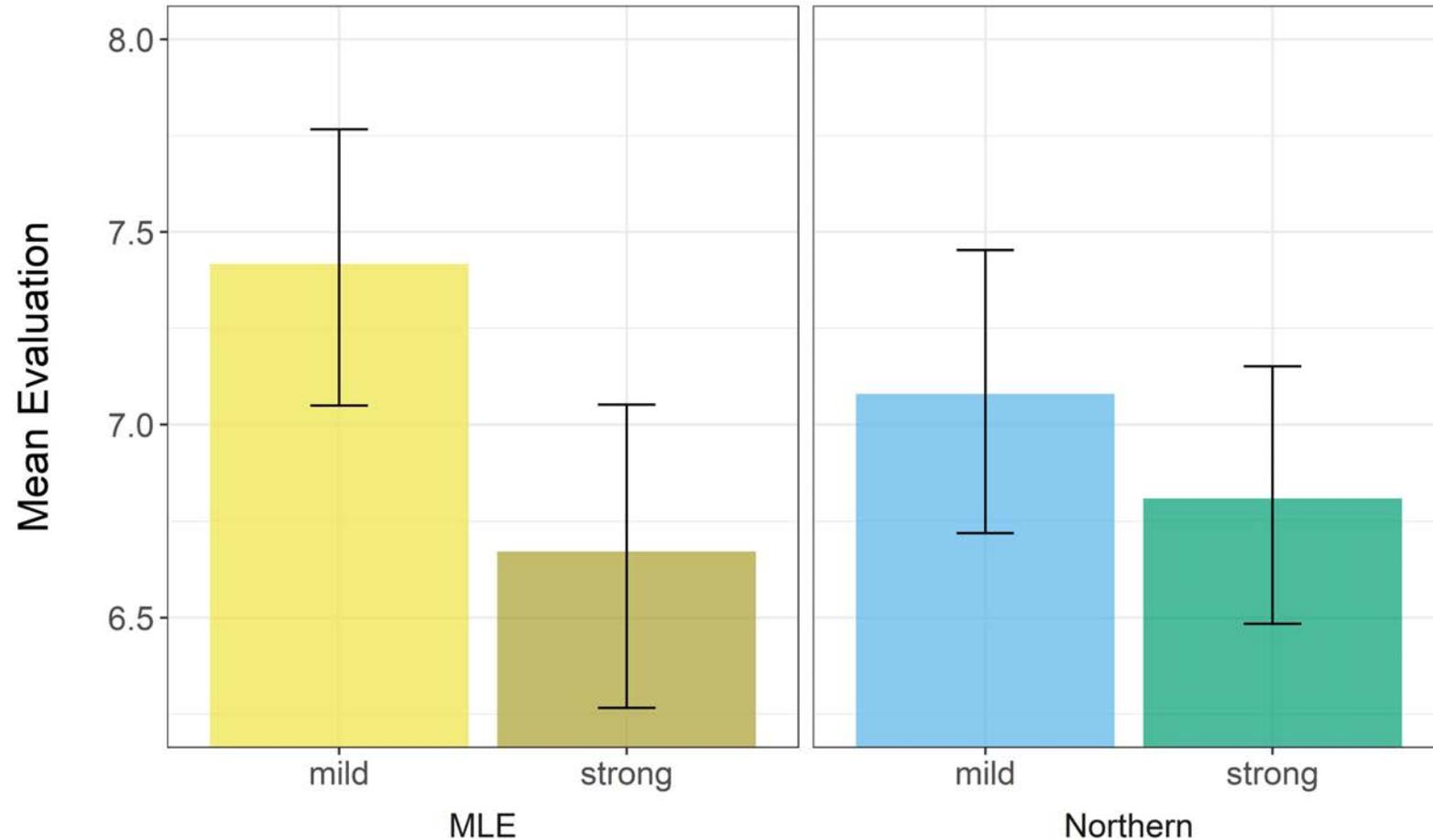
More bias

- Above age 45
- In Southern England
- In higher social classes

3. The effect is mitigated by expert content.



4. The effect is exacerbated by intersection of social class and ethnicity.



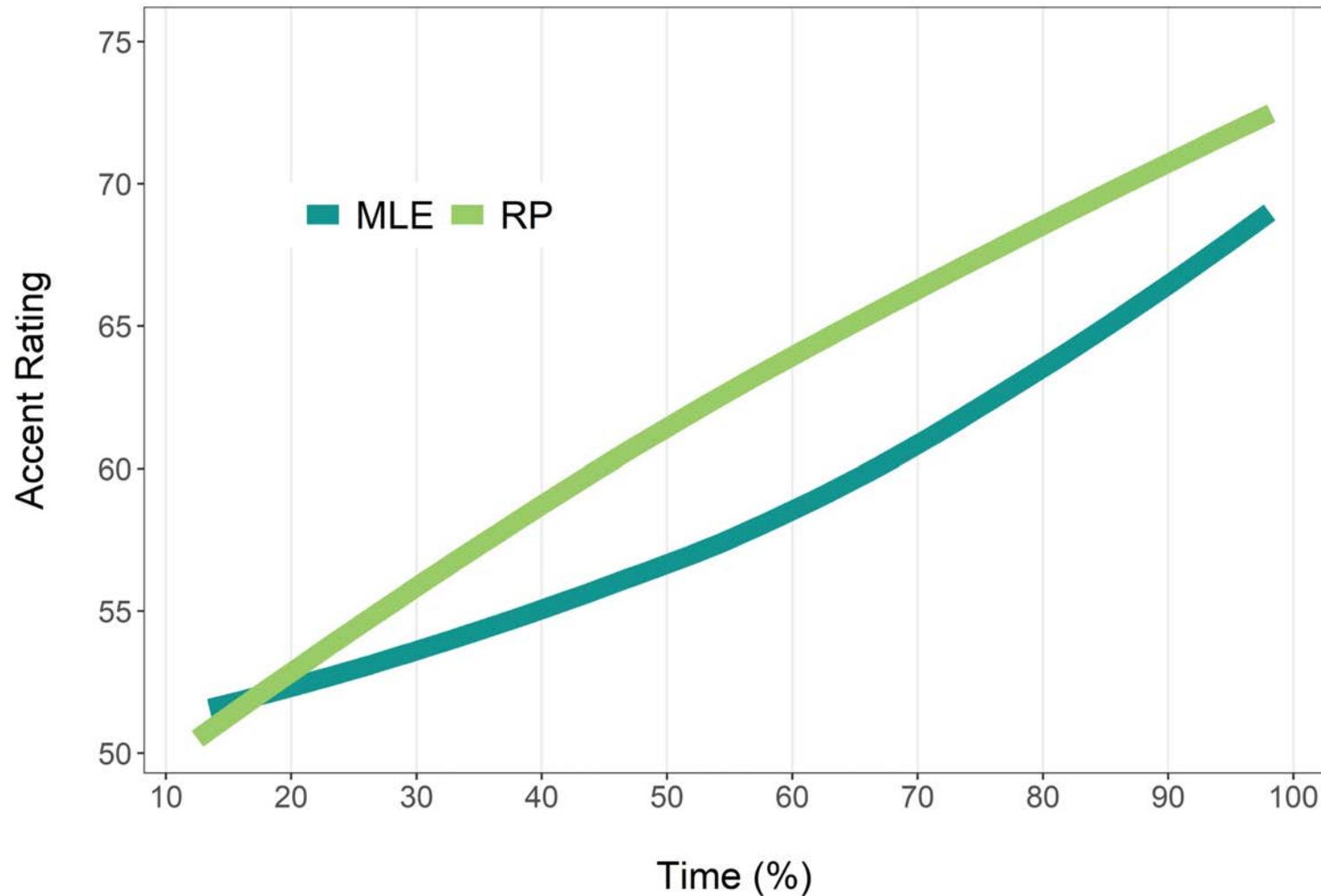
Accentedness

- Significant effect on rating of MLE speakers
- Not Northern speakers

Pressure on MLE speakers

- Penalty for failure to modify accent
- Reward for sounding 'safely' diverse

5. The effect can even be observed even in real time.

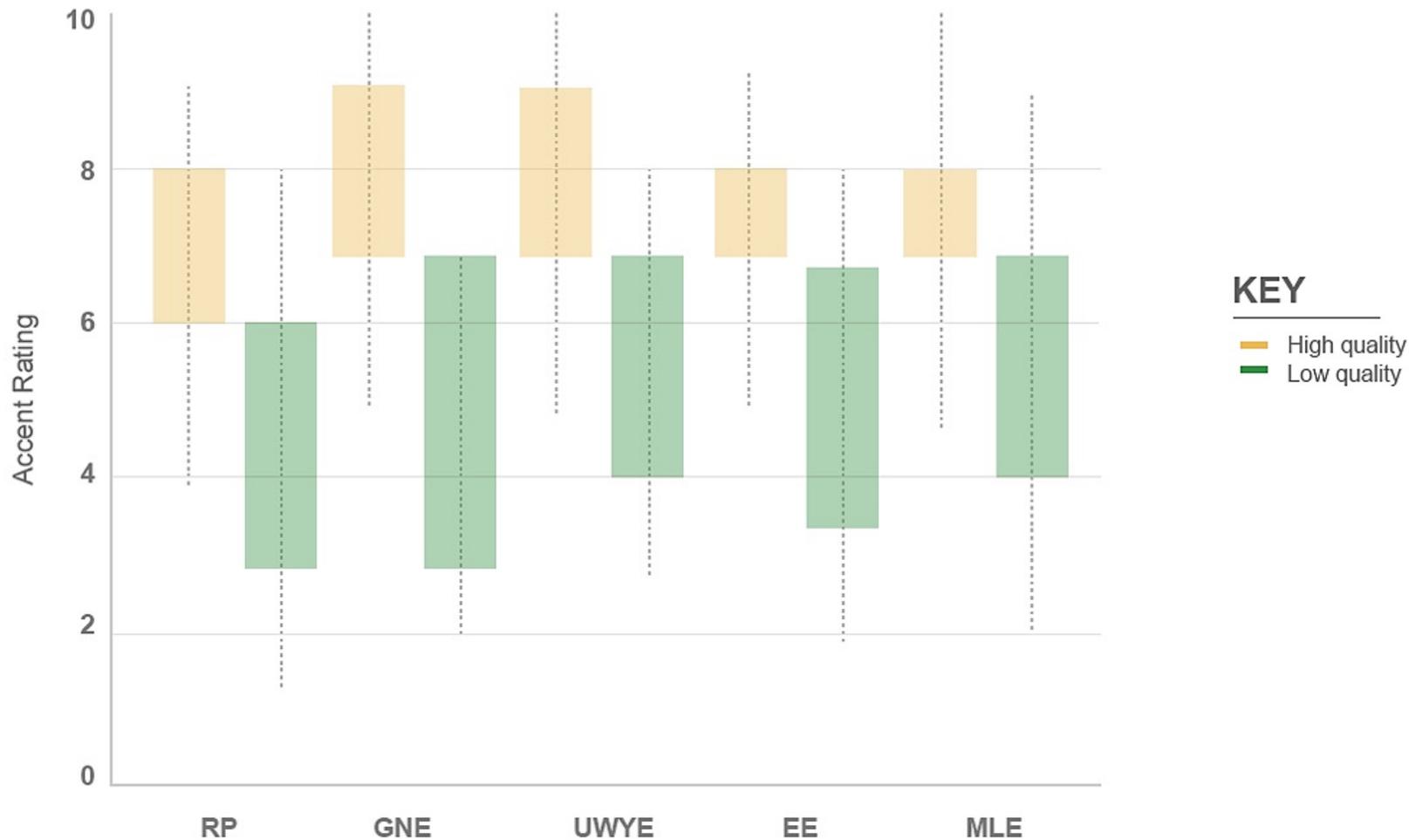


While listening

- RP gets early boost
- Jury is out for MLE until expert content is heard

Burden of proof for MLE speakers.

6. Trained legal professionals can suppress bias.



Legal professionals

- Can distinguish a mix of good vs poor responses
- Irrespective of accent
- No age effects

Potential for change

- Not lack of bias
- Ability to suppress bias



Bad news

- Persistent bias against working-class and ethnic accents over half a century

Better news

- Bias has weakened slightly in recent years
- Less biased when listening to job candidates
- Effect of expert content

Good news

- Legal professionals show ability to tune out accent biases and focus on content
- This does not mean that they don't exercise bias in the workplace in practice





Pre-interview

- CVs with ethnic minority names received significantly fewer replies from potential employers than identical CVs with typically white names

(USA: Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004; UK: Wood et al. NatCen 2009)

During interview

- via accent-based judgements
- via conversational cues (e.g. less nodding, affirming; more awkward turn-taking)
= Higher stress for certain candidates

Post-interview

- Even if successful, bias may persist in workplace
- Can lead to isolation from colleagues
- Subtly impede career progression via other- or even self-exclusion

What is the solution?



Raising awareness



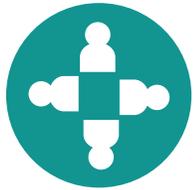
Identifying irrelevant information



Committing to fairness and objectivity



Increasing accountability



Appealing to multiculturalism and diversity



Raising awareness

Recruiters who read the following statement before judging job interview candidates had significantly smaller differences in their ratings of identical interview responses in different accents:

Recent research has shown that, when evaluating candidates' performance, interviewers in the UK can be influenced by the candidates' accents of English. In particular, they tend to rate candidates who speak with a "standard" accent more favourably than candidates who speak with "non-standard" accents. This is an example of so-called "accent bias". The focus should be on the knowledge and skills of the candidate, not their accent. Please keep this in mind when assessing the suitability of candidates.



Raising awareness

- Not always effective, e.g. unconscious gender or racial bias training
- Our result suggests much lower awareness of the problem of accent bias
- So considerable potential for addressing it with simple training

A note on implicit bias

- Unconscious bias training only raises awareness of bias
- It does not eliminate it
- Biases and stereotypes are eliminated through real change
 - real diversity in school, university, workplace environments



Home

About ▾

Our work ▾

Results ▾

Training and tools ▾

Resources ▾

Training for recruiters

This page offers a 15-minute interactive tutorial to raise awareness of accent bias and help reduce its effects in hiring.

The tutorial will cover: why accent differences exist, what accent bias is, what accent discrimination is, and provide evidence-based advice on how to minimise it. You will also be informed about current attitudes to accent in Britain and whether or not such bias necessarily leads to discrimination when job candidates are evaluated.

15-minute interactive tutorial:
<https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-for-recruiters/>

🕒 Step 1

🕒 Step 2

🕒 Step 3

🕒 Step 4

🕒 Step 5

🕒 Step 6

Language at work

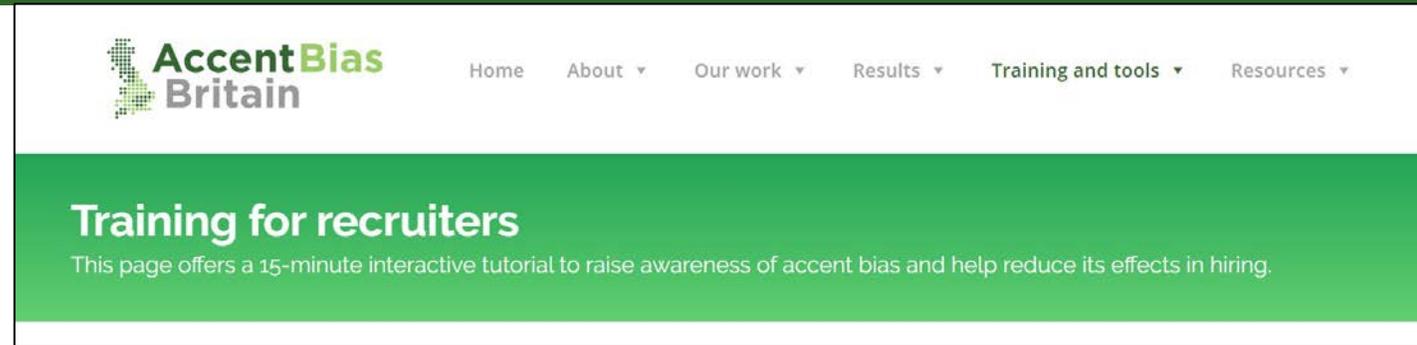
Language form	What does it do?	Does it affect quality of work?
accent (vowels, consonants)	Signal social group	No
formality (grammar, lexicon, humour)	Match tone or style	Somewhat
self-expression, clarity (discourse structure)	Structure argument	Yes
logic, evidence, confidence (content)	Convey knowledge	Yes

Realistic and fair expectations

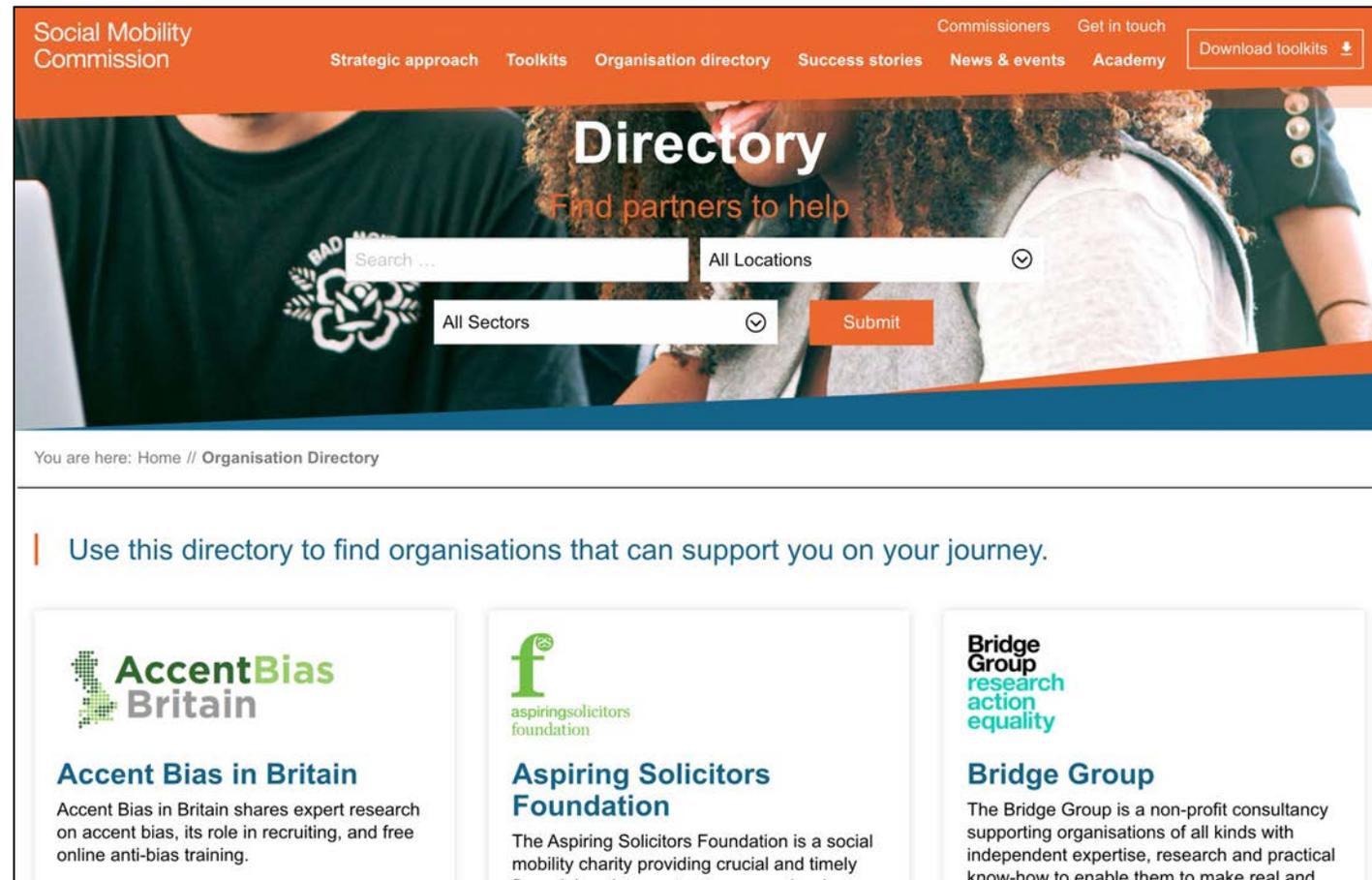
- Employers should only assess those aspects of language that affect work
- Accent is not directly relevant to work communication
- It is also the hardest for people to change

Summary of current public-facing work

- Web resources
- Interactive tutorials
 - For HR teams
 - For students
- Workshops with HR teams, law firms, universities, other sectors
- Accent added to Social Mobility Commission's Professional Services Toolkit
- Addition to Equality Act Review
www.equalityactreview.co.uk



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the Accent Bias Britain website. The logo is on the left, followed by links for Home, About, Our work, Results, Training and tools, and Resources. Below the navigation is a green banner with the text 'Training for recruiters' and a sub-headline: 'This page offers a 15-minute interactive tutorial to raise awareness of accent bias and help reduce its effects in hiring.'



The screenshot shows the 'Organisation Directory' page of the Social Mobility Commission. The header includes the commission's name and navigation links for Strategic approach, Toolkits, Organisation directory, Success stories, News & events, and Academy. There is also a 'Download toolkits' button. The main content area features a search bar with a 'Search ...' input, a dropdown for 'All Locations', another dropdown for 'All Sectors', and a 'Submit' button. Below the search bar, a breadcrumb trail reads 'You are here: Home // Organisation Directory'. A blue box contains the text: 'Use this directory to find organisations that can support you on your journey.' Below this are three featured organization cards: Accent Bias Britain, Aspiring Solicitors Foundation, and Bridge Group, each with a logo and a brief description.

Accent bias **exists**.

It leads to unequal outcomes in many sectors of life.

It places a significant added **burden** on already disadvantaged speakers of working-class, ethnic minority, and regional accents.

It can be **addressed** through awareness raising.

www.accentbiasbritain.org

@accentbias

Thank You!



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Inconsistent feedback (during interviews or meetings)

- Eye gaze
- Smiling, backchanneling
- Facilitative overlap vs. awkward interruption
- Casual remarks and cultural references

Unintended consequences

- Can subtly, even unconsciously, convey (dis)preference
- Undermines confidence in candidate's/colleague's subsequent turns
- Heightened anxiety for some candidates/colleagues more than others

Example: Supportive interviewer with white British candidate



- (1) **I:** so all we're looking for here is er:m
(2) an example where you have done similar type of routine repetitive work
(3) **C:** painting magnolia for three weeks ((laugh))
(4) that was the most (.) painting
(5) you couldn't get anything more er repetitive (2)
(6) walls with nothing just walls the size of hhh
(7) just giant walls in a warehouse say fifty feet high (.)
(8) painting one colour (.) day in and day out day in and day out ((laugh))
(9) there ain't nothing more repetitive than that (.)
(10) you'll be pleased to be paint (.)
(11) white ceilings was was a bit of a pleasure (2)
(12) and with printing as well (.) it's d- I'll let write (5)
(13) **I:** ((laugh)) (3) and this this what you're talking about
(14) except you (was) seven hours a day as well [(that long)]
(15) **C:** yeah you we're] talking r- half hour half hour lunch and it's wouldn't even class it as lunch eating on the job (.)

Interviewer:

← Minimized request

Interviewee:

← Comfortable with humour

← Shared vernacular speech

Interviewer:

← Facilitating laughter

← Co-constructing answer

← Sympthetic content



Example: Unsupportive interviewer with Maltese candidate:

5. C: I mean I'm Maltese {[C moves arms] I tend to talk with my hands} and one
6. thing that's really brought up quite often when I'm talking in a meeting you
7. know I'm sitting there with my]} {[C gesticulates with hands, I looks up and
8. nods] hands flailing away like this} {[I looks down] which puts everybody off
9. because they're looking at you know {[I looks up, C moves arms]what on
10. earth is she doing} {[I looks down] doing this [business
11. I: right]
12. C: so I've made a conscious effort to keep my hands in my lap [I mean
13. I: i-]
14. C: that that is one [thing that somebody told me
15. I: how do you er:m}] {[I looks up] (.) how do you ensure though if you
16. (choose) somebody in your team that maybe they they maybe don't want to be
17. too critical you know they're only really sort of being positive or being nice
18. for the sake of it really is that not a danger some times
19. C: that is a danger but-
20. I: they might not want to say that actually you was pretty- you were just
21. mumbling it was pretty awful but I daren't say that because she's the boss}
22. (fifteen seconds of talk deleted)
23. I: so can you give me some examples of things you've picked up then from
24. using that
25. C: well I just did that that was the one that comes [to mind
26. I: the one about are there any other sort of things that
27. C: er:m-
28. I: apart from you know your own sort of body language and things which (.)
29. you know I think from presentations we always there's always things to pick

Interviewee: Efforts to build rapport

Interviewer:

← Decreasing conversational involvement

← Interruption

← Absence of co-constructed content

← Negative, unsympathetic content

← Minimal backchannelling

← Authoritative requests