Appendix 4: Psychology and the courtroom (Cognitive)

Key research: Dixon et al. (2002) Accents of Guilt: Effects of Regional Accent, Race, and Crime Type on Attributions of Guilt

Previous research and context to the study

• Social psychological research in this area e.g. Halo Effect

Hypotheses

• It was predicted that a ‘Brummie’ suspect would elicit stronger attributions of guilt than a standard accented suspect.
• The study also looked at the influence of the race of the suspect and type of crime committed.

Participants

• 119 white undergraduate psychology students from the University of Worcester
• 24 m, 95 f with a mean age of 25.2 years.

Research method

• Lab experiment
• IVs:
  1) Accent (Birmingham/standard)
  2) Race
  3) Type of crime (armed robbery/cheque fraud)
• DV: Participants’ attributions of guilt.

Procedure

• Participants listened to a 2-minute recorded transcript (based on a real case). In all conditions the conversation was between a middle-aged male police inspector and a young male suspect
• Matched guise procedure to manipulate accent
• Race manipulated by contextual cues in the transcript; two rating scales
• Suspect’s level of guilt from ‘innocent’ to ‘guilty’ measured on a 7-point rating scale
• Speech Evaluation Instrument (measuring Superiority, Attractiveness and Dynamism).

Results

• The ‘Brummie’ suspect was rated lower on superiority
• The ‘Brummie’ suspect was rated as more guilty (moderate strength)
• There was an interaction between Brummie accent/black suspect/blue collar worker with significantly higher guilt findings for this combination of variables
• Suspect’s ratings of guilt were predicted by higher ratings of ‘Superiority’ and ‘Attractiveness’.

Conclusions

• A range of social psychological factors can influence perception of a suspect’s guilt including accent, race and type of crime.

Evaluation Issues

• Experimental control
• Ecological validity
• Sample generalizability
• Psychology as a science.