

Background

Long-standing patterns of **inequality** in professional hiring in the UK (Ashley et al. 2015)

Accent = key signal of social background and may impact ability to access elite professions

- e.g. lowest status jobs most-suitable for non-standard accent speakers (Giles et al. 1981; Alemoru 2015)
- e.g. discrimination of non-standard accents in workplace (Roberts et al. 1992)

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



George B. Shaw,
Pygmalion, 1916

Research Questions

Does accent bias affect public attitudes about a job candidate's **perceived suitability** for employment?

Are these attitudes affected by listener **background** (e.g. age, region, etc.) and **psychological profile**?

Methods

Verbal guise study

- Representative sample of **England** (N= 846)

Listeners:

- evaluated** all 10 “candidates” for trainee solicitor position at corporate law firms on:
 - Overall quality of candidate's answer
 - Does the candidate's answer show expert knowledge?
 - Will the candidate succeed as a lawyer?
 - Would you like to work with the candidate?
 - Rate the candidate overall
- provided social and linguistic **backgrounds**:
 - region, gender, age, class and networks
 - beliefs about social mobility in the UK
 - motivation to control prejudiced reactions (**MCPR**)

Candidates: 10 young men (mid-20s), **native speakers** of 5 English accents (2 speaker/accents):

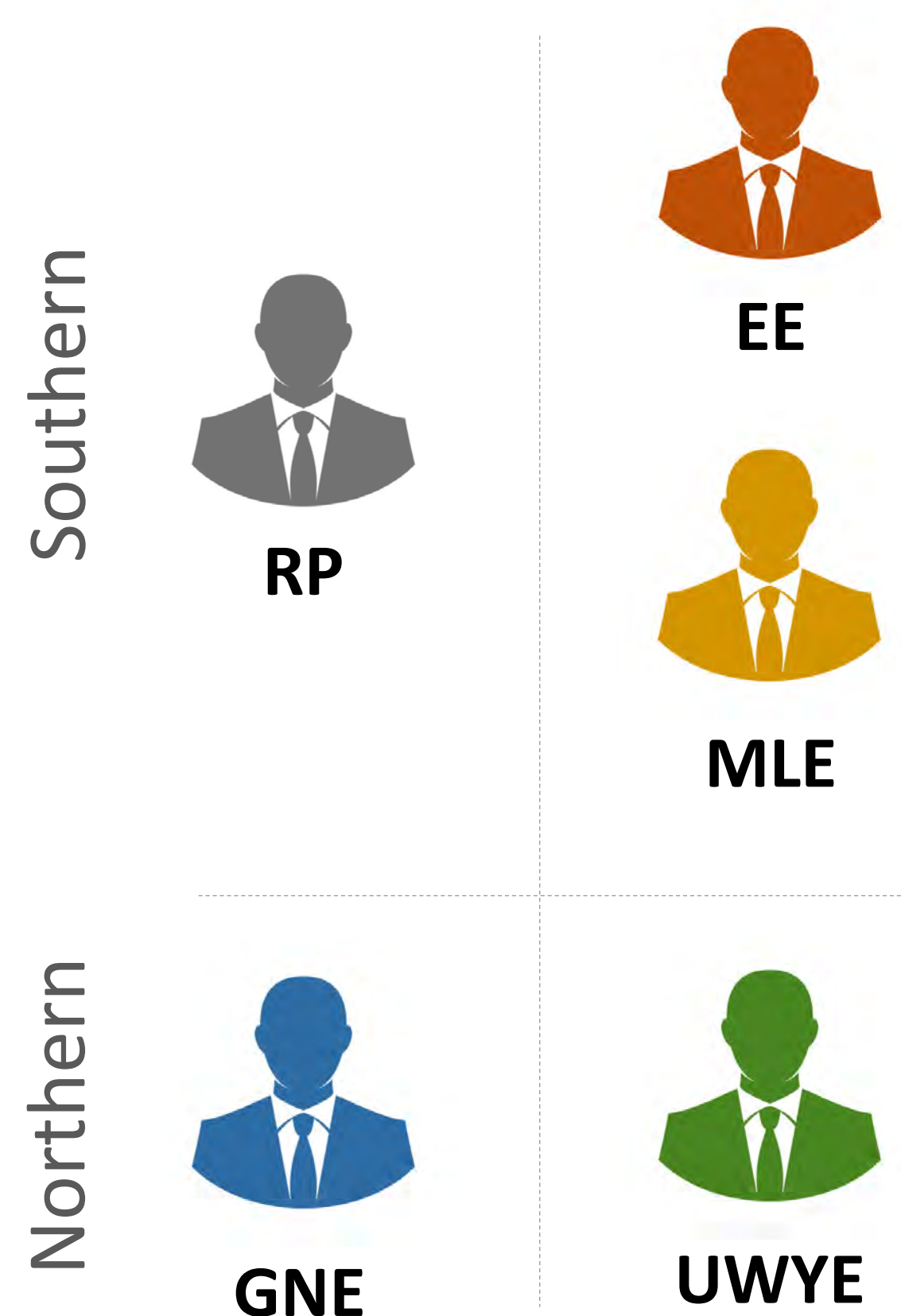
- Received Pronunciation (RP)
- Estuary English (EE)
- Multicultural London English (MLE)
- General Northern English (GNE)
- Urban West Yorkshire English (UWYE)

Stimuli: audio responses to **10 interview questions** (developed with lawyer consultants)

- 5 questions require legal expertise
- 5 more general professional skills

Statistical analysis: Linear Mixed Effects Models

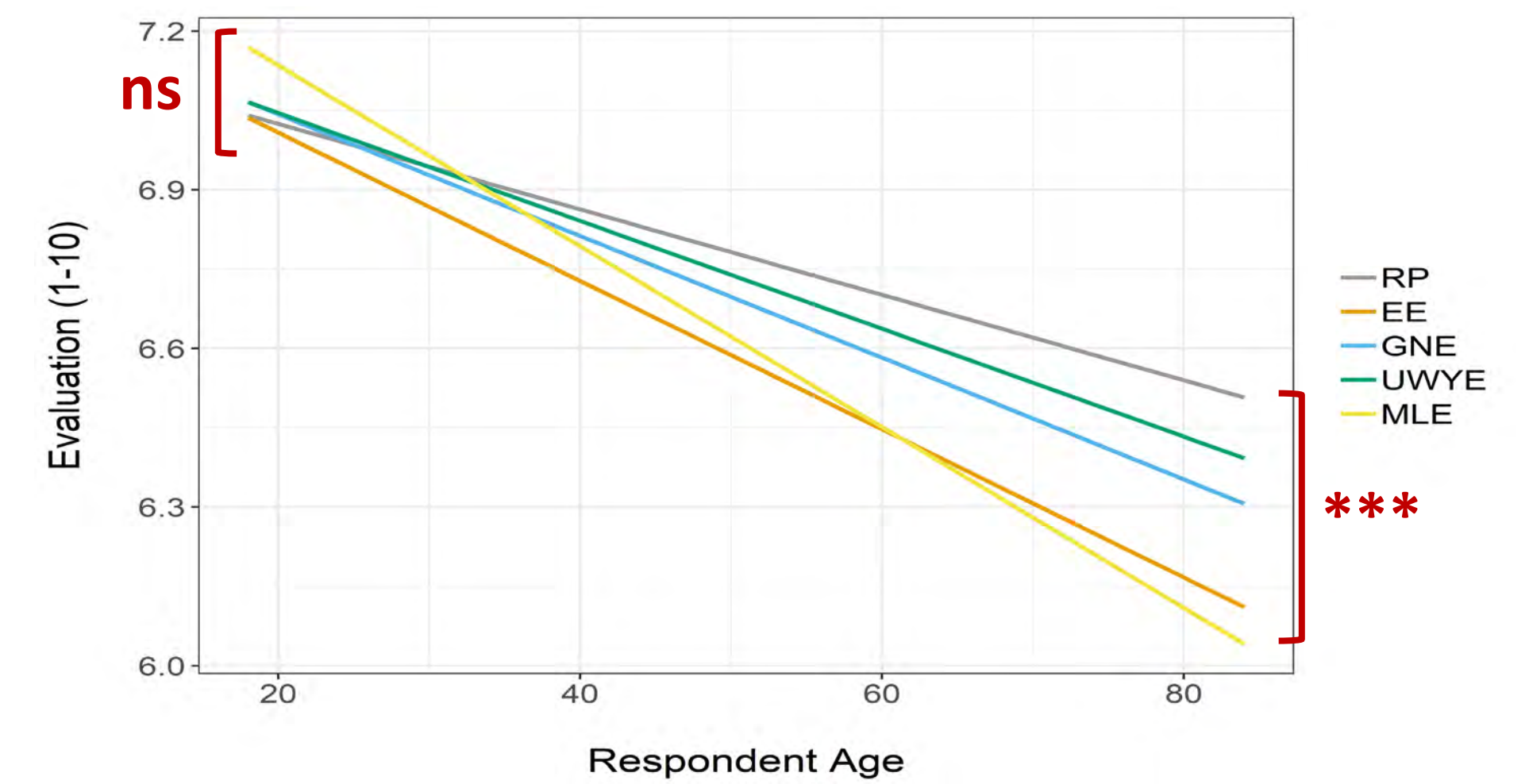
Middle-Class Working-Class



Results

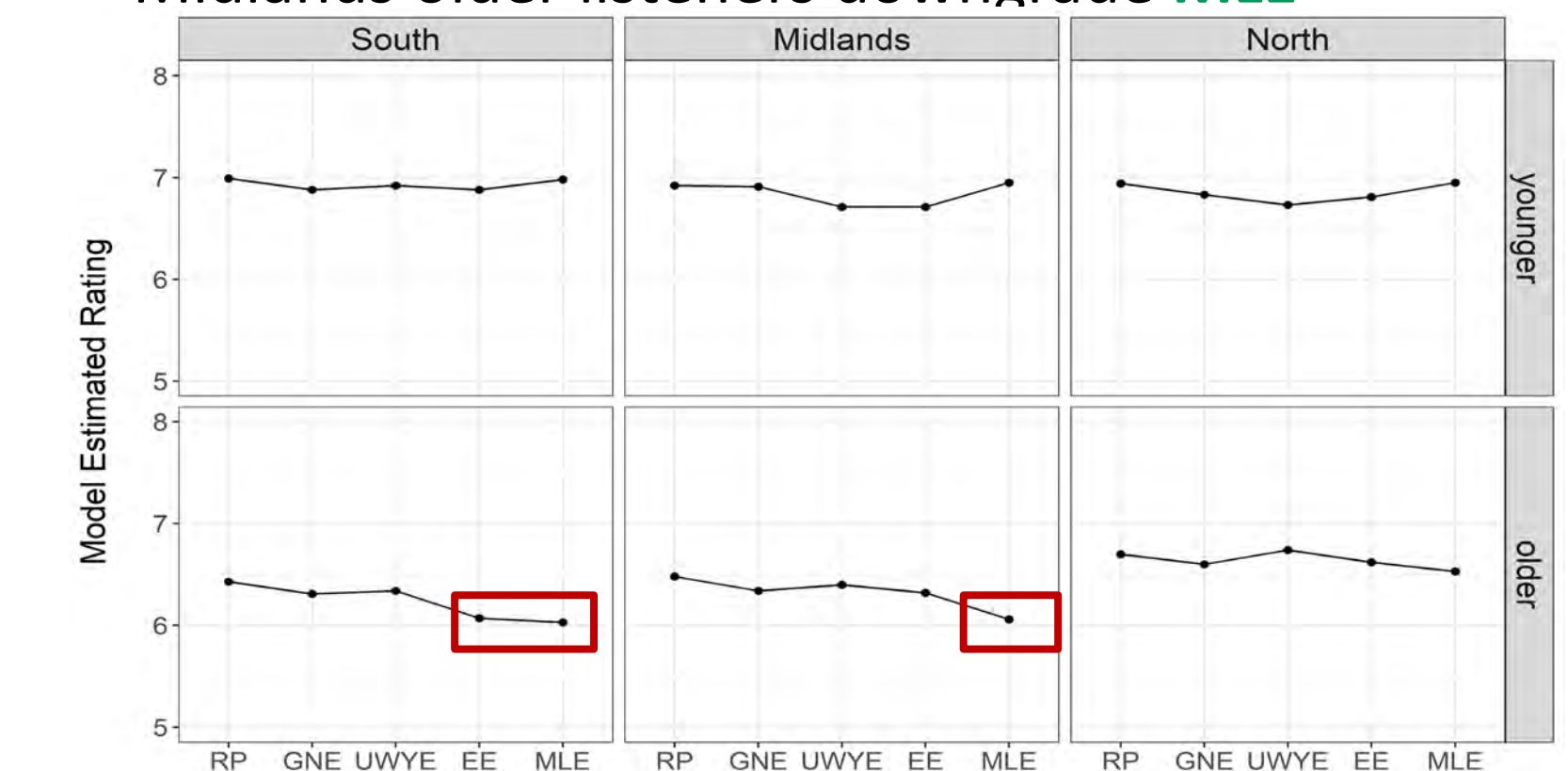
Accent by Listener Age

- Older listeners (ca. > 45) downgrade **EE & MLE**



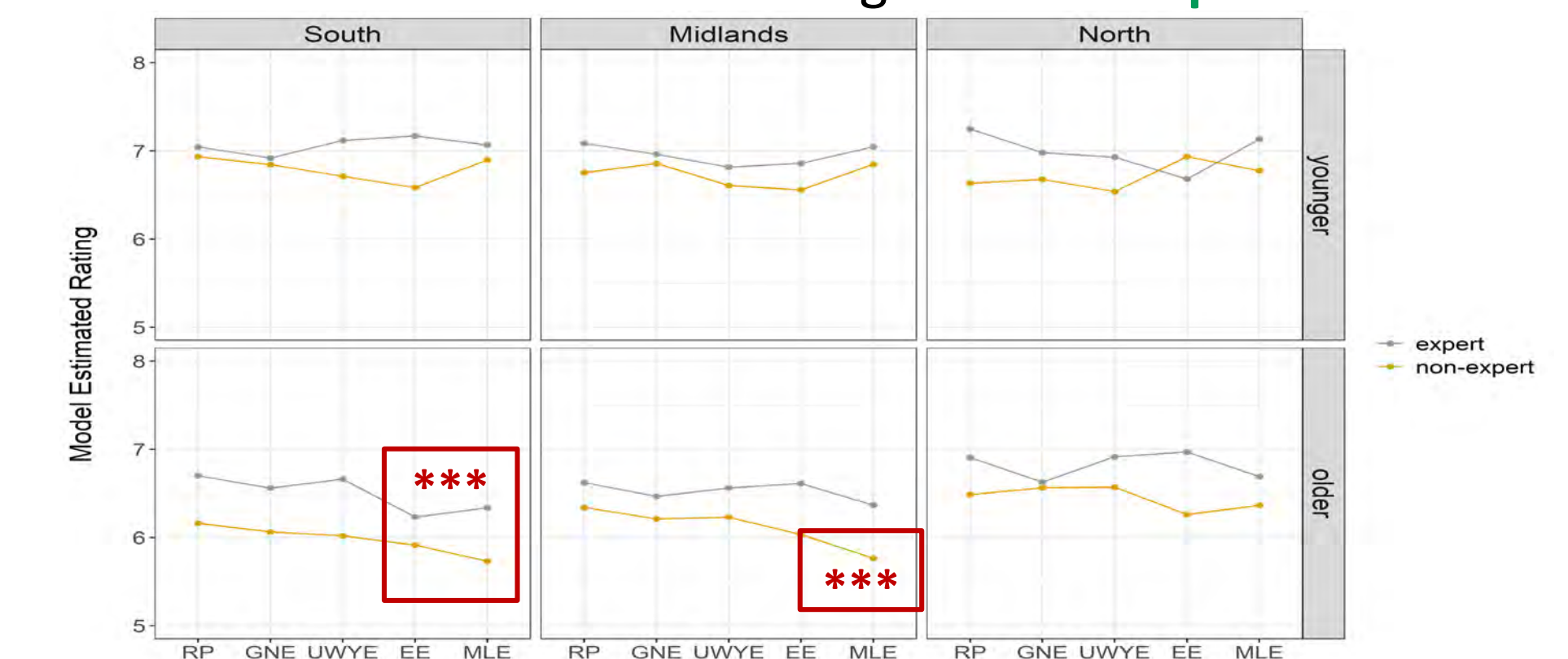
Accent by Listener's Age & Region

- Southern older listeners downgrade **EE & MLE**
- Midlands older listeners downgrade **MLE**



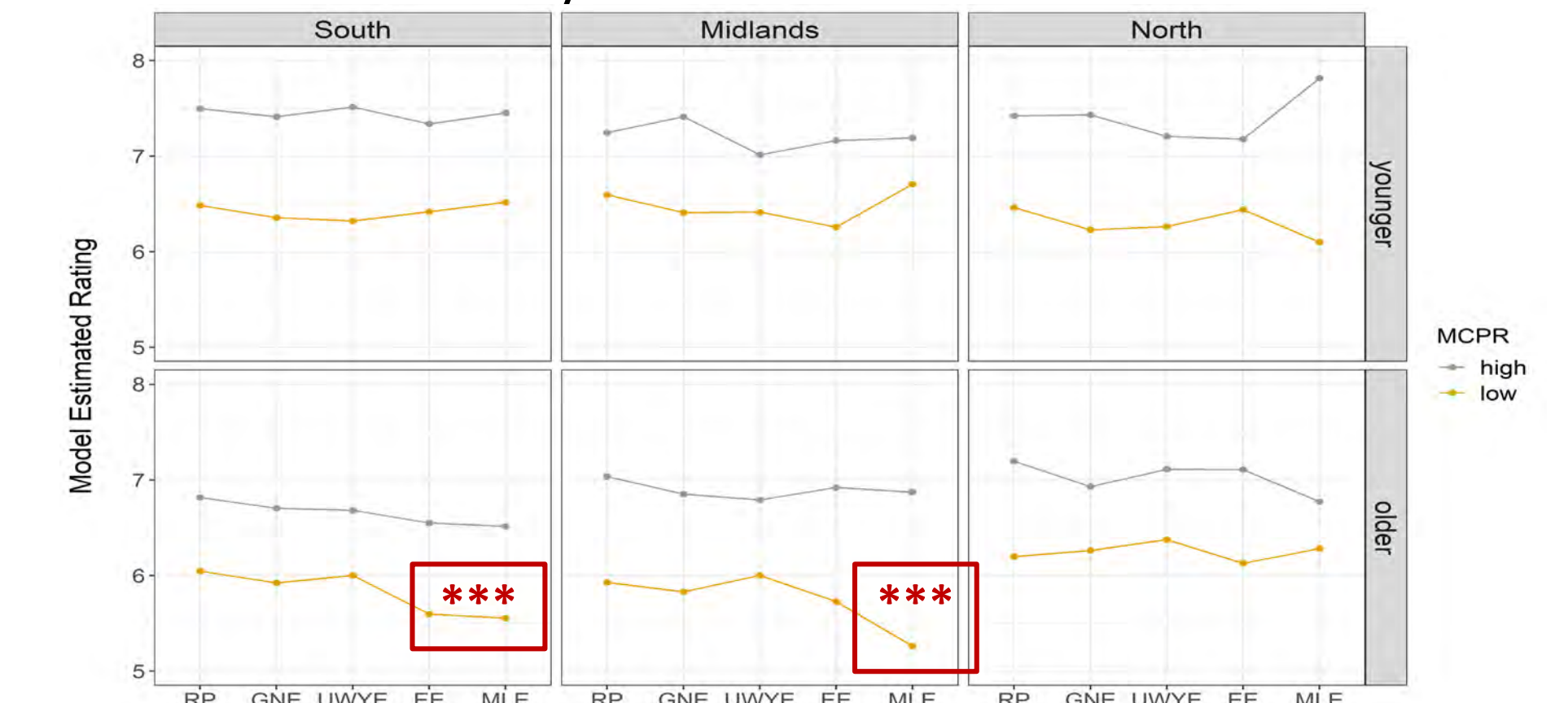
Accent by Listener's Age, Region & Question Type

- Southern older listeners downgrade **both** for EE & MLE
- Midlands older listeners downgrade **non-expert** for MLE



Accent by Listener's Age, Region & MCPR

- Downgrade EE & MLE by **low MCPR** Southern & Midland older listeners only



Non-significant effects: accent, listener social class

Take-Home

Southern working-class accents are dispreferred in legal employment interviews, but the effect is:

- moderated by listener **age** and **region**
- mitigated by **expert content** and **motivation to control prejudiced response**

BUT: in wider project we find that results differ when

- listeners respond to accent labels
- professional recruiters judge candidates

References

- Alemoru, K. 2015. "You don't sound like them": A sociolinguistic investigation into how race interacts with the perception and attitude towards Multicultural London English. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Sheffield.
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- Giles, H., P. Wilson & A. Conway. 1981. Accent and lexical diversity as determinants of impression formation and perceived employment suitability. *Language Sciences* 3: 91-103.
- Roberts, C., Davies, E. & T. Jupp. 1992. *Language and Discrimination: A study of communication in multi-ethnic workplaces*. London: Longman.