Perceptions of children during a police interrogation: Guilt, confessions, and interview fairness

Allison D. Redlich\textsuperscript{a}, Jodi A. Quas\textsuperscript{b} and Simona Ghetti\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Policy Research Associates, Inc., Delmar, New York, USA, \textsuperscript{b}Department of Psychology and Social Behavior, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, California, USA, \textsuperscript{c}Department of Psychology and Center for Mind and Brain, University of California, Davis, Davis, California, USA

(Received 14 March 2007; final version received 20 July 2007)

Jurors are often provided with confession evidence and must determine whether the confession was true, false, coerced, or voluntary. As more juveniles are tried in adult criminal court, jurors must increasingly make these determinations about minors’ statements. In this study, mock jurors read an actual interrogation of a child suspect that included confession evidence, and then provided judgments regarding the coerciveness of the interrogation, the child’s and police’s knowledge and behaviors, and guilt. Child age (11 versus 14 years) and gender were manipulated and examined in relation to participant gender and pre-existing sympathy levels for juvenile offenders. Factors external to the suspect – participant gender and sympathy for juvenile offenders – interacted with child suspect factors to influence perceptions of the child, the interrogation, and guilt. When multiple factors were considered, perceptions of suspect credibility and police fairness were the strongest predictors of guilt and perceived culpability. The findings have implications for decision-making in cases involving juvenile defendants and confession evidence.

Keywords: child suspects; police interrogation; confessions; perceptions

Introduction

In recent years, several high profile cases involving false confessions and unlawful police interrogations have been uncovered. Two cases in Chicago are particularly noteworthy because the suspects were adolescents accused of murder (Rozas & Howes, 2003; for similar stories in other cities, see Ratcliffe, 2004; Saltzman, 2004). In the cases, jurors were not shown the many hours of interrogation of the defendants that preceded each of their confessions, but rather were shown the end-result confessions. Both defendants were acquitted and post-decision interviews with the jurors suggested that their inability to know what preceded the confession statements influenced their decisions. For example, when asked about the decision, one juror stated, ‘Do you know how easy it is to get an 18-year-old to confess to anything?’ Another juror stated, ‘I, more or less throughout, totally ignored what the kid was saying on the confession … I didn’t know enough about what preceded it to know if it was true or not.’ However, in other cases, such as the Central Park Jogger case, which pre-dated the Chicago cases by more than a decade, it has been clear that decision-makers do not take into account defendants’ age and/or the circumstances in which confession statements were obtained.

*Corresponding author. Email: ARedlich@prainc.com
These anecdotal examples suggest that jurors may or may not take into account the conditions under which a confession is made and the age of the individual confessing. Thus, a systematic investigation of jurors’ perceptions of confession evidence is needed to determine how, when, and which conditions are considered. It is also critical to examine perceptions of confessions by juveniles, in light of the increased prevalence of the transfer of juvenile defendants to adult criminal court (e.g. Fagan & Zimring, 2000). Of interest is the extent to which jurors take into account age and other factors when making decisions about the veridicality of a confession. The present study sought to provide this knowledge.

In the study, we examined perceptions of youths’ abilities and confessions during a police interrogation. To increase the ecological validity of the study, our stimuli consisted of the actual transcript of an interrogation of a female pre-adolescent suspected (and subsequently convicted twice) of having murdered a toddler. In the interrogation, the child suspect seemingly admitted to some elements of the crime but the confession itself was questionable, and the police employed harsh and developmentally inappropriate questioning tactics. In our study, we left the interrogation intact, and manipulated the suspect’s age and gender to investigate the extent to which these factors affected individuals’ perceptions of the interrogation and/or confession. Finally, because audio- and videotaping interrogations are becoming more widespread, in part due to controversial interrogation practices (Sullivan, 2004), it is likely that juries will increasingly be exposed to complete interrogations. Because our primary interest was in perceptions of youthful suspects during the interrogation (and their subsequent effect on guilt judgments), we presented participants with the entire interrogation as opposed to just the resultant confession. Before we describe our research, we review former studies on suspect and juror characteristics as predictors of beliefs about accused juveniles and decision-making in cases involving confession evidence.

**Suspect factors**

Characteristics of suspects with implications for jurors’ evaluations of confessions include, but are not limited to, the suspect’s age and gender. Each is reviewed below.

First, a growing body of literature has examined the associations between age and juveniles’ capabilities in legal contexts, including the ease with which they can be led to confess falsely to crimes. Several consistent findings have emerged: Younger persons accused of committing crimes often lack complete understanding of their rights, have difficulties applying their general knowledge of the legal system to their own cases, and lack the cognitive and social skills required to withstand the stress and rigors of a police interrogation, particularly when the crime is serious (Owen-Kostelnik, Reppucci, & Meyer, 2006; Redlich, Silverman, Chen, & Steiner, 2004; Steinberg & Cauffman, 2001). Of importance, age is negatively correlated with false confessions in mock crime situations (Gudjonsson, 2003; Redlich & Goodman, 2003), and juveniles are over-represented in proven false confessions in actual cases (Drizin & Leo, 2004).

Relevant to the present research is not whether younger suspects are at increased risk for false confessions, but instead whether fact-finders, who make decisions in legal cases, take the suspect’s age into account when evaluating confessions and rendering decisions. Few, if any, researchers have directly examined jurors’ perceptions of juvenile suspects’ confession evidence. However, related evidence suggests that decision makers may be more skeptical of the voluntary nature of confessions from younger compared to older suspects. For instance, mock jurors perceive younger child defendants as less likely to be competent to stand trial and less culpable for a crime than older child defendants (Crosby, Britner,
Jodl, & Portwood, 1995; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001), although such age-related differences in perceptions are diminished when the crime is serious. Also, jurors are aware of age differences in suggestibility, recognizing that children can be misled more easily than can adults (e.g. Cashmore & Bussey, 1996; Kovera & Borgida, 1997; Quas, Thompson, & Clarke-Stewart, 2005). In so far as perceptions of competency, culpability, and suggestibility relate to perceptions of interrogation performance, confessions provided by younger rather than older suspects may be evaluated more skeptically.

Despite the potential for increased skepticism about the veracity of confessions from young defendants, this skepticism may not translate into reduced likelihood of guilt. Specifically, for adult suspects, statements viewed as coerced do not necessarily result in higher rates of acquittals (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980). Thus, even if decision makers recognize inherent limitations in a minor suspect’s ability to withstand interrogation pressures, they may nonetheless not utilize this information, or possibly weigh it less heavily than other information, when rendering guilt judgments.

Although studies have not examined guilt judgments in relation to juvenile confessions, a few studies have investigated the effects of defendant age on mock jurors’ guilt judgments. Results have been mixed, although in general, they suggest that, despite jurors’ recognition of age differences in capabilities, age is at best only marginally related to guilt judgments. For instance, Tang and Nunez (2003) found that prosecution-biased mock jurors (i.e. those who tend to believe that the defendant is guilty and the police arrested the right person) were more likely to render guilty verdicts after reading a murder scenario when the defendant was described as 16 or 19 years than when he was described as 13 years. Defense-biased mock jurors’ judgments (those who tend to view defendants as innocent until proven guilty), however, did not differ as a function of the defendant’s age. Nor did Warling and Peterson-Badali (2003) find significant age differences in guilt ratings for 13-, 17- and 25-year-old defendants. Finally, Redlich, Ghetti, and Quas (in press) found that mock jurors viewed older adolescent suspects’ (14-year-olds) reports during a police interrogation as less credible than younger suspects’ (7- and 11-year-olds) reports. However, actual guilt judgments did not differ significantly as a function of age. Of course, it is possible that, although suspect age does not directly affect jurors’ judgments, age may play a more significant role when confession evidence is presented, given that jurors may recognize age differences in confession veracity and susceptibility to pressure and suggestions.

The second suspect factor with implications for evaluations of confessions is the gender of the suspect. In regard to actual likelihood of false confession, Sigurdsson and Gudjonsson (1996) found adult women prisoners were more likely to claim to have falsely confessed than men prisoners. Gender differences have not been found, however, in experiments investigating false responsibility taking or confessions in mock crime scenarios (e.g. Kassin & Kiechel, 1996; Redlich & Goodman, 2003), suggestibility (Gudjonsson, 1989; Loftus, 1979) compliance in an interrogation situation (Gudjonsson, 1989), or obedience to authority (Milgram, 1974). Nonetheless, individuals may perceive that females are more susceptible than males to providing confessions – either true or false. Because of stereotypic beliefs about gender roles, for instance, that females are less assertive (Burn, 1996; Ridgeway, 2001), jurors may view female suspects as more likely to fall prey to manipulative police interrogation tactics and therefore confess in comparison to male suspects. To our knowledge, relations between gender of the accused and perceived likelihood of confession have yet to be investigated for child or adult suspects.
Juror factors

Characteristics of jurors also have the potential to influence evaluations of confession evidence and decision-making in trials involving juveniles suspected of committing crimes. Factors relevant to the present study include (a) jurors’ beliefs about interrogations and the police, (b) jurors’ attitudes towards guilt and defendants generally, and (c) jurors’ gender.

First, as perceptions of police unfairness (i.e. police using threats of punishment) increase, perceptions of confession voluntariness decrease (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980). Despite sometimes being unlikely to translate perceptions of coerced confessions into acquittals for adult suspects (Kassin & Sukel, 1997), mock jurors can seemingly recognize coercive tactics, even when ‘subdued’ in the form of minimization (e.g. feigned friendship, sympathy) or maximization (e.g. intimidation, threats) techniques (Kassin, 1997; Kassin & McNall, 1991). Whether this same pattern of findings will emerge with child suspects and when the two types of techniques are used in conjunction is unknown, but clearly how decision-makers view the fairness of police actions can influence perceptions of the interrogation, generally, and the veracity of statements elicited during the interrogation, specifically.

Second, jurors enter the courtroom with their own a priori beliefs about justice, the potential guilt of those accused, and general feelings of sympathy for defendants. Often these beliefs are described as reflecting either prosecution- or defense-oriented biases or tendencies (e.g. Kassin & Wrightsman, 1983; Tang & Nunez, 2003). Compared to individuals who report higher levels of general sympathy for defendants (i.e. who are defense oriented), individuals who report lower levels of sympathy for defendants (i.e. those who are prosecution oriented) are more likely to render guilty verdicts in mock trial situations and to endorse pro-conviction beliefs, such as ‘Too often jurors hesitate to convict someone who is guilty out of pure sympathy.’ As mentioned, Tang and Nunez (2003) found prosecution- and defense-biases similarly influenced ratings of juvenile defendant guilt. To date, researchers have not directly assessed how pre-established beliefs and attitudes relate to perceptions of confessions and interrogations, particularly in juvenile defendants, although it is reasonable to expect patterns similar to the above to emerge. In the present study, we thus explored how sympathy specifically for juvenile suspects, both directly and in combination with our other factors, affected perceptions of child suspects, police, confessions, and guilt.

Third, one of the most well studied characteristics in juror decision-making studies is that of juror gender. Studies of perceptions of child victim/witnesses, especially in sexual assault cases, have produced consistent results: Women are more pro-child, and men are more pro-defendant (Bottoms, 1993; Quas et al., 2005; Schutte & Hosch, 1997). Thus, women tend to believe children’s statements more, are more trusting of children’s claims, and react positively to evidence provided in favor of children’s allegations. Men, in contrast, tend to view children’s allegations of abuse with skepticism and are less likely to render guilty verdicts. Women are also more lenient than men when making decisions about whether to transfer juvenile defendants to adult criminal court (Stalans & Henry, 1994). Women may thus react similarly when evaluating child suspects’ performance in interrogations.

Present study overview

The goals of the present study were twofold: (1) Investigate whether perceptions of juvenile suspects who were vigorously interrogated by police for a serious crime are affected by the
suspect’s age and gender; and (2) Examine the extent to which characteristics of the suspect and decision-maker, in conjunction with perceptions of the interrogation, influence decisions regarding confession volition and suspect guilt. Because what occurs in the interrogation room can be key to the prosecution, it is essential to begin to understand what affects perceptions of the interrogation of suspects and concomitant decisions of guilt.

To address these goals, adult participants read the complete transcript of an interrogation of a pre-teen charged with the capital murder of a toddler. The interrogation was provided in its original form, with the exception that the suspect’s age (11 versus 14 years) and gender were systematically varied. After reading the transcript, participants completed questionnaires concerning their perceptions of the suspect and police’s behavior during the interview and the suspect’s culpability. Participants also provided a dichotomous guilt judgment.

Based on former research, several hypotheses were tested. First, with regard to perceptions of the interrogation, respondents were hypothesized to view the interrogation as less fair and the suspect as having less interrogation and trial-related understanding when the child was younger and female in comparison when the child was older and male, respectively. Second, with regard to culpability and guilt judgments, it was hypothesized that respondents would be less likely to perceive children described as younger and female as responsible and as guilty than children described as older and male. A similar prediction was made about perceived confession voluntariness. Finally, consistent with previous research (Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000), men and those with less sympathy for juvenile offenders were expected to find child suspects guilty more often than women and those with more sympathy.

Method

Participants

Participants included 264 college undergraduates (45% men) from two universities in the Northern and Southern parts of a large state. Age ranged from 18 to 32 years, M = 20.2, SD = 2.02. The ethnic make-up, which was representative of the university populations, was as follows: European American, 36.7%; Asian American, 44.4%; Hispanic, 8.5%; Other/Mixed, 10.4%. All participants were jury-eligible (e.g., 18 years or older, were US citizens, had not been convicted of a felony).

Materials

Interrogation transcript

The verbatim transcript of a 1996 interrogation was presented. The interrogation was of an 11-year-old girl suspected of killing a 2-year-old (see Drizin & Colgan, 2004). The toddler was under the care of the suspect’s grandfather. Although the names and identifying information were changed, the content and the text of the interrogation remained intact. The transcript totaled 73 pages.

The actual interrogation of the girl lasted approximately 3 hours. At various times, four police officers were present and questioned the girl. A victim/witness advocate was also present, but no one else (e.g., a lawyer, the girl’s parents). The suspect was later determined to have an IQ of 77, which is slightly above the threshold for a diagnosis of mental retardation.
The girl was twice convicted of negligent murder (although charged with capital murder), and spent 3 years in confinement. Her second conviction was overturned on appeal, in part because of inappropriate interrogation techniques. During the interrogation, the child had seemingly ‘confessed’ to dropping and kicking the victim. Some medical experts contend that this action could not have caused the toddler’s death. The case was not retried a third time because new evidence surfaced exculpating the child suspect, indicating her actual innocence.

The transcript of the interrogation begins with the police officers reading the *Miranda* warning. The warning is not explained in a developmentally appropriate manner, but instead is simply read as a formal statement. The suspect states that she understands and waives her rights. During the interview, the police officers utilize a variety of techniques similar to those described in contemporary interrogation training manuals (Inbau, Reid, Buckley, & Jayne, 2001). For example, the police officers state that they know that she (the suspect) is guilty and provide her with several ‘moral outs’ regarding her reasons for committing the crime (e.g. ‘You might have had him [sic] in your arms and then slipped from your arms and it might have fallen. There are things like that, and that’s understandable. We can understand all that, but we need to hear that explanation from you.’). The police also repeatedly state that their primary purpose is simply to help the suspect and her family (‘Everybody else is going to assume the worst and they’ll be thinking the worst about you, but when you talk to me and tell me the truth, then I can explain things to people.’). Additionally, the police stated, ‘a doctor with over 20 years of experience is saying that baby [sic] died at this particular time.’ Because the toddler was in the presence of the suspect at that time, the police imply that the suspect was the only one who could have injured the baby. Finally, throughout the interrogation, the police officers use difficult-to-comprehend words and sentences and rarely clarify terms or answer the suspect’s questions. For example, the suspect at one point asks what the word ‘homeseed’ (homicide) means, but does not receive an answer (Drizin & Colgan, 2004). After denying the allegations over 40 times, the suspect eventually ‘confesses’ that she accidentally dropped and kicked the baby. She is then asked to sign a confession statement, which she does. Overall, the interrogation reflects the use of interrogation techniques that are considered controversial for competent adults (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Leo, 1996), much less a pre-adolescent suspect with lower than average intellect.

**Perceptions questionnaire**

The perceptions questionnaire, developed for the present study, began with several demographic questions (participant age, gender). Next was a question asking for a dichotomous guilty/not guilty verdict, which was followed by several other guilt-related questions (i.e. perceptions of the suspects’ responsibility for the toddler’s death, the intent to commit the crime, and the level of malice involved in the crime; scored on six-point Likert scales of 1 = not at all to 6 = extremely). A series of questions assessing participants’ perceptions of the interrogation (e.g. fairness), including the child’s performance (e.g. credibility, confidence, accuracy) and the police’s behaviour (e.g. truthfulness, manipulativeness) then followed. These questions also required participants to respond according to six-point Likert scales (1 = not at all to 6 = extremely). The next set of questions assessed perceptions of the suspect’s understanding of his/her situation, constitutional rights, and vocabulary used in the interview (1 = no understanding to 6 = a lot of understanding). (See Table 1 for exact wording of questions.) A final question assessed participants’ general
Table 1. Composite scores.

**Child Credibility**
- How credible do you find the child?
- How believable do you find the child?
- How consistent do you think the child was during the interview?
- How confident do you think the child was during the interview?
- How accurate do you think the child was in recalling the events of the day in question?
- How suggestive do you find the child? (R)
- How likely is it that the child was truthful with the officer?

**Police Fairness**
- How fair do you think the interview was overall?
- How fair do you think the interview questions were?
- How credible do you find the police?
- How consistent do you think the police were during the interview?
- How manipulative do you think the police officers were? (R)
- How suggestive do you think the interview questions were? (R)
- How likely is it that the police intentionally lied to the child during the interview? (R)
- How likely is it that the police officers were trying to confuse the child during the interview? (R)
- How likely is it that the police officers were truthful with the child?

**Interview Understanding**
- How likely is it that the child understood the questions being asked?
- How likely is it that the child understood that if he was 15 years old, he could be tried as adult?
- Do you think the child understood he might lose his freedom?
- Do you think the child understand the role of the victim/witness advocate?
- Do you think the child understand why the interview was being recorded?
- Do you think the child understood what he was reading when the police had written down his statement?
- Do you think the child understood what the statement was he was signing?
- Do you think the child understood he had a choice in signing the statement?

**Rights Understanding**
- How likely is it that the child understood his right to have a lawyer present during questioning?
- How likely is it that the child understood that if he wanted a lawyer, he would not have to pay for one if he could not afford it?
- How likely is it that the child understood his right to remain silent and not answer questions?
- How likely is it that the child understood that any statement he gave could be used against him?
- How likely is it that the child understood he could stop the interview any time he wanted?

**Vocabulary Understanding**
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Voluntary
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Homicide
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Restrict
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Constitutional
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Right
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Sustained
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Injuries
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Discipline
- How well did the child understand the meaning of the word: Verify

**Courtroom Abilities**
- How likely is it that the child knows the procedures that will take place in the courtroom?
- How likely is it that the child knows what the judge’s role is?
- How likely is it that the child knows what the jury’s role is?
sympathy for juvenile offenders (1 = no sympathy to 6 = a lot of sympathy). This was included to account for prosecution/defense biases (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1983).

**Procedure**

All procedures were approved by the Universities’ Internal Review Boards. Participation took place in groups ranging from 2 to 25 people. A research assistant briefly explained the study to participants, obtained their consent to participate, and distributed a cover sheet, describing the study in greater detail. The cover sheet gave a one-paragraph synopsis of the case, which varied according to the two manipulations (suspect age and gender). Participants were instructed not to be overwhelmed by the length of the transcript, that their memory for the transcript was not being tested, and that the transcript was to be read like conversation, which it was.

Participants then read one of four transcripts, which were identical with the exception of changing names, pronouns, and minor information concerning the suspect’s age and gender to match the experimental manipulations. After reading the transcript, participants returned it to a research assistant and were given the perceptions questionnaire to complete. Participants then completed a brief exit questionnaire asking about the suspect’s age, gender and crime. This questionnaire served as a manipulation check (overall accuracy rate = 96%). Total time of participation ranged from 2 to 3 hours, for which participants received extra course credit.

**Results**

The study conformed to a 2 (child age: 11 versus 14 years) × 2 (child gender) × 2 (participant gender) between-subjects design. The number of participants in each of the eight cells ranged from 29 to 40. Results are presented in four sections. First, the effects of child age and gender on men’s and women’s guilt and culpability judgments were examined. Second, participants’ perceptions of the confession, specifically, the extent to which the confession was voluntary offered and signed, were investigated. Third, the effects of the study factors on participants’ perceptions of the interrogation more generally were investigated. Fourth, the combined relations among participants’ perceptions of the interrogation, confession, and guilt/culpability judgments were examined. Preliminary analyses revealed that perceptions did not differ significantly by data collection site, and thus data were collapsed across the two sites. Bivariate correlations among study measures are presented in Table 2.
Table 2. Bivariate correlations between measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Child Age</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Child Gender</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participant Gender</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.19**</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.17**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sympathy for Juvenile Criminals</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.21***</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Child Credibility</td>
<td>-0.17**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.45***</td>
<td>-0.44***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Police Fairness</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td>0.35***</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td>0.29***</td>
<td>-0.42***</td>
<td>-0.31***</td>
<td>0.43***</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Interview Understanding</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
<td>0.48***</td>
<td>0.58***</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Rights Understanding</td>
<td>0.44***</td>
<td>0.48***</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Vocabulary Understanding</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Courtroom Capabilities</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Police Coerce Statement</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sign Confession</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Culpability</td>
<td>0.51***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Guilt</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher scores indicate higher aspects of the trait, except Sign Confession in which 1 = voluntary and 6 = forced to sign.

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.
Finally, because general attitudes toward defendants can influence guilt decisions, including in cases involving juveniles (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1983; Tang & Nunez, 2003), we included participants’ ratings of their sympathy for juvenile suspects as an additional factor in the analyses (dichotomized such that responses of 1, 2, and 3, \( n = 116, 44\% \), were classified as ‘low sympathy’ and responses of 4, 5, and 6, \( n = 148, 56\% \), were classified as ‘high sympathy’). (Including the scaled sympathy ratings as a covariate instead of as an additional factor did not alter any of the findings reported below.)

**Guilt and culpability judgments**

First, we examined participants’ overall guilt judgments and perceptions of the suspect’s responsibility for the murder. Overall, a majority of our participants – 76% – believed that the child committed the murder (see Table 3). This rate is consistent with the actual trial, in which two separate juries convicted the girl of the murder. A 2 (child age) \( \times \) 2 (participant gender) \( \times \) 2 (juvenile sympathy: high versus low) logit model revealed a strong main effect of juvenile sympathy, \( F(1,246) = 11.96, p < 0.001 \) (Table 3). Among persons who reported low sympathy, 87% voted guilty. Among persons who reported high sympathy, 67% voted guilty. No other main effects or interactions emerged.

We next examined participants’ perceptions of the suspect’s ‘culpability’ for the crime. Although culpability and guilt were related \( (r = 0.51) \), it is possible to believe a defendant is guilty (in that the elements of the crime are met for a guilty verdict) but not to believe the defendant is responsible and/or committed the crime intentionally. In the present study, the ‘confession’ involved claiming that the victim had been accidentally dropped and kicked. Thus, although participants may have believed that there was sufficient evidence to render a guilty verdict, they may not have perceived the child to have committed the crime intentionally.

We created a mean composite score to reflect participants’ judgments of the child’s level of responsibility for the baby’s death that included their ratings of the child’s level of intent to commit the act, and the child’s level of malice, \( r_s \) ranged from 0.41 to 0.69, \( \alpha = 0.76 \). Higher scores indicate greater perceived culpability. When the culpability score was entered into the 2 (child age) \( \times \) 2 (participant gender) \( \times \) 2 (juvenile sympathy) ANOVA, significant main effects of participant gender and juvenile sympathy (see Table 3) emerged, as did a significant child age \( \times \) child gender, \( F(1,246) = 4.72, p < 0.05 \). Women and those with more sympathy rated the child as less culpable than men and those with less sympathy, respectively.

Simple effect analyses conducted to examine the interaction further revealed that the 11-year-old girl, \( M = 3.68, SD = 1.02 \), was seen as significantly more culpable than the 14-year-old girl, \( M = 3.26, SD = 0.88 \) (Cohen’s \( d = 0.44 \)), and the 11-year-old boy, \( M = 3.29, SD = 0.95 \) (Cohen’s \( d = 0.40 \), \( F_s (1, 129 or 136) \geq 4.69, p s < 0.05 \). When the child suspect was a boy, the mean difference between the two ages was non-significant \( (M \) for the 14-year-old boy = 3.45, \( SD = 1.11 \), as was the mean difference between 14-year-old girls and boys, \( F_s (1, 124 or 131) < 1.18 \).

**Confession voluntariness**

Because participants in our study were exposed to the entire verbatim transcript of a questionable interview with a juvenile suspect, we were able to examine their perceptions of the interrogation, including the extent to which the child suspect’s age and gender, as well as participants’ gender and sympathy, affected evaluations of the confession.
Table 3. Mean ratings (standard deviations) of composite scores, statement voluntariness, and guilt measures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Child age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Participant gender</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Juvenile sympathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guilt measures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
<td>(0.42)</td>
<td>(0.40)</td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culpability</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confession voluntariness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Manipulate</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.41)</td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(1.40)</td>
<td>(1.40)</td>
<td>(1.44)</td>
<td>(1.33)</td>
<td>(1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign Confession</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.37)</td>
<td>(1.19)</td>
<td>(1.28)</td>
<td>(1.29)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.21)</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composite scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Credibility</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td>(0.63)</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Fairness</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Understanding</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>(0.84)</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
<td>(0.77)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights Understanding</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.96)</td>
<td>(0.88)</td>
<td>(0.95)</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td>(0.92)</td>
<td>(0.93)</td>
<td>(0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Understanding</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(0.69)</td>
<td>(0.72)</td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtroom Abilities</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.65)</td>
<td>(1.62)</td>
<td>(1.58)</td>
<td>(1.69)</td>
<td>(1.65)</td>
<td>(1.62)</td>
<td>(1.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher scores indicate higher aspects of the trait, except Sign Confession in which 1 = voluntary and 6 = forced to sign. Guilt: 0 = not guilty, 1 = guilty. Bolded means are significantly different at \( p < 0.05 \). Significant interactions are discussed in the text.
Participants provided two voluntariness judgments about the interrogation and confession – the degree to which the police manipulated the child into admission (1 = not at all, 6 = very much so), and the degree to which the child had a choice in signing the confession statement (1 = voluntarily signed, 6 = forced to sign). These judgments, which were significantly correlated (Table 2), were entered into a 2 (child age) × 2 (child gender) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (juvenile offender sympathy) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Only the multivariate effect of participant gender was significant, $F(2,242) = 4.29, p < 0.05$.

For participant gender, the univariate effects for ratings of both police manipulating the child into admitting responsibility and whether the confession was signed voluntarily were significant, $F_{s}(1, 243) \geq 3.88, ps < 0.05$, Cohen’s $d_s \geq 0.23$ (Table 3). Compared to men, women were more inclined to think the child was manipulated into admission and more likely to view the child as forced into signing the confession statement.

**Perceptions of suspects and the interrogation**

In addition to our interest in respondents’ overall perceptions of child guilt and confession voluntariness, we were also interested in participants’ perceptions of the child, police, and interrogation more generally. In particular, we believed that respondents would view younger children and girl suspects less favorably than their counterparts. Also, men and women and persons with high versus low sympathy levels were anticipated to hold significantly different views from one another.

On the study questionnaire, participants made a number of judgments about the interrogation, the child’s credibility, the fairness of the police during the interrogation, the child’s understanding of interrogation and the legal system, and the child’s theoretical ability to take part in legal proceedings subsequent to the interrogation. Many of these ratings were highly correlated and some tapped similar underlying constructs. Thus, based on a priori groupings, we sorted variables into six meaningful categories and then conducted reliability analyses. All categories had sufficient internal validity: Cronbach alphas ranged from 0.77 to 0.90 and inter-item correlations ranged from 0.32 to 0.65. Thus six mean composite scores were created (see Table 1). The first two composite scores concerned participants’ perception of the Interrogation and included: (1) Child Credibility (e.g. how credible, believable, and accurate the child was during the interrogation); and (2) Police Fairness (e.g. how fair was the interview, how credible and manipulative were the police, how suggestive were the interrogation questions). Three composite scores concerned the child’s interrogation Understanding and were labeled: (1) Rights Understanding (e.g. how well did the child understood her/his right to a lawyer, right to remain silent); (2) Interview Understanding (e.g. how well did the child understand the role of the victim/witness advocate in the interrogation, why the interview was being recorded); and (3) Vocabulary Understanding (e.g. understood the words ‘voluntarily,’ ‘homicide,’ ‘restrict’). The final composite score concerned participants’ perceptions of the child’s eventual Courtroom Abilities, which focused on assessments of the child’s legal understanding and knowledge (e.g. how well the child understands charges, the role of the lawyer, what will happen after trial, how well the child understands courtroom procedures, the judge’s role).

To evaluate the effects of the independent variables on participants’ evaluations of the interrogation and perceptions, two 2 (child age) × 2 (child gender) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (juvenile offender sympathy) MANOVAs and one ANOVA were conducted with the composite variables entered as the dependent measures.
Interrogation

Two composite scores related to the interrogation: Child Credibility and Police Fairness. The multivariate main effects of participant gender and sympathy for juveniles were significant, \( F(2, 245) \geq 4.40, p < 0.01 \). Regarding the main effect of participant gender, women rated the interview as less fair and the police as more manipulative than men, but men and women did not differ in their ratings of Child Credibility. Regarding the main effect of juvenile sympathy, compared to participants with lower levels of sympathy, participants with higher levels rated the child as significantly more credible. Means and standard deviations are in Table 3.

Two significant three-way interactions also emerged. The first significant interaction was a child age \( \times \) child gender \( \times \) juvenile sympathy interaction, \( F(1,246) = 4.63, p < 0.05 \). The univariate effect was significant only for Police Fairness ratings. Simple effect analyses were conducted: Within this three-way interaction, there were two significant effects (see Figure 1). First, when rating an 11-year-old boy, participants with low sympathy, \( M = 3.29, SD = 0.60 \), rated the police as significantly more fair than participants with high sympathy, \( M = 2.84, SD = 0.84 \), \( F(1,59) = 5.09, p < 0.05 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.62 \). When rating 11- (or 14-) year-old girls, sympathy did not influence Police Fairness perceptions (Figure 1). Second, Police Fairness ratings were significantly higher among persons with high sympathy when rating an 11-year-old girl suspect, \( M = 3.21, SD = 0.77 \), compared to an 11-year-old boy suspect, \( F(1,74) = 3.90, p < 0.05 \), Cohen’s \( d = 0.46 \). The second significant interaction was among child age, child gender, and participant gender; however, the univariate effects for both Child Credibility and Police Fairness were not significant, and thus are not analyzed further.

Understanding of interrogation process

The three composite scores relevant to this section are Rights Understanding, Interview Understanding, and Vocabulary Understanding. When the three scores were entered into a 2 (child age) \( \times \) 2 (child gender) \( \times \) 2 (participant gender) \( \times \) 2 (juvenile sympathy) MANOVA, the multivariate main effect of participant gender was significant, as well as the interaction among child age, child gender, and participant gender, \( F(3, 241) \geq 3.30, p < 0.05 \).
An examination of the univariate tests revealed that participant gender significantly influenced ratings of Interview Understanding and Vocabulary Understanding, $F$s (1, 243) $\geq 5.46$, $p < 0.05$, Cohen’s $d$s $\geq 0.28$. Men’s ratings of the suspect’s understanding of both the interview and of vocabulary words were significantly higher than women’s ratings (Table 3).

The significant three-way interaction emerged for perceptions of Rights Understanding between participant gender, child age, and child gender, $F$(1,243) = 6.24, $p < 0.02$ (Figure 2). Men believed the 11-year-old girl to be significantly less likely to understand her rights in comparison to women’s ratings of the 11-year-old girl (Cohen’s $d = 0.57$) and in comparison to their (men’s) ratings of the 14-year-old girl (Cohen’s $d = 0.53$). There were no other significant mean differences within this interaction.

**Courtroom abilities**

Next, a 2 (child age) $\times$ 2 (child gender) $\times$ 2 (participant gender) $\times$ 2 (juvenile sympathy) ANOVA was performed with this composite score. Although there were no significant main effects, a significant interaction effect emerged between child age and participant gender, $F$(1,244) = 4.93, $p < 0.05$. When the suspect was 14-years-old, men, $M = 3.80$, SD = 1.69, viewed the child suspect as having significantly more legal understanding and knowledge than women, $M = 3.09$, SD = 1.50, $F$(1,131) = 6.03, $p < 0.05$ (Cohen’s $d = 0.44$). When the suspect was 11-years-old, men, $M = 3.36$, SD = 1.60, and women, $M = 3.62$, SD = 1.70, did not differ in their perceptions. Also, men perceived 11- and 14-year-old suspects as having similar courtroom capabilities, but women perceived 11-year-olds as having more advanced courtroom capabilities than 14-year-olds, $F$(1,137) = 3.84, $p = 0.05$, Cohen’s $d = 0.33$.

**Summary**

Child’s age and gender affected participants’ attitudes in regard to police behaviour and the child suspect’s legal understanding. However, these effects were indirect and differed depending on whether respondents were men or women, or whether sympathy levels were high versus low.
Combined relations: Perceptions of the interrogation, the confession, guilt, and culpability

The final analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which the manipulated study factors of child age and gender, participant gender and feelings of sympathy related to guilt and culpability judgments when participants' general perceptions of the interrogation were considered concurrently. We conducted a logistic regression predicting guilt verdicts and a general linear regression predicting culpability ratings. For both regressions, the experimentally manipulated factors, participant gender, and participants' general ratings of juvenile criminal sympathy were entered first and were followed by the six composite scores and ratings of confession voluntariness.

For guilt, the overall model was significant, $\chi^2 (12) = 114.29, p < 0.001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.53$. As seen in Table 4, although neither of the experimental manipulations or participant gender predicted guilt ratings, participants' general sympathy for juvenile defendants, as well as four composite factors – Child Credibility, Police Fairness, Interview Understanding, and Rights Understanding – significantly predicted guilty verdicts. Not surprisingly, less sympathy for juvenile offenders and lower perceptions of the suspect’s credibility were associated with increased likelihood of rendering a guilty verdict. Also, participants who viewed the police as fair and who viewed the suspect as having more understanding the interview, were 5 and 3.5 times, respectively, more likely to vote guilty than those who saw the police as less fair or the suspect as having less understanding. Unexpectedly, however, perceptions that the suspect was less likely to understood her/his Constitutional rights were associated with higher proportion of guilty verdicts. In other words, our participants did not interpret the child’s inability to fully understand his/her rights into the possibility of a false confession, but rather into a guilty verdict. Finally, as found in some prior research with adult suspects (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980), perceptions of confession voluntariness did not influence guilt.

For culpability ratings, the overall model was also significant, $F(12, 244) = 12.30, p < 0.001$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.35$. Similar to the model predicting guilt ratings, Child Credibility and Police Fairness were strong predictors of culpability ratings (Table 5). However, unlike guilt ratings, sympathy for juveniles and understanding did not significantly predict

Table 4. Logistic regression results predicting guilt ratings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Wald (1)</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Age</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.68 (0.31–1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Gender</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>1.23 (0.56–2.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Gender</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>1.52 (0.67–3.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathy for Juvenile Offenders</td>
<td>8.88**</td>
<td>0.58 (0.40–0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Manipulate Admission</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.95 (0.69–1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily Sign Confession</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.90 (0.66–1.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Credibility</td>
<td>32.53***</td>
<td>0.14 (0.07–0.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Fairness</td>
<td>19.07***</td>
<td>5.13 (2.46–10.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Understanding</td>
<td>8.09**</td>
<td>3.49 (1.47–8.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights Understanding</td>
<td>9.04**</td>
<td>0.37 (0.20–0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Understanding</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>1.68 (0.89–3.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtroom Abilities</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.78 (0.56–1.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001.
perceptions of culpability. Thus, although perceptions of child suspects’ abilities may influence guilt, our results suggest these same abilities do not influence perceptions of responsibility and intent.

Because a significant interaction between Child Age and Child Gender emerged in the analysis of variance, we conducted a second regression predicting culpability with this interaction term included, \( F(13,243) = 11.79, p < 0.001, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.35 \). Results in are in Table 5. As shown, child gender emerges as a significant predictor, but is qualified by the significant interaction between child gender and child age (for interpretation of this interaction, see above). Additionally, Child Credibility and Police Fairness ratings remain the most robust predictors of culpability.

In summary, consistent with the initial analyses, suspect characteristics did not directly affect verdict preferences. However, participants’ general interpretations of the interview, including the suspect’s and police’s behaviour, were predictive of guilt and culpability judgments. Finally, perceptions that children did not understand their constitutional rights also predicted guilty verdicts.

Discussion

The primary goal of the study was to investigate factors that influence perceptions of youthful suspects interrogated by the police. The most consistent predictors of such perceptions were two factors external to the suspect: Gender of the rater and level of general sympathy held for juvenile offenders. Whether the child suspect was a pre-adolescent or an adolescent did not directly affect perceptions, even for ratings of interview understanding, legal knowledge, and the like – that is, abilities that in studies of adolescents’ actual and perceived legal knowledge have revealed consistent age-related differences (e.g. Grisso et al., 2003; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Redlich et al., in press).
Instead, participant gender and sympathy for juvenile offenders directly and, in conjunction with other factors, influenced perceptions of suspect capabilities and guilt.

In regard to differences in women's and men's judgments and perceptions, a vast literature on perceptions of child victim/witnesses supports the current findings. In studies examining juror perceptions in child sexual assault cases, women tend to rate the child victim more favorably than men, and men tend to rate the defendant more favorably than women (Bottoms, 1993; Schmidt & Brigham, 1996). To extrapolate to the current study, women could be predicted to see child suspects more favorably than men because of their child status, although men could be predicted to see child suspects more favorably than women because of their suspect/defendant status. Our findings support the first alternative. In comparison to women, men were more likely to rate (1) the child guilty and perceive him/her to be culpable, (2) the child as more freely giving, and signing the confession statement, (3) the child as having a higher understanding of the interview and related vocabulary words, and (4) the police as more fair. However, depending on certain factors, women held perceptions in a direction that was unexpected. For example, compared to men, women rated 11-year-old girl suspects as more likely to understand her rights. And, women rated 11-year-olds as having higher courtroom abilities in comparison to 14-year-olds, whereas men did not make this distinction.

In previous studies examining child defendants, differences based on participant gender have not always surfaced (e.g. Crosby et al., 1995; Ghetti & Redlich, 2001), although some studies have reported differences: Haegerich and Bottoms (2000), for instance, found that when presented with defendants who killed their fathers, men were more likely to vote guilty than women. The present study, however, is distinct because we focused on child suspects when guilt was ambiguous and the manner in which the child was questioned was problematic. Furthermore, previous studies have also relied on brief vignettes or partial trial transcripts, whereas in the present study, participants were able to consider the entire 3-hour interrogation. Thus, when potential decision-makers have access to more information than vignettes and/or trial transcripts, differences between men and women may become more apparent. If these findings generalize to actual cases involving children and questionable confession evidence, the advent of preserving entire interrogations can have implications for jury make-up, although in the present study decision-making post-deliberation was not examined.

The second factor external to suspects that affected participants’ judgments concerned the level of sympathy held generally for juvenile offenders. Not surprisingly, in comparison to participants with less sympathy for juveniles, participants with more sympathy: (1) were less likely to vote child suspects as guilty, (2) viewed child suspects as less culpable (although this finding was not borne out in the multivariate regression), and (3) viewed child suspects as more credible. Juvenile offender sympathy levels also interacted with child age and child gender to influence perceptions of Police Fairness. When the suspect was a younger boy, the same pattern emerged: Persons with higher sympathy levels perceived the police to be fairer than those with lower sympathy levels for juvenile offenders generally.

Both research participants and jurors make decisions in part according to pre-established biases. More than 20 years ago, Kassin and Wrightsman (1983) demonstrated the predictive validity of the Juror Bias Scale, a scale measuring general attitudes towards the guilt of persons criminally charged and punished. Biases regarding suspect guilt were most influential when the surrounding evidence was weak or ambiguous. Thus, in the present study, because the ‘confession’ was questionable and interrogation tactics were controversial, participants’ sympathy for juveniles appeared to be particularly influential in affecting both guilt ratings. In contrast, ratings of the child suspect’s abilities and
understanding as well as ratings of the police were not affected by high versus low sympathy levels.

Perceptions of culpability and guilt verdicts

When perceptions of culpability, which included ratings of maliciousness, intent, and responsibility, were examined, a significant interaction between suspect age and suspect gender was found indicating that the 11-year-old girl was viewed as the most culpable. The actual suspect was also an 11-year-old girl, who was twice convicted of negligent murder. If the actual suspect was older or was a boy, would the outcome of the original trials have been different? In the present study, men and women viewed the police as equally fair for boys and girls, but only when the suspect was 14 years of age. These findings concerning suspect age and gender may stem from schemas not only about suspected criminals, but also about gender expectations. Fiske and Taylor (1991) define a schema as a ‘cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes’ (p. 98). At a basic level, schemas are preconceived notions; the conceptions of suspected criminals are that they are usually older (than 11 years) and usually male. Eleven-year-old girls are not common murder suspects, and thus raters may have translated this highly unlikely situation into a higher likelihood of guilt. That is, because the information was so inconsistent with their schema of criminals, participants may have interpreted the 11-year-old girl’s mere presence as a suspect of homicide as evidence of her guilt. In fact, we found that the level of responsibility attributed to the 11-year-old girl was nearly the same as the level attributed to the 14-year-old boy, who is arguably a more common representation of a ‘criminal.’

Additionally, the regression revealed that perceptions of Child Credibility and Police Fairness were the most important predictors of perceived culpability. Even sympathy for juvenile offenders, which was significant in the analysis of variance, was not a significant predictor of culpability when other variables were considered. Similarly, other variables, including perceptions of Interview and Rights Understanding, which significantly predicted guilt, did not predict perceptions of culpability. Thus, when making assessments of maliciousness, intent, and responsibility, there is preliminary evidence that suspects’ capabilities and degree of understanding are less influential in decision-making, whereas they are influential in decisions of guilt. Because the confession in the present study involved admitting to accidentally dropping and kicking the victim, it will be important to assess whether similar findings emerge when confessions and culpability for committing malicious crimes intended to cause harm are considered.

In regard to dichotomous verdicts, which are more applicable to real courtroom situations, we found characteristics of the suspect, interview, police, and perceiver to influence guilt decisions. As expected, we found that individuals who felt less sympathy for juvenile criminals in general and individuals who rated child suspects as less credible were more likely to convict. We also found that perceptions of decreased Police Fairness and increased Interview Understanding predicted guilt. Participants who viewed the police as fair were more than five times more likely to vote guilty. Similarly, participants who viewed the child as having a fuller understanding of the interrogation were three and half times more likely to vote guilty. False confessions often arise from highly coercive police practices and arguably from suspects who lack understanding. Although these Police Fairness and Interview Understanding ratings were made pre-deliberation, it is encouraging that decision-makers who perceive the police as unfair and who perceive the child suspect as lacking a full understanding of the interrogation process take these factors into
consideration when casting their verdicts. It is important to remember that in the present study, the suspect ‘confessed’ to an accidental homicide. Thus, these two findings suggest that recognitions of improper police practice and child suspect understanding affect whether triers of fact view confessions as false, or at the least coerced (in that they were less likely to vote guilty).

In contrast to these above two findings, perceptions of confession voluntariness did not predict guilt (or culpability). Thus, when considering the weight of confessions in the courtroom, while we found perceptions of decreased Police Fairness and Interview Understanding to lead to acquittal, we did not find perceptions of statement voluntariness to influence perceptions of guilt. In past research, perceptions of police coercion during interrogations have not always influenced conviction rates, nor have instructions to disregard involuntary confessions (Kassin & Sukel, 1997; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980). Specifically, when mock jurors are presented with confessions resulting from minimization techniques (i.e. feigned friendship and understanding, sympathy) conviction rates are as high as rates when presented with an unprompted confession. When presented with maximization-like techniques (i.e. veiled threats), conviction rates drop significantly (Kassin & McNall, 1991). In the present study, the police officers used both types of techniques, and individuals had access to the entire interrogation process. Additionally, perceptions of child as opposed to adult suspects were examined. Thus, the current findings provide initial evidence suggesting that decisions of confession voluntariness and guilt/culpability ratings are made independent of each other when (1) a combination of minimization and maximization interrogation techniques are used, and (2) children as opposed to adults are the suspects.

We also found that the lower the perceived level of the child suspects’ Rights Understanding, the more likely participants were to perceive the child as guilty. On the one hand, if a person understands their rights, it can be argued that this understanding does not bear on the likelihood of falsely confessing. Kassin and Norwick (2004) found that 81% of persons innocent of a mock crime waived their rights in comparison to 36% of guilty persons. Although Kassin and Norwick did not measure rights comprehension, their subjects were undergraduates at a prestigious college with high entry standards (e.g. mean 2003 SAT score of 1410, http://www.williams.edu/admin/provost/ir/2003-04cds.pdf), suggesting that average rights comprehension would be higher than in samples of juveniles or offenders. Prior research (Kassin, Goldstein, & Savitsky, 2003; Meissner & Kassin, 2004) has found that the state of innocence has led investigators to be more harsh and aggressive, leading to the conclusion that ‘innocence can put innocents at risk’ for false confession (see Kassin, 2005). Thus, innocent individuals who understand their rights and who choose to waive them are still susceptible to false confession, but arguably not because of reasons relating to their comprehension of their rights.

On the other hand, for innocents who do not understand their rights, this lack of understanding may be significantly and positively correlated with the potential for false confession because the same deficits in cognitive and social functioning that contribute to false confessions (Gudjonsson, 2003) may also contribute to deficits in rights comprehension. The evidence is quite robust that young juveniles and persons with intellectual/mental difficulties are less likely to understand and appreciate their interrogation rights (Everington & Fulero, 1999; Goldstein, Condie, Kalbitzer, Osman, & Geier, 2003; Grisso, 1981; Redlich, Silverman, & Steiner, 2003), and that these two groups are at risk for false confession (Drizin & Colgan, 2004; Redlich, 2004). However, Goldstein and colleagues (2003) found Miranda comprehension did not significantly predict self-reported hypothetical likelihood for false confession among juvenile offenders. To our knowledge,
the relation between rights comprehension and actual false confessions has not been studied.

Nevertheless, the present results suggest that individuals do not perceive deficits in rights understanding to be associated with false confession (i.e. innocence). Rather, perceptions of lowered understanding of rights predicted guilt ratings. However, these perceptions did not predict perceptions of culpability, suggesting that participants may have viewed child suspects as guilty but also as committing the crime unintentionally and without malice. Future research should address relations between perceptions of suspect intelligence, suspect understanding, guilt, and culpability.

Conclusions

Before concluding, limitations of the present research should be addressed. First, participants were undergraduate students and thus did not represent a wide range of ages and other possibly relevant characteristics (e.g. parental status) that could influence mock jurors’ perceptions and decisions. However, meaningful differences emerged that should not be discounted. Further, several researchers have reported few, if any differences between individuals who match characteristics of typical jurors, for instance, by recruiting actual jurors or recruiting jury-eligible adults (e.g. who are typically in their 40s and 50s), when evaluating perceptions of interrogation-related issues and when assessing perceptions of children involved in legal cases (Lassiter, 2002; Quas et al., 2005; see Bornstein, 1999, for a review). Second, the interrogation was presented only in written form. Thus, findings may not generalize to situations where the interrogation can be viewed or heard. Lassiter and colleagues found, however, that differences in presentation format of interrogations (i.e. written transcripts, audiotapes, and videotapes) did not produce significant differences in ratings of voluntariness and guilt when there was equal camera focus on the suspect and interrogator (Lassiter et al., 2002; Lassiter, Slaw, Briggs, & Scanlan, 1992) or when detective-focused (Lassiter & Irvine, 1986). Similarly, in the present study, only the crime of homicide was studied, and thus conclusions regarding other types of crimes cannot be made. In actual proven false confession cases, murder or attempted murder accounted for 83% of the cases (Drizin & Leo, 2004).

In closing, the well-known legal scholar McCormick (1972) wrote, ‘The introduction of a confession makes the other aspects of a trial in court superfluous’ (p. 316). Although his statement may well remain true today, our findings suggest that mock jurors are somewhat sensitive to the conditions under which a confession has been obtained from a juvenile suspect. Of course, that a majority of our participants still rated the child as guilty, despite evidence revealing that the actual girl suspect could not have committed the crime, is cause for concern. The next step is to identify methods of assisting triers of fact when evaluating confession evidence regarding the conditions that are more versus less likely to lead to false confessions (see Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004).

Note

1. Also included in the cover sheet was a sentence that varied in whether it stated that the child suspect was a former child abuse victim. This manipulation was only mentioned once, and did not influence perceptions (i.e. no significant main or interactions effects emerged with our dependent measures). Further, a post-survey manipulation check revealed that 20% incorrectly believed the child had not been a former abuse victim when informed so, and 30% incorrectly
believed the child had been a former abuse victim when no information about abuse was given. Thus, we do not consider the physical abuse victim manipulation further.

References


