

Sample Answer

Explain how the research by Hall and Player (2008) could be used to improve fingerprint identification. (10 marks)

The research by Hall and Player highlights possible emotional bias which could affect the process of identifying fingerprints. In the study they created an experiment where 70 experienced forensic scientists were asked to compare a smudged fingerprint on a £50 note with a reference set of prints. The independent variable was the information that was included in a crime report supplied with the prints. Half were given a crime report describing fraud involving passing forged notes where the suspect fled the premises after the shop assistant spotted that the money was fake, this was the low emotional context condition. The other half were given the same information but at the end of the description it stated that the criminal fired two shots and killed the victim and then fled, this is the high emotional context condition. The reason for this was to see whether an emotional context influences the accuracy of the scientists. When comparing the conditions there was little difference in identification rates between the high emotional context condition and low emotional context condition. This suggests that the emotional context actually had little effect on the sample in terms of their identification of the fingerprint. However, the participants were asked at the end of the study if they had read the crime report which contained the details of the crime, and if they had, did they think it had affected their analysis. 50% of the high condition said it had affected their analysis, compared to 6% from the low condition. This result does suggest that emotional context can affect the fingerprint experts thinking, but maybe not to the extent of biasing their judgements in this artificial scenario. To improve the future identification of fingerprints forensic experts should be unaware of the details of the crime in order to reduce bias. They should only be provided with the fingerprints themselves and no additional crime report. This would improve the reliability of the process and ensure that all fingerprint identifications are carried out in exactly the same way without any bias. As found by Hall & Player (2008) forensic scientists could be more objective in their analysis if they are unaware of the contextual details of a crime. This is known as de-biasing and would help standardise the process of fingerprint analysis.

