

**(a) Using the research by Dixon et al (2002) explain how juries can be persuaded by the characteristics of witnesses and defendants. (10 marks)**

In the courtroom, ordinary people make decisions about guilt or innocence but stereotypes can bias their decisions. We might not even be aware of them, but guilty people may go free or innocent people may get convicted. In Dixon et al (2002) they aimed to evaluate the consequences of accent in a legal context by investigating the influence of an English regional accent, the Birmingham or “Brummie” accent, on listeners’ attributions of guilt toward a criminal suspect. They conducted an independent groups design where the independent variables (IV) were manipulated. These were which of the conditions the participant was assigned to – accent type: Brummie/ standard, race of suspect: Black/ White and crime type: blue collar/ white collar. The main dependent variable (DV) was participants’ attributions of guilt. Using a sample of 119 white undergraduate Psychology students they found that the Brummie suspect was rated as more guilty when compared to someone with a standard accent. This tells us that attributions of guilt may be affected by accent in a British context. However, it is possible, though that juries would not be persuaded so easily. In a real situation there is much more evidence given to juries, so the accent would be less important to the decision and the importance of accents might be less than other things like gender or age. Other researchers have found that speech mattered for defendants too. People who were accentless were less likely to be thought of as guilty of assault as ones with Australian or Asian accents. In Lakoff (1973) it was found that witnesses, who sounded unsure e.g. saying perhaps or ending sentences like questions, were thought of as less clever and not so believable. This shows that the effect of accents is complex as the type of crime was linked to particular social groups, meaning that in different situations, juries might be biased in favour of or against different groups, so guiding juries to avoid it would be hard. It has also been found that an interaction between, crime, voice and race can influence and persuade a jury’s decision. Research by Dixon et al (2002) also looked at the differences between people who were black or white, accused of robbery or fraud. Participants listened to the same interview but in different accents and with different information about the crime and then rated the suspects guilty. They found that race was a possible influence in the decision-making process. Suspects accused of a blue-collar crime who are black and speak with a Brummie accent, were found to be more likely to be perceived as guilty. This research shows how juries can be persuaded by the characteristics of witnesses and defendants.

