

Ethics and Socially Sensitive Research



This activity will help you to:

- Understand what is meant by socially sensitive research (SSR)
- Identify and describe some examples of SSR
- Assess the ways in which SSR issues arise from research

Socially sensitive research is a term that refers to any psychological research that has ethical implications that go beyond the research situation and affect people or groups in the wider society. People or groups potentially affected by SSR include:

- The PPs who took part in the research
- Their families or other people who are close to them
- Subgroups or cultures within society e.g. ethnic minorities, sexual subcultures etc.
- The researchers and their institution

Very few researchers deliberately carry out studies intended to have a negative impact on people. However, they sometimes overlook the negative impact their research might have.

Here are some examples of SSR. Working in small groups, discuss the implications of one of more of the examples. In your discussion you should consider the following questions:

- Who is put at risk by this research, and in what ways?
- What are the potential benefits of this research for society or people and groups within it?
- Do you think the research was justified, or should it have been disallowed?

Examples of SSR

- **Hamer (1993)** carried out genetic studies of gay men. By correlating patterns in sections of their DNA, he suggested that male homosexuality is heavily influenced by genetics. He argued that gay men have no choice about being gay; that environmental influences make little difference and that homosexuality probably evolved because of survival advantages it gave to social groups.
- **Raine (1996)** carried out brain scans of violent criminals. He found that they tended to have subtle damage to areas of the brain associated with impulse control. He suggested that this type of brain damage is a marker for violent criminality and that a great deal of misery (not to mention money) could be saved if, early in life children were screened for these markers and 'something done about it'.
- **Lowney (1995)** carried out participant observations of a group of teenage Satanists in a small American town. She documented their views on life and society, and their activities, which tended to centre on listening to music and a small amount of underage drinking and drug taking. She argued that their adoption of Satanism was a symbolic critique and rejection of the heavily stratified and hierarchical nature of American high school society.
- **Humphreys (1970)** carried out research into the practices and social interactions of gay men meeting up in a public toilet for sex. He posed as a gay man and met with and talked to his participants. To find out more about his participants' backgrounds, he took their car number plates and used a contact in the police to find out where they lived. Humphreys concluded that most of the stereotypes about gay men were untrue and that their public sexual practices were not harmful to anyone.