Assess the view that psychologists should avoid socially sensitive research.

Socially sensitive research in Criminological Psychology is justifiable to the extent that the researcher has fully considered its potential for harm and yet can advance a sound argument for its benefits. Sieber and Stanley (1988) define socially sensitive research (SSR) as that which has implications beyond the study itself, either for the participants themselves or the class of people they represent. For example, research into biological influences on violence (e.g. Raine et al, 1997) may undermine attempts at offender rehabilitation by promoting a fatalistic view of aggression. This definition is very broad and, within it, almost every study could be seen as sensitive. Lee (1993) defines SSR more narrowly as research that poses a 'substantial threat' to those involved.

One way of dealing with the issues raised by SSR is to avoid such topics altogether. Although SSR is in no way prohibited by current BPS and APA guidelines, there is a tendency for ethics committees to reject more often research proposals in sensitive areas (Ceci et al, 1985). Although this avoids the problems raised by SSR, the cost of such a strategy is that research becomes restricted to 'safe' topics and society's most pressing problems - like how to prevent crime - are left unaddressed. Avoiding controversial topics simply because they are controversial is scientifically irresponsible

In general, SSR is therefore justified, but in specific cases the associated risks to the participants, their groups and the researchers themselves mean that more care than usual must be given to deciding whether potential benefits justify the study. In any study care must be given to the treatment of the participants and the avoidance of harm (e.g. BPS, 2009) but in SSR the risk of harm and the degree of complication is greater. For example, a researcher should respect the confidentiality of a respondent describing their life as a gang member. But what if the respondent indicates that they plan to injure or kill someone? And if the researchers decide to act on this information, what are the personal risks to the researcher themselves? Or to the research community, to whom other potential respondents may now be unwilling to disclose information? Such possibilities should be identified and the associated risks carefully assessed before any decision is made.

Besides the conduct of the study itself, Sieber and Stanley (1988) identify three other areas where research can become sensitive and which can be overlooked when planning investigations. The formulation of the research question is one: even *asking* some questions can cause problems. Research into 'radicalisation' (e.g. Christmann, 2012) is potentially problematic because it risks stigmatising Muslims as 'potential terrorists'. Another is the institutional context. In a prison, convicted offenders are relatively powerless and the same ethical safeguards in place at, say, a university, may not be there. And so interventions (e.g. Howells et al, 2005) may be carried out without properly informed consent, and information given to researchers confidentially in good faith may be exploited in ways that are detrimental to the participant and which the researchers did not anticipate. Finally, there is the interpretation and applications of findings. Researchers should be mindful that other people may misinterpret findings and exploit them in unacceptable ways. For example, the observation that psychopaths tend to have low levels of activity in the amygdala (Glenn et al, 2009) could potentially give rise to a mass screening programme that results in the labelling and stigmatisation of people who have committed no crime.

However, these potential risks must be weighed against that benefits that might come out of the research. By understanding the role of brain abnormality in crime, we open up the possibility of reducing offending by identifying those at risk before they offend and supporting them to avoid it, or by addressing the factors that cause it, such as traumatic brain injury, environmental pollution and childhood neglect. By understanding the processes of radicalisation we open up the possibility of avoiding death and injury from terrorist acts. SSR tends to focus on the most pressing problems faced by society. Whilst the problems that surround it are consequently greater, so is the need to address them through research. Therefore, researchers have a duty to engage with SSR, not avoid it.