

“Psychologists have a real dilemma in carrying out works in socially sensitive areas. Such work raises difficult ethical issues and yet it may provide insights into some of society’s most pressing problems.”

Discuss issues relating to the ethics of SSR, such as those raised in this quotation

Socially sensitive research describes studies in which there are potential social consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in research or the class of individuals represented by the research. Socially sensitive research can produce risks for many people other than those directly involved, for example, members of the group to which participants belong, people closely associated with the participants, the experimenter/s or even the research institution to which the experimenter/s belong.

Sieber and Stanley 1988 have argued that ethical concerns can arise with respect to 4 major aspects of such research; deciding on the research question or hypothesis to be tested, the conduct of the research and treatment of the participants, the institutional context and the interpretation and application of findings in ways far removed from the intentions of the experimenter. When looking at research that attempts to link crime to genetics, both legal and moral implications are created. With regards to treatment of participants, one of the major problems is maintaining the confidentiality of information that might be revealed as part of the research process, for example, sexual habits or drug use. In such situations the issue of confidentiality is paramount. If confidentiality were broken, then participants would be less willing to divulge this information in the future and further research in this area would have been compromised. On the other hand, carrying out socially sensitive research also carries significant implications for the researchers themselves. Milgram was continuously harassed and criticised by the American press for his findings that ordinary people are capable of committing such atrocities when instructed to do so by an authority figure. A major concern in the interpretation and application of research findings in psychology is that they may be used for reasons other than those for which they were originally intended. Not all socially sensitive research issues are quite as controversial as Hamer’s work on the inheritance of a gene connected with homosexuality; research into the accuracy of children as witnesses in allegations of sexual abuse has shown quite clearly that children are able to remember events with the same kind of accuracy as we might expect from adults. In contrast, up until the 1980’s, children’s accounts of sexual abuse were generally regarded as unreliable and therefore inadmissible as evidence.

Studies that examine the relationship between race and IQ or the genetic basis of homosexuality can be considered socially sensitive; the scientific knowledge can be used for exploitation and even social manipulation. Psychologists are cautioned that some aspects of human behaviour are beyond the scope of psychological research although it is largely left to the individual psychologists as to how this caution is interpreted. This has resulted in some researchers avoiding sensitive areas altogether, and those who do pursue such areas often risk criticism from colleagues and others outside the discipline. From this it is evident that socially sensitive research is more likely than non-sensitive research to be rejected by institutional ethical committees. Ceci et al found that the rejection rate was about twice as great. The fact that certain SSR is being carried out can suggest to society at large that these issues are real and important. For example, the fact that psychologists have compared the intelligence of different races implies that there are racial differences and that intelligence exists and

can be measured. SSR can be used to justify various forms of discrimination against individuals or groups and in the most extreme cases the findings have been used to produce discriminatory changes in the laws and regulations within a given society. So, the findings of SSR can be used to justify new forms of social control.

There are many areas concerned with SSR but race-related research is one of the best known and the most notorious. One of the main arguments in favour of race related research is that researchers should be free to carry out whatever research seems important to them. There is a real danger that research in this area will be stopped for political rather than for ethical reasons. One of the strongest arguments against race related research into intelligence is that the findings are often used in unacceptable ways. Goddard 1913 gave intelligence tests to immigrants arriving in New York. He claimed that his findings demonstrated that 87% of Russians, 83% of Jews, 80% of Hungarians and 79% of Italians were “feeble-minded”. Goddard reached this ludicrous conclusion by ignoring the obvious fact that most of these immigrants had a very limited command of the English language. A second argument against much race related research is that it is almost meaningless given the fact that blacks and whites in the US do not form biological groups. It is also fairly pointless, because it is important to discover for certain precisely why there are race differences in intelligence. Another argument is that such research does not possess any particular scientific interest, in that it offers no prospect of shedding much light on the processes and mechanisms involved in intelligence. If it could be shown that all racial differences in intelligence are due to environmental factors, this would tell us nothing about the different problem solving strategies used by those high and low in intelligence.

Early research on “alternative” sexuality suffered from heterosexual bias. This was replaced by a liberal humanistic approach that assumed that gays and lesbians conform to heterosexual norms in their attitudes and behaviour, and that minimised the specific problems encountered by gays and lesbians. Most recently, an ethically acceptable approach has evolved. Ethnic groups often experience acculturative stress. Investigators need to ensure that their research does not interfere with the attempts to members of ethnic minorities to use a suitable acculturation strategy.

Socially sensitive research now shows much more recognition of the fact that we need to take full account of the needs and sensitivities of all those involved in experiments, as well as the broader society or culture in which experiments are carried out. What is regarded as acceptable or unacceptable for psychologists to do depends very much on the prevailing cultural values and standards. Some psychologists used to treat their participants in ways that are now unthinkable because their ethical standards resembled those of the culture in which they lived and worked. SSR can provide us with very valued findings but the risks of conducting the research seem to be preventing more important issues and findings from being discovered.