

## Ethics applications: Determining the level of risk

### 1. Minimal risk

- Literature, documents, and information in the public domain; for example, in public libraries, public archives, websites, newspapers, or newsletters, and research involving the analysis of existing statistics.
- The probability of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not in itself greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life (the concept of 'daily life' used as a benchmark should be that of everyday life as experienced by the average person living in a safe, 'first-world' country).
- Not all research involving material in the public domain can be identified as 'minimal risk'. For example, research studies involving social media, such as 'tweets' or 'Facebook' profiles, could be medium risk, depending on the research question/s.

### 2. Low risk

***Low-risk research is research in which the investigation of largely uncontroversial topics is undertaken through interviews, surveys, and participant observation. The participants in such research are typically adults or children who are unremarkable in terms of their social status, health status, and/or development. As such, there is little potential for discomfort or inconvenience on the part of participants; where such possibility does exist, the predicted distress or discomfort or inconvenience would be minor.***

It includes the following:

- Research in which the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort or inconvenience.
- The potential risk that the participant would experience by participating in the research activity (e.g. surveys, interviews or activities) is not greater than what they would be exposed to in their daily lives. This means that the questions asked during the interview will not require the participant to reflect on traumatic or negative experiences that would increase the risk of discomfort, emotional distress or harm. Questions asked will not require them to divulge personal/sensitive information and experiences that they would not usually share with a stranger.
- Research in which the investigation of largely uncontroversial topics is undertaken through interviews, surveys, and observation.
- The participants are adults and are not considered a vulnerable research population. Children are generally considered a vulnerable research population; however, this rule is not absolute, and some projects involving children may also be considered 'low risk' in some instances.
- The research will collect information that would generally be considered non-sensitive, such as opinions rather than personal information.
- The information can primarily be collected anonymously. Please note the following: "A respondent may be considered anonymous when the researcher cannot identify a given

*response with a given respondent. This means an interview-survey respondent can never be considered anonymous, since an interviewer collects the information from an identifiable respondent. An example of anonymity would be the mail survey in which no identification numbers are put on the questionnaires before their return to the research office". (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).*

- A study of a social setting, a network, a set of activities, etc., that is not controversial and involves ethnographic methods (participant observation and interviews). An example could be a study of public life in a tourist destination. Most of the knowledge gathered is public, shared, and available. These are the kinds of studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology.
- Post-hoc analysis of a large sample of student essays/exam papers where the anonymity of students is assured; much standard socio-economic survey and interviewing work where standard protocols re informed consent, voluntary withdrawal, and confidentiality are in place.

### **3. Medium risk**

***Medium-risk research is research in which there is an increased potential for emotional or psychological discomfort due to the topic being controversial or connected to social stigma, or the participants themselves being vulnerable. Such research could harm the participant if not appropriately managed by the researcher.***

It includes the following:

- Research in which there is a potential risk of harm or discomfort but where appropriate steps can be taken to mitigate or reduce overall risk.
- It is highly probable that the participant would experience significant discomfort, emotional distress, or a range of negative emotions while participating in the research activity. The participant would be asked to reflect on personal matters that they would not usually share with anyone outside the research context. OR they would be asked to reflect on or respond to questions on a topic that is considered sensitive and/or controversial. The potential risk of participation could include emotional distress, which could necessitate referral for counselling. The study participants would be groups considered vulnerable or stigmatised, but this could also include cases where non-vulnerable populations would be rendered in a vulnerable situation due to their participation in your research activities.
- A study of vulnerable social categories, e.g. relationships between children and adults as experienced by both these categories. An example is a survey of controversies about school discipline. Some of the knowledge is private and based on a relationship of trust between the researcher and participants.
- Dealing with potentially sensitive topics such as HIV, sexuality, rape, and violence, one cannot presume that sensitivity can be generalised across all cultural/social contexts. (Example: Researchers in Uganda have maintained that stigma re HIV is not an issue there compared to SA, so there is a very different context in which to judge potential harm or discomfort. Or another example: Working with a cultural group where elders are considered the leaders who make the decisions; these elders cannot be indicated as vulnerable because that would offend them).

With medium-risk, one or more of the following applies:

- The research topic is 'sensitive'.
- Information gathered is personal rather than opinions, attitudes, or a combination of both.

- The information must be collected with personal identifiers (name, student number, etc.)
- The research participants may come from a vulnerable or marginalised group, such as those with disabilities, people living with HIV or other chronic diseases, economically or educationally disadvantaged, etc.

#### 4. High risk

***High-risk research is research in which there is a foreseeable risk of emotional or psychological discomfort or harm if not managed responsibly. Such research involves intimate details of vulnerable participants and highly sensitive or susceptible topics.***

It includes the following:

- Research in which there is an actual and foreseeable risk of harm and discomfort to participants and/or the research team, which may lead to serious adverse consequences if these risks are not managed responsibly. High-risk research could also be described as research involving highly sensitive, susceptible topics and/or the participation of very vulnerable and marginalised individuals/groups.
- Criminal activities linked to names, or activities in which victims of sexual abuse are asked questions about their abuse in ways that provoke flashbacks.
- A study involving vulnerable social categories where exploitation or severe personal loss is concerned, e.g. research re sexual abuse, abortion, crime, drugs, witchcraft accusations, etc. The knowledge gained in this risk category often involves intimate or secretive aspects. Information that is provided is usually not meant to be published in detail.
- Research with/on political dissidents in a very repressive political environment.
- Research on whistleblowers.
- Research on grief.
- Research on children's access to pornography.
- Research on political refugees.
- Research on ex-criminals.
- Research on prisoners.
- Research on cutting behaviour among adolescent girls, with a waiver of parental consent.

With high-risk, one or more of the following applies:

- Research involving highly sensitive topics and/or very vulnerable and marginalised individuals or communities.
- Research involving the deception of research participants.
- Research investigating illegal activities; research involving participants who are illegal immigrants or engaged in illegal activities.
- Agreeing to participate in the research may well place participants at real risk of harm.
- Information revealed in the course of the research may put the researcher at risk of breaking the law, e.g. research investigating gang activities and possession of illegal firearms.
- The research may reveal information that requires action on the researcher's part that could place the participant or others at risk, e.g. research involving child victims of physical or sexual abuse, victims of domestic violence, etc.

<https://www.eng.sun.ac.za/media/sites/7/Determining-the-Level-of-Risk.pdf>

*Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures*, Department of Health, RSA. 2015

Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2001). *The Practice of Social Research*. Oxford University Press, Cape Town.