

Ethics Applications: Determining the Level of Risk

1. Minimal risk

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

2. Low risk

- Research in which the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort or inconvenience.
- The potential risk that would be experienced by the participant by taking part in the research activity (by way of surveys, interview or activity) is not greater than what they would be exposed to in their daily lives, e.g. 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 OR ask them to divulge personal/sensitive information and experiences they would not normally 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 not considered to be a vulnerable research population. Children are generally considered to be a vulnerable research population; however, this rule is not absolute and certain projects involving children may also be considered 'low risk'.
- The research will collect information that would generally be regarded as non-sensitive, such as opinion rather than personal information.
- The information can generally 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 are not controversial and involve ethnographic methods (participant observation and interviews). A study of informal trade or of public life in a tourist destination could be examples. Much of the knowledge is of a public nature. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- Post-hoc analysis of large sample of student essays/exam papers where 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. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- 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 the little potential for discomfort or inconvenience on the part of participants; where such potential does exist, the predicted discomfort or inconvenience would be minor. (Department of General Linguistics).

3. Medium risk

- 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 major 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 normally share with anyone outside of 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 participants in the study would be groups that are considered vulnerable or stigmatised, but this could also include the case where non-vulnerable populations would be rendered vulnerable 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. A study of controversies about school discipline is an example. Some of the knowledge is private and is based on a relation of trust between researcher and participants. (Sociology and Social Anthropology).
- Dealing with potentially sensitive topics such as HIV, sexuality, rape, violence, but one cannot presume that sensitivity can be generalised across all cultural/social contexts. (Example: researchers in Uganda maintained that stigma re HIV not an issue there compared to SA, so very different context in which to make judgements re potential harm or discomfort.) (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- Medium risk research is research in which there is an increased potential for emotional or psychological discomfort, due to either the topic investigated being controversial or connected to social stigma or the participants themselves being vulnerable. Such research could be harmful to the participant if not managed properly by the researcher. (Department of General Linguistics)
- One or more of the following apply:
 - The research topic is 'sensitive'.
 - Information gathered is personal rather than opinion or attitudes, or a combination of both.
 - The information needs to 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 disease, the economically or educationally disadvantaged, etc.

4. High risk

- Research in which there is a real and foreseeable risk of harm and discomfort to participants and or the research team, and which may lead to serious adverse consequences if these risks are not managed in a responsible manner. High-risk research could also be described as research involving highly sensitive topics and/or the participation of very vulnerable and marginalised individuals/groups.
- Criminal activities that are linked to names, or ones in which victims of sexual abuse are asked questions about their abuse in ways that provoke flashbacks. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- A study involving vulnerable social categories where exploitation or severe personal loss is involved, e.g. research re sexual abuse, abortion, crime, drugs, witchcraft accusations, etc. The knowledge that is gained in this category of risk often involves intimate or secretive aspects. Information that is provided is often not meant to be published in detail. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- Research with/on political dissidents in a very repressive political environment; research on whistle-blowers. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- A study on bereavement. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)
- A study on children's access to pornography. (Sociology and Social Anthropology)

- High risk research is research in which there is a foreseeable risk of emotional or psychological discomfort or harm if not managed in a responsible manner. Such research involves intimate details of vulnerable participants, and highly sensitive topics. (Department of General Linguistics)
- A study on political refugees.
- A study on ex-criminals on the Cape Flats.
- Any study on prisoners.
- A study on cutting behaviour among adolescent girls, with a waiver of parental consent.
- A study of bereavement among adolescents in a high school setting.
- One or more of the following apply:
 - Research involving highly sensitive topics and/or very vulnerable and marginalised individuals or communities.
 - Research involving 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 during the course of the research may place 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 part of the researcher 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.