

# Determining the Level of Risk (LOW RISK)

## 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.
- The research will collect information such as opinions, perspectives and attitudes rather than information that a participant may regard as private, confidential or sensitive.
- Research in which the investigation of largely uncontroversial topics is undertaken through interviews, surveys and observation.
- The research will not involve the participation of any individuals or groups who may be exposed to key sources of vulnerability, e.g. minors, prisoners, or persons who do not have the factual capacity to consent. 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 is generally regarded as non-sensitive, such as opinion rather than personal info.

# Determining the Level of Risk (LOW RISK)

## LOW RISK (continued):

- The information can generally be collected anonymously, or the information can be collected without personal identifiers. 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).

# Determining the Level of Risk (MEDIUM RISK)

## MEDIUM RISK:

- The Research in which an individual or group is exposed to key sources of vulnerability (social, psychological, economic, legal) in the context of the research project.
- The research involves the participation of minors (persons under the age of 18).
- Participants are required to commit an act, or answer questions which might diminish their self-respect or cause them to experience embarrassment, shame or regret.
- Participants are exposed to questions which may be experienced as stressful or upsetting, or to procedures and activities which may evoke unpleasant or harmful responses or reactions.
- The use of stimuli, tasks or procedures may be experienced as distressing, noxious or unpleasant.
- Research involving inmates at correctional facilities, persons with limited freedom of movement, or people functioning in unequal power relationships, for example work environments, churches and schools, community projects where beneficiaries are recruited by the staff of community organisations or service providers.
- The research involves persons living with intellectual disabilities and/or mental illness (which may affect their factual capacity to consent or whom may be unduly coerced into research).

# Determining the Level of Risk (MEDIUM RISK)

## **MEDIUM RISK (continued):**

- Research involving deception of participants or withholding of information from participants.
- The researcher requires access to classified or confidential information without the prior, informed consent of participants (explicit motivation is required for waiver of consent, dependent on the type of information sought; researchers may be required to conduct a privacy impact assessment).
- Research involving participants who are illegal and/or undocumented immigrants or migrants.
- Research in which the type of information collected (e.g. personal or sensitive information that a person would reasonably expect to remain private and confidential), in combination with the collection of personal identifiers may put the participant at risk of identification if such confidential data is breached (name, student number, address etc.)
- Research which involves the collection of personal information classified in the Protection of Personal Information Act (2013) as special personal information.
- 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

# Determining the Level of Risk (MEDIUM RISK)

## MEDIUM RISK (continued):

- ... 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)

# Determining the Level of Risk (MEDIUM RISK)

## MEDIUM RISK (continued):

➤ 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.

# Determining the Level of Risk (HIGH RISK)

## HIGH RISK:

- Research investigating illegal activities which might place either the participant or the researcher at risk of harm.
- Research in which information may be revealed that requires action on the part of the researcher where such information could place the researcher or members of the research team, the participant or others at risk e.g., research involving child victims of physical or sexual abuse, victims of domestic violence, etc.
- The research will actively recruit persons who have experienced or might be experiencing a traumatic or stressful life event.
- Research that may require immediate follow-up and monitoring of a participant's well-being. 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)



# Determining the Level of Risk (HIGH RISK)

## HIGH RISK (continued):

- 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.



# Determining the Level of Risk (HIGH RISK)

## HIGH RISK (continued):

- 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.