

# Is my research project minimal risk or at risk?

## Hendrix College – Fall 2011

**Minimal risk** – no more emotional, physical, legal, social, mental or financial risk than everyday life

- If using college students, think about what an average college student might think is a sensitive topic, not just what your social group would think
- Think about what might be sensitive for your *relevant population*
  - For example, if you are studying older adults in Conway, you might need to take on the perspective of someone who's older or more socially conservative than yourself

**At risk** – more emotional, physical, legal, social, mental or financial risk or harm than people experience every day. This includes:

- Disclosing behaviors that might be illegal
- Behaviors that present physical risk
- Questions that involve painful, sensitive topics and might distress your participants (for example, asking about medical or sexual history)
- Any use of serious deception or situations that might create psychological stress
- Disclosure of sensitive health behaviors or information
- Disclosing personal characteristics that might make participants vulnerable to social or employment rejection
- Studying vulnerable populations (i.e., children, pregnant women, prisoners, individuals with cognitive impairments, elderly participants)
  - NOTE: any student research with a vulnerable population will require a faculty supervisor who can assist with creating the appropriate informed consent documentation

\*\*An at risk study just needs additional supervision and more oversight through our committee. These research projects are not necessarily less likely to eventually be approved. So, be upfront about risk and safeguards you are taking to account for the risk.

\*\* Research with *any amount* of deception requires a debriefing, even if the research is minimal risk.

### **Examples**

- **Studying student study behavior**
  - Minimal risk version – asking student participants to report their study habits, in terms of number of hours studied a day
  - At risk version – asking student participants to disclose if they have ever purchased Adderall or Ritalin with or without a prescription as a way to aid in their studying
    - *This study could be minimal risk, but only if there is no way to connect participants to their medical history*
    - *Another concern is that this research could be subpoenaed by a court of law because it might involve the illegal purchase of prescription drugs*

- **Studying responses to negative feedback**

- Minimal risk version – asking college student participants to imagine the last time they received negative feedback and to describe their reaction to the feedback
- At risk version – asking high school student participants to imagine the last time they received negative feedback and to describe their reaction to the feedback
  - *This study involves a vulnerable population, so HSRB review is required*

- **Studying human attraction**

- Minimal risk version – asking adults in committed relationships to identify characteristics they look for in a romantic partner
- At risk version – asking adults in an interview to identify times they have cheated on romantic partners when they were in committed relationships
  - *This study could be minimal risk, but only if the identities of participants were kept confidential*
  - *One problem that could occur is if the researcher and/or student assistants know the participant, in which case there could be social consequences for participation because of the difficulty in maintaining confidentiality*

- **Studying how people react to conflict**

- Minimal risk version – asking participants how they might react to a hypothetical conflict with a co-worker
- At risk version – having a fake participant, who is actually working for the researchers, get into a conflict with participants during a team task and observing the reactions of the participants
  - *This study involves deception, so it must go through the HSRB*

- **Studying exercise behavior**

- Minimal risk version – measuring the heart rate of soccer players (whose identities would be kept confidential and would not be recorded) before and after practice
- At risk version – measuring the heart rate of students who do not typically exercise before and after an intensive hour of exercise
  - *This study involves the creation of physical risk that participants would not typically be exposed to and would need to go through the HSRB*

- **Conducting Oral History Research**

- Minimal risk version – asking participants about their daily routine during elementary school
- At risk version – asking participants to discuss any bullying they experienced during elementary school
  - *This study involves the creation of psychological risk that participants would not typically be exposed to – in terms of discussing a painful event from their past – and would need to go through the HSRB*