Research with Vulnerable Populations Policy

Introduction

TASC is dedicated to conducting research that upholds the highest ethical standards, especially when working with vulnerable populations. In alignment with the ethical guidelines established by organisations such as Carmichael Ireland, the Irish Sociological Association (SAI), the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), this policy serves as a framework for ethical research practices within the organisation. While additional supports and tailored approaches are needed with populations at risk of vulnerability, research with vulnerable groups is important in order to address and respond to the needs and priorities of these populations.

Purpose of document

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for conducting research with vulnerable populations. It outlines ethical principles, such as respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, and offers practical advice on how to implement these principles in research practices. The document aims to ensure that research involving vulnerable populations is conducted in a respectful, compassionate, and ethical manner, with the goal of protecting the rights and well-being of participants and contributing to positive social change. In addition, this document details additional considerations and guidance when working with the following specific populations: minors, and asylum seekers and refugees.

Definition of vulnerable populations

There are two broad approaches to understanding vulnerability of populations, a categorical and a contextual approach. The categorical approach considers certain groups or populations as inherently vulnerable. This approach can overlook differences within population, individuals with multiple vulnerabilities, and dynamic or situational vulnerability (Gordan, 2013). The contextual approach, adopted in this policy, focuses on situational factors, and recognises that participants who are at risk of vulnerability are not always vulnerable; their vulnerability may change with their situation and environment, and this should be considered in research to manage the balance between protection and risk.

Additionally, we acknowledge that various social factors, such as poverty and lack of access to healthcare, can also contribute to vulnerability. Therefore, these factors are carefully considered in the design of our research to mitigate risks of coercion, exploitation, or other harms.

Research participants who may be considered at risk of vulnerability:

a. Children and young people
b. Older adults
c. People who are detained or subject to criminal sanction (e.g. prisoners; people on probation)
d. Asylum seekers and refugees
e. Members of minority and/or marginalised communities (e.g. LGBTQ+ people; people with disabilities; ethnic minorities)
f. People with conditions which may have a social or legal stigma (e.g. addictions; HIV)
g. Persons who may require support to provide consent, including adults with mental health problems, learning disabilities, literacy difficulties, cognitive impairments, and/or communication difficulties

TASC's approach to working with vulnerable populations

a. All research involving vulnerable populations will undergo an ethical review overseen by the Head of TASC's Research and Policy Committee and TASC's Director before data collection for the project begins.
b. All research projects involving vulnerable populations conducted by TASC will adhere to safeguarding procedures and protocols.
c. All research projects involving vulnerable populations conducted by TASC will align with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).
d. All staff working directly with vulnerable persons are required to be Garda vetted.
e. All staff working with vulnerable persons should attend safeguarding training.
f. When possible, TASC provides lower-income participants with a One4All voucher as a token of appreciation for their time spent participating in research. This will be included in project budgets where funding allows.
g. TASC is committed to producing accessible documents as an organisational standard, including plain language summaries of reports and screen reader-compatible formats.

Guiding principles

These guiding principles underpin our commitment to conducting ethical research, upholding the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants.

a. **Respect for autonomy**

- Honour the autonomy of all research participants, ensuring comprehension of research purpose, risks, and benefits.
- Obtain informed consent and allow participants the right to withdraw without repercussions.

b. Beneficence

- Strive to benefit both participants and society as a whole through research efforts.
- Minimise harm and maximise potential benefits for participants.
- Disseminate research outcomes responsibly, contributing to positive social change.

c. Non-maleficence

- Take necessary precautions to prevent physical and psychological harm to participants.
- Provide researchers with training to identify and mitigate potential risks.
- Implement confidentiality and data security measures to protect participants' privacy.

d. Justice

- Ensure equitable access to research opportunities and outcomes for all individuals.
- Conduct research procedures fairly and transparently, promoting inclusivity and diversity.
- Avoid unduly burdening or exploiting vulnerable populations in research.

e. Informed consent

- Provide participants with clear information about the research purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits.
- Use accessible language and formats to ensure comprehension.
- Give participants the opportunity to ask questions and provide them with the freedom to consent or decline participation.

f. Protection of privacy

- Take measures to safeguard participants' personal information and data.
- Maintain anonymity and confidentiality during data collection, storage, and dissemination.
- Comply with legal and ethical guidelines regarding sensitive data handling.

g. **Safeguarding**

- Maintain procedures in place to identify and respond to concerns or disclosures of harm or abuse.
- Researcher staff to undertake training to allow then to better recognise signs of distress or discomfort in participants.
- Direct participants to relevant support services if needed.

h. **Cultural sensitivity**

- Design and conduct research with awareness of cultural differences and respect for diverse beliefs and practices.
- Use translators and interpreters to facilitate communication and understanding when needed.

i. **Trauma-informed approach**

- Recognise the potential impact of past trauma on participants' well-being.
- Adopt practices to avoid re-traumatisation and ensure participant safety.
- Provide information on support services for participants requiring additional assistance or counselling.

Additional guidelines for specific groups

In addition to the above principles, the following groups need additional considerations.

a. Children and young people

Any research with people under 18 years of age will adhere to guidance outlined by Irish Child and Family Agency (Tulsa) and guidance from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability Inclusion, and Youth (DCEDIY).

- **Parental/Guardian involvement and informed consent**
  Open and transparent communication will be maintained with parents or legal guardians throughout the research process. Consent will be obtained from both the child and their legal guardian, utilising age-appropriate language and methods.

- **Safety and well-being**
  Safeguarding procedures will be followed to promptly respond to any concerns or disclosures of harm or abuse. Researchers will undergo training to identify signs of distress or discomfort in children and will be equipped to provide appropriate support as needed.

- **Respect for developmental stage**

The cognitive and emotional maturity of children will be carefully considered when designing research protocols and communicating with participants. Age-appropriate language and methods will be utilised to ensure comprehension and minimise stress or anxiety for children involved in the research. Additionally, research procedures will be adapted to accommodate children's developmental needs and capacities, allowing for breaks and providing support as necessary throughout the research process.

b. Asylum seekers and refugees

Any research with Asylum Seekers and Refugees will adhere to the key principles laid out by the [European Network of Research Ethics and Research Integrity](#) and [guidance](#) set out by the European Commission on research on refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

- **Informed consent**

Information will be provided in a way that is easily understood by participants, in recognition of the potential diverse linguistic needs of participants. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project at any stage without comment or penalty.

- **Data protection and anonymity**

In the case of this group, anonymity is particularly important as participants may have ongoing asylum claims and be identifiable as part of only a small cohort of their nationality or culture present in the country. Only information essential to the research aims will be collected from participants. Names, addresses or specific locations and exact dates will not be collected unless absolutely essential.

- **Prevention of harm**

It is crucial to ensure that individuals are not retraumatised during the research process, particularly when working with asylum seekers and refugees. Therefore, we will refrain from seeking details about a participant's grounds for asylum or their experiences of migration to Ireland unless absolutely necessary. The purpose of the research will be explained to participants, allowing them to prepare themselves in advance for what will be discussed. TASC's safeguarding procedure will be followed if a participant shows signs of distress during the

interview. Direct participants to relevant support in the event that psychological support is needed.

c. People speaking in a professional capacity

Any research with people speaking in a professional capacity, for example civil and public servants, politicians, members of civil society doctors and health workers, necessitates a specific approach to maintain ethical integrity, respect legal obligations, and uphold the principles of transparency, accountability, and impartiality.

- **Transparency and Accountability**

  We will ensure heightened transparency and accountability when researching public officials and civil society representatives. Following the European Union's emphasis on transparent governance, we will adhere to ethical guidelines, such as those outlined in the [EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)](), to handle personal data lawfully, fairly, and transparently, respecting participants' privacy and confidentiality.

- I**nformed Consent and Autonomy**

  We will ensure informed consent is obtained when conducting research with individuals in their professional capacity. Adhering to EU policies, such as those in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, we will stress the importance of voluntary participation, ensuring individuals are fully aware of the research's purpose, methods, potential impacts, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

- **Conflict of Interest and Impartiality**

  We will design our research to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure impartiality. Following EU guidelines, such as those from the [European Commission's Ethics for Researchers](), we will identify and manage potential conflicts to ensure our research findings are credible and unbiased.

- **Respect for Institutional Roles and Responsibilities**
  We will respect the specific institutional frameworks and responsibilities of public officials and civil society members. By adhering to EU-based policies, we will ensure our approach recognises and does not undermine these roles. The [European Research Area (ERA) Guidelines]() will guide our collaborative and respectful engagement with public institutions and civil society organisations.

- **Legal and Ethical Compliance**

We will comply with both ethical standards and legal requirements. By following the EU's harmonised legal frameworks, such as those within the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#), we will ensure our research upholds fundamental rights, including dignity, freedom, and equality.

Key documents

1. **TASC's Ethics Review Form is available [here](#).**
2. **TASC's GDPR Policy is available [here](#).**
3. **TASC's Safeguarding Policy is available [here](#)**.
4. A template for creating an **interview/survey information sheet and consent form is available [here.](#)**

References

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