EASHW TIPS – VULNERABILITY

This tip sheet addresses questions C9 and C10 from the EASHW application and focuses on two types of participant vulnerability in research:

1. **Pre-existing vulnerability (C9)**: Participants who are already vulnerable before the study begins (e.g., individuals with health issues, people in extreme poverty, illegal immigrants, etc.).

2. **Research-induced vulnerability (C10)**: Participants who may become vulnerable due to their involvement in the study (e.g., an employee disclosing negative information about their employer and facing risks of identification in the results).

C9. VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS: DO YOU WORK WITH VERY VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS (VERY VULNERABLE PRIOR TO THE STUDY)?

Question 9 is about pre-existing vulnerability. To know whether participants you invite for your study may have any pre-existing vulnerabilities, consider the following different types:

1. **General pre-existing vulnerability** = Individuals who are inherently vulnerable in most research contexts due to their circumstances. Examples include:
   - Incapacitated persons or those under legal guardianship.
   - Individuals with serious physical or mental health conditions.
   - Survivors of violence, abuse, or trauma.
   - Persons experiencing extreme financial distress or homelessness.
   - Individuals without legal residency status.
   - People in highly dependent relationships (e.g., employees dependent on employers, students reliant on supervisors).
   - And so on.
2. **Study-specific pre-existing vulnerability =** Even participants not typically considered vulnerable may face risks *based on the research topic or context*. For example:
   - A study on body image in social media may be harmful to individuals with eating disorders or body dysmorphia.
   - A study on school or workplace stress may not be ideal for people with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as severe anxiety or depression.
   - THUS: you must always reflect on whether your study is ***respectful and safe for all*** participants.

Extra questions to reflect upon when there are vulnerable participants at the start of the study (Yes to question 10)

1. WHY are participants vulnerable?
   - Explain here if there may be general and/or study-specific pre-existing vulnerability among potential participants.
2. WHO will come into contact with these participants: do these researchers have the necessary training or experience to deal with this target group professionally and respectfully?
   - PREPARE YOUR TEAM: Ensure all researchers working with vulnerable participants have the training and experience needed. Does your team have the necessary training or experience to support these people respectfully and professionally?
3. How will the researchers deal with the pre-existing vulnerability of the participants DURING THE STUDY? &
4. How will the researchers deal with the pre-existing vulnerability of the participants IN RESULTS/PUBLICATIONS?
   - DESIGN WITH CARE: Consider consulting other professionals or relevant organizations for additional insights when working with vulnerable groups. If certain individuals may

face specific risks or discomfort due to the study's topic or methods, what are the best options to ensure their safety and comfort?

- PLAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION: Include safeguards for participants during the study and in how results are published. Communicate about this in the informed consent.

5. Do you refer participants and researchers to HELP AGENCIES FOR SUPPORT? Which aid agencies do you refer them to?
    - PROVIDE SUPPORT LINES: Refer participants (and researchers!) to relevant organizations for help and support. At the end of this document, we list organizations for participant referral and study design assistance. Of course, you, as the expert, are best qualified to identify the organizations most relevant to your study.
6. Do you obtain the ACTIVE CONSENT of a CURATOR from incapacitated persons? (Adapted informed consent forms tailored to the intended target group are mandatory as an appendix. Unclear, missing or redundant information in the informed consent forms will result in a PRELIMINARY NEGATIVE ADVICE from EASHW).
    - OBTAIN PROPER FULLY INFORMED CONSENT: Fully inform participants in a language they will understand and that will not upset them. For incapacitated participants, submit tailored informed consent forms signed by legal guardians. SEE TIPS about ETHICAL & LEGAL CONSENT.

If you answer NO to this question, it is useful to **indicate if you take measures to warn or exclude certain participants** to prevent harm.

- Example: In a study on academic stress among, you can warn participants with anxiety disorders to avoid triggering unnecessary mental health challenges. **Using warnings leaves the decision to participate or not with the participants themselves.**
- Example: In a study on online dating behaviors, you might warn participants that some questions may be triggering for people with experiences of partner violence.
- Example: In a study about social media body ideals, targeting "the general user audience" it might be useful to take measures to *exclude* participants with diagnosed eating disorders or other mental health issues.
- Example: In a study on parenting techniques, you might *exclude* parents currently involved in custody disputes to avoid exacerbating stress or conflict.
- Example: In a study on exercise habits, you might *exclude* participants with known medical (mental/physical) conditions that could make physical activity risky.
- Example: In a global study on political opinions that cannot guarantee the anonymity of participants, you might *exclude* participants living in oppressive regimes where their responses could put them at risk if disclosed.
- Example: In a study about marketing of alcoholic drinks, you might exclude individuals currently in recovery programs to prevent relapse or unnecessary emotional distress.

C10. MORE VULNERABLE THROUGH PARTICIPATION: DO PARTICIPANTS BECOME (MORE) VULNERABLE THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY?

Regardless of pre-existing vulnerability, **this question applies to all participants**, including those already vulnerable at the start and those not vulnerable at the start.

We here ask you to carefully consider **whether participation in your study** could:

- **Trigger unwanted** emotional or psychological **responses** (e.g., reliving trauma or distress).
- **Expose participants to** social, professional, or legal **risks** (e.g., through the disclosure of sensitive information).
- **Create other risks** specific to your study's context or methods.

Extra questions to reflect upon if you answer YES to question 10:

1. WHY/HOW do participants become vulnerable by participating in this study?
    - Does the study's topic or process pose risks that could harm participants emotionally, socially, or professionally?
    - Example 1: A study on whistleblowing might lead employees to disclose sensitive workplace information, risking retaliation.
    - Example 2: A study using extreme images could trigger feelings of distress among participants, even if they were not vulnerable at the start.
2. WHO will come into contact with these participants: do these researchers have the necessary training or experience to deal with this?
    - Are researchers prepared?
    - Ensure your team has training or experience to engage respectfully and professionally with participants who may become vulnerable.
3. HOW WILL THE INVESTIGATORS DEAL WITH THE CAUSED VULNERABILITY OF THE PARTICIPANTS DURING THE STUDY?
    - How will you protect participants during the study?
    - What safeguards will you implement to minimize harm?
    - How will you address risks or discomfort participants might face during data collection?
4. HOW will the investigators IN RESULTS/PUBLICATIONS deal with the caused vulnerability of the participants?
    - Can you ensure anonymity and avoid descriptions that could indirectly identify participants, particularly when discussing sensitive topics?
5. Do you refer participants and researchers to HELP AGENCIES FOR SUPPORT? Which aid agencies do you refer them to?
    - Do you provide support or referrals?
    - Include plans to refer participants to professional help or resources if needed.
    - Look to the list of organizations provided at the end of this document, but ensure you identify the most suitable ones for your study.

You may answer **"NO" if you believe participants cannot become vulnerable** through participation. In this case, **explain briefly why** participation poses no risk of emotional, social, or professional harm.

SUPPORT LINES

We here suggest some support lines you can consult or refer participants to. It is IMPORTANT that YOU search for the BEST SUITED SUPPORT LINES FOR YOUR STUDY.

- For incapacitated persons or those under legal guardianship **https://www.vlaanderen.be/bescherming-en-bewind-voor-meerderjarigen**
- The Flemish Government provides an overview of various aid agencies such as TeleOnthaal or the Suicide Helpline, see overview: **https://www.zorgenvoormorgen.be/hulplijnen**
- The Onlinehulp-Apps website screens interesting apps that can be used for well-being and mental health: **https://www.onlinehulp-apps.be/**
- Support Centre for the Fight against Poverty, Precariousness and Social Exclusion **https://armoedebestrijding.be/**
- Equal Opportunities Support Centre **https://steunpuntgelijkekansen.be/**
- Transgender information **https://www.transgenderinfo.be/nl**
- ZORROLA informs about the harmful effects of negative representations in advertising and communication. **https://zorrola.be/nl/**