Recruitment Strategies in Human Research

Participant recruitment issues

The recruitment phase of a project is fundamental to the success of research involving human participants as outlined in the National Statement for the Ethical Conduct of Human Research (Chapter 3.1). There are many factors that must be considered in determining your recruitment strategy. These can include such matters as identifying individuals as potential participants, contact between the research team and potential participants, screening or exclusion of some individuals, and preparing to seek consent from the potential participants. Recruitment for the purpose of participation in a research study involves providing potential participants with a full explanation of what their participation in the research will involve, including an explanation of the overall research project. Research proposals and ethics applications should clearly describe the recruitment strategy and the criteria for the selection of potential participants, such as posting flyers on a campus, contacting people on social media, or using a tool like prolific. Recruitment can be either direct or indirect.

Key Recruitment Questions

Questions to consider when designing recruitment strategies include the following:

- Who will be recruited?
- How will participants be identified and recruited?
- Will the potential participants be screened?
- What is the impact of any relationship between researchers and potential participants on recruitment?
- How will the recruitment strategy facilitate obtaining the consent of participants?
- How will the recruitment strategy ensure that participants can make an informed decision about participation?
- Are there any risks associated with the recruitment strategy for potential participants or

for the viability of the project?

Other issues to consider in developing your recruitment strategy include:

- Are the inclusion/exclusion criteria for potential participants justifiable and fair?
- Has the potential participant population been over-researched or require special protection?
- the potential for coercion/exploitation
- any risks to participants related to recruitment (see Chapter 2.1 in the National Statement) and how the pattern of recruitment might be structured to mitigate any risks to participants
- any privacy matters relating to the recruitment of participants
- the potential impact of existing relationships on recruitment (including, but not limited to, hierarchical relationships that may generate an unequal or dependent relationship, such as teacher and student, manager and employee, supervisor and team member or treating health care professional and patient)
- the potential impact of participation on existing relationships
- whether participants will be recruited by co-researchers or other members of the project team who are unfamiliar with the guidance provided by this National Statement
- whether the research requires community engagement or agreements related to the research to be in place prior to individual recruitment

Outline in your research proposal and your ethics application:

- the desired number of participants to achieve a valid research result, and the number who may need to be approached to account for drop-outs and attrition
- your recruitment method – describing how it would work, what materials would be used (emails, posters, facebook) and what permissions would be needed, (if emailing in an organization, to post up recruitment information, from social media administrators.

You will need to address:

- How will the recruitment strategy ensure that participants can make an informed decision about participation?
- Are there any risks associated with the recruitment strategy for potential participants or for the viability of the project?

- Is there an unequal/dependent relationship between the participants and researchers, e.g., employer/employee; service provider/client; doctor/patient, lecturer/student, researcher/family member/friend?
- Some approaches to address unequal/dependent relationships
    - Have someone independent of the researchers recruit participants
    - Have a member of the research team rather than an employer or client service provider recruit participants
    - Advertise passively – with flyers or on-line with no direct contact with potential participants

Addressing unequal/dependent relationships

• Having someone independent of the research team perform recruitment e.g. a colleague who isn't associated with the unit/s in which student participants are enrolled

• Having a member of the research team other than the person with the pre-existing relationship to the participant undertake recruitment e.g. the student's supervisor instead of the student for student projects involving the recruitment of family/friends

• Having someone other than the employer or representative of the employer undertake recruitment e.g. a member of the research team

• Having someone other than the client service provider undertake recruitment e.g. a member of the research team

• Advertising the project using a method which doesn't involve direct contact with potential participants e.g. by advertising online or placing flyers in appropriate locations

    - Performing recruitment after, for example, students' grades have been released or after a client/patient receives the service or finishes their appointment

- Are participants considered vulnerable regardless of their relationship to the researchers and the nature of the research?

Recruiting vulnerable participants

Great care needs to be taken in the recruitment of vulnerable participants. Potential participants who are vulnerable may perceive coercion where none is intended. A power disparity, whether perceived or real, may mean that potential participants may feel obliged to participate. For example, a patient may feel a concern that they may not get as much medical treatment if they decide not to be in their doctor's clinical trial or feel too unwell to consider their involvement fully.

The National Statement lists as vulnerable participant groups:

- Children and young people
- people highly dependent on medical care who may be unable to give consent
- people with a cognitive impairment, intellectual disability or a mental illness
- pregnant women and the human foetus
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- people who may be involved in illegal activities

Vulnerable participant groups

Children and young people

The recruitment process for this participant group must consider the capacity of the specific cohort to comprehend what the research, and their participation, entails. This will vary according to participants' age and maturity. It may be appropriate to recruit and consent children and young people directly depending on both these factors and on the complexity of the research study itself. Therefore, as per N.S. 4.2.2 (a), researchers should specify how they will judge the child's/young person's vulnerability and capacity to consent to participation in research. If it has been determined that they will be able to comprehend the research project and their involvement, researchers must also describe the form of proposed discussions with them about the research and its effects, at an appropriate level of comprehension (see N.S. 4.2.2 (b)). If it has been determined that parental consent is required, please note that the consent of both parents may be required, depending on the level of risk involved in the child's participation (see N.S. 4.2.7). Special consideration must be given to parental consent when devising recruitment strategies for projects involving online research, where parental consent is required. Consider, for example, how it will be ensured that the parental consent is genuine i.e. how will it be ensured that the real parent is providing consent, and not someone masquerading as them. As with all participants, the possibility of (perceived) coercion must be addressed and, for children and young people, this may be coercion by parents or peers as well as by researchers or others.

People highly dependent on medical care

This participant group can be found in research conducted in the following settings:

- neonatal intensive care;
- aged and community care;
- terminal care;
- emergency care;
- intensive care; and
- the care of unconscious people

The recruitment process must allow for the fact that it may not be possible for participants or their family to provide consent. Even if it is possible for participants to provide consent, their decision-making capability may be impaired and/or there may be insufficient time for the provision of informed consent. In addition, if family are able to provide consent, their ability to make a decision may be very much affected by the situation at hand.

Please note that any research that targets people highly dependent on medical care must be reviewed by SUHREC and take into account relevant jurisdictional laws.

People with a cognitive impairment, intellectual disability or a mental illness

Recruitment of this participant group should take into consideration that depending on the condition of the specific participant, their capacity to consent and participate may vary depending on, for example:

- the nature of the participant's condition;
- the participant's medication or treatment;
- the participant's discomfort or distress;
- the complexity of the research project;
- fluctuations in the participant's condition and/or ability to provide consent

Researchers must recognise that these conditions exist on a continuum and design the research project, including the recruitment process, accordingly. For example, participants with dyslexia are not vulnerable to the extent that participants with serious mental illnesses or profound intellectual disabilities are vulnerable. Please note that any research that targets people with a cognitive impairment, intellectual disability or a mental illness must be reviewed by SUHREC.

Pregnant women and the human foetus

In recruiting for research involving pregnant women and the human foetus, researchers must ensure that the wellbeing and care of this participant group receives priority (see N.S. 4.1.1). They must ensure that information about the research is provided separately from information on routine clinical care (see N.S. 4.1.6). The risks and benefits to both the participants and their foetuses must be given careful consideration and must be discussed with the participants, possibly including providing access to counselling (see N.S. 4.1.3). In addition, researchers should ask participants if they wish to involve people who may be affected by the research in their decision to participate (see N.S. 4.1.5). Please note that any research that targets pregnant women as participants must be reviewed by SUHREC.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Researchers must obtain the agreement of relevant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or groups regarding recruitment techniques and research information that is to be communicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (see N.S. 4.7.3). Researchers conducting the following types of research must ensure that they attempt to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (see N.S. 4.7.6):

• Research occurring in an area where it is likely that the population includes a significant amount of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and/or

• Research that is concerned with a topic or disease/health burden specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the targeted population has a significant proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

People who may be involved in illegal activities

Although some research studies may be designed to uncover illegal activities, other research may uncover illegal activity inadvertently. Projects which fall into the first category must be reviewed by SUHREC, whereas projects that fall into the second category can be reviewed at SHESC-level or via negligible risk review. Recruitment procedures for projects falling into the second category should ensure that potential participants are made aware of the likelihood of illegal activity being discovered and highlight any legal obligations investigators may have, including the extent to which researchers will be able to keep such discoveries confidential (see N.S. 4.6.6). This includes considering that certain professional groups have mandatory reporting requirements that might impact this confidentiality.

English as a Second Language or Non-English Speaking Participants

In recruiting participants whose primary language is a language other than English, researchers must ensure that they take this into account with the research information presented in a suitable manner (see N.S. 2.2.3 & 5.2.17). In addition to communicating information to participants translated into their primary language (see N.S. 5.2.17 (b)), researchers should also consider addressing this by communicating this information orally (see N.S. 5.2.17 (a)).

Participants located in other countries

Researchers must demonstrate that the recruitment processes involved respect the cultural context in which they occur when recruiting people in other countries (see N.S. 4.8.21). This includes taking into account local beliefs and practices regarding recruitment (see N.S. 4.8.20). See the Australian Council for International Development's resources for more information. If the other countries in which research activities take place have their own formal HRE processes, these must be followed. Please note that these guidelines relate to projects involving data collection in other countries; not to projects taking place in Australia involving people from other countries.

Resources

Victoria University's guide to research ethics in the time of COVID-19

Links to Human Research Ethics Resources

Contact us for information

If you would like further information about the conduct of research or the human research ethics approval and review process, please contact:

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Victoria University Human Research Ethics website

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