Preparing to Conduct Research in One’s Own Organization

Occasionally CTU doctoral researchers would like to conduct research within their own organizations. The following discussion explores the concerns related to this, and the preparation required of the researcher prior to submitting an IRB application.

There are three categories of research at CTU. Exempt, Non-Exempt, and “No Human Subjects.” “No Human Subjects” is self-explanatory and is to be confirmed by submitting the appropriate form as found in the IRB section of the Doctoral Portal.

Exempt applications are intended for studies considered “low” risk (from page 4 of the IRB application):

- **Exempt Research** – After a systematic review, research activities that are deemed to be low risk for the participants will be submitted as EXEMPT from review by the entire IRB. This means that if you believe your proposed research carries low risk for the participants it will be reviewed under EXEMPT status, by one (or more) members of the IRB (see 45 CFR 46.101).

  Be informed that the IRB may ask you to revise your application and/or reclassify your research. If your application is reclassified, it is because the committee has reviewed your application and has determined that it was incorrectly classified. Often, the reason is that you have underestimated the risk to participants. It is the prerogative of the institution to make the final determination of classification.

By contrast, IRB applications are considered Non-exempt, when the risks to participants are estimated to be greater than those of Exempt research (from pages 4-5 of the IRB application):

- **Non-Exempt Research** – Non-exempt research requires full review by the IRB. Conditions that demand a full review of the proposed research include (but are not limited to):

  - Data is collected and can be connected to the participant/subject (identifiable private information), The subject/participant’s environment is manipulated for research purposes,
  - Research involving deception, Information about behavior is collected when the participant/subject reasonably assume that no observation and/or recording is taking place,
  - Research involving vulnerable populations*, Collection or recording of behavior could result in the subject facing criminal or civil liability, Collection or recording of behavior could result in damage to the subject/participant’s reputation, employability, or financial standing. It is your responsibility to systematically review the risks of your proposed research.

As seen above, the IRB application differentiates between the two categories and assists the applicant in selecting the appropriate category for research (pages 4-5 of the application):

In management and computer science research, there is often the assumption that organizational members would experience very low risk if they participated in a DM or DCS study. However, employees in one’s own organization are considered to be members of a vulnerable population (see below, from page 7 of the IRB application), and while the researcher may estimate that the risk is low, the risks for
participation are greater than if the employee was not in the researcher’s own organization. Additionally, the research him/herself is at greater risk when conducting research in his/her own organization.

What risks are we most concerned about? In addition to the risks to participants of any research (physical or mental harm, etc.) research in one’s own organization carries additional possible risks. As stated in the IRB application, “Collection or recording of behavior could result in damage to the subject/participant’s reputation, employability, or financial standing.” The participant may also feel coerced in some way to participate or feel that there may be consequences for not participating in the research regardless of what is communicated by the researcher. These concerns are always considered legitimate, regardless of the stance of the researcher. Also, the results of a study may not be viewed favorably by the organization, casting the potential for retaliation upon one or more study participants and/or the researcher him/herself.

Knowing the above, researchers often assume that the above-mentioned risks will not be experienced in their study. We assure you that the CTU IRB committee has seen these risks come to fruition on more than one occasion over the years. Thus it is emphasized that research conducted in one’s own organization requires an even higher level of scrutiny and preparation for the mitigation of risk to the participants (and researcher).

Non-exempt studies are allowed. However, researcher must proclaim that the study is Non-exempt, the protection to human subjects must be thoroughly detailed (see sections 7, 8, 9 and 12 of the IRB application) and the application must be accompanied by a, “Permission to Use Site” letter from the organization. **The use of CTU staff, faculty and/or students will be considered a Non-exempt study.**