

Research vs. Program Evaluation

Overview

The Canadian Tri-Council (the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) has provided the joint policy *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS) to promote the ethical conduct of research involving humans. The policy is inclusive of leading international ethics standards and norms to help guide researchers in the conduct of research involving humans.

The TCPS provides a **distinction** between **research** and **program evaluation** work. This is an important distinction as the approval processes for accessing personal information and personal health information held at NB-IRDT will have different requirements.

Key among those differences, ***program evaluation does not always require Research Ethic Board (REB) review***. REB review is required only if program evaluation falls within the definition of research or serves as a component of a research project.

Disclaimer

Research Ethics Boards are established to help ensure that ethical principles are applied to research involving human subjects. (Section 1, Article 1.1 Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans¹). If you are unsure whether your work involves program evaluation, research or both, or whether your work might violate the rights of human subjects, you should contact the relevant research ethics body for guidance.

Best Practices Advice

- Determination of research vs. program evaluation should be done on a case by case basis
- Use the TCPS definition of **research** as a guide:
 - ...an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and/or systematic investigation. The term “disciplined inquiry” refers to an inquiry that is conducted with the expectation that the method, results, and conclusions will be able to withstand the scrutiny of the relevant research community. For example, a study seeking to explore the narratives of teens coping with mental illness would be evaluated by the established standards of studies employing similar methods, technologies and/or theoretical frameworks.²

¹ Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2014. (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>)

²Ibid.

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- The intent and objectives of data collection, as well as the further use of the collected data, may determine whether it is research (i.e. reviewed by an REB) or an evaluation of a program
- If the intent is for internal use for assessment, management or improvement purposes it is most likely program evaluation
- If the intent is generalizable knowledge (e.g. examining a program's processes as a case for extending knowledge to other similar programs) then it is most likely research
- Examine the wording used to describe the undertaking; is it referred to as a project or program and not research
- What objective and rationale or purpose are given for the undertaking? If claims imply that the work will benefit other similar programs it is most likely research
- Data collected for program evaluation activities, later proposed for use in research is considered secondary use. Secondary use of data may require REB review.
- Both research and program evaluation may use methods and techniques such as data collection and data analysis
- Intent or ability to publish findings *are not* factors that determine whether an activity is research requiring ethics review or program evaluation
- If in doubt about the requirement for REB review of a particular research project, consult the REB.

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Guidance Checklist

The following is a checklist providing guidance for distinguishing between a research undertaking and a program evaluation taken from the Alberta Research Ethics Community Consensus Initiative (ARECCI)³.

	Question	Yes	No
1	Is the project funded by, or being submitted to, a research funding agency or foundation for a research grant or award that requires research ethics review?		
2	Are there any local policies that require this project to undergo review by a Research Ethics Board?		
	IF YES to either of the above, the project should be submitted to a Research Ethics Board. IF NO to both questions, continue to complete the checklist.		
3	Is the primary purpose of the project to contribute to the growing body of knowledge regarding health and/or health systems, education, social development, etc. that are generally accessible through academic literature?		
4	Is the project designed to answer a specific research question or to test an explicit hypothesis?		
5	Does the project involve a comparison of multiple sites, control sites, and/or control groups?		
6	Is the project design and methodology adequate to support generalizations that go beyond the particular population the sample will be drawn from?		
7	Does the project impose any additional burdens on participants beyond what would be expected through a typically expected course of care or role expectations?		
	LINE A: SUBTOTAL Questions 3 through 7 = (Count the # of Yes responses)		
8	Are many of the participants in the project also likely to be among those who might potentially benefit from the result of the project as it proceeds?		
9	Is the project intended to define or develop a best practice within your organization or practice?		
10	Would the project still be done at your site, even if there were no opportunity to publish the results or if the results might not be applicable anywhere else?		
11	Does the statement of purpose of the project refer explicitly to the features of a particular program, organization, or region, rather than using more general terminology such as rural vs. urban populations?		
12	Is the current project part of a continuous process of gathering or monitoring data within an organization?		
	LINE B: SUBTOTAL Questions 8 through 12 = (Count the # of Yes responses)		

Interpretation:

- If the sum of Line A is greater than Line B, the most probable purpose is research. The project should be submitted to an REB.
- If the sum of Line B is greater than Line A, the most probable purpose is program evaluation. Proceed with locally relevant process for ethics review (may not necessarily involve an REB).
- If the sums are equal, seek a second opinion (e.g. an REB) to explore further, whether the project should be classified as research or program evaluation.

³ Alberta Research Ethics Community Consensus Initiative (ARECCI)
<http://www.aihealthsolutions.ca/arecci/screening/360592/00f281686084de2afd61fb992595fa5e>
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