

A Troubled Dance: Doing the Work of Research Ethics Review

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Abstract The fast growing interest in the work of university ethics review boards is evident in the proliferation of research and literature in the area. This article focuses on a Research Ethics Board (REB) in the Canadian context. In-depth, open-ended interviews with REB members and findings from a qualitative study designed to examine the ethics review of school-based research are used to illustrate points raised in the paper. The author's experiences as academic researcher, advisor to student researchers and a 3-year term as an REB member inform the discussion. Macro issues related to the general workings of the board (e.g., maintaining appropriate membership) and micro issues connected to individual REB members' experiences of reviewing research applications are examined. The author's goal is to contribute to a fastgrowing conversation related to the issues that influence university ethics review while drawing attention to the contribution that faculty members' understandings of their work as REB members can make to that conversation.

Keywords University ethics review · Canadian research ethics boards · REB research review practices

Introduction

Ethics review of research involving human participants has become a hot topic in universities in Canada, particularly in the last decade with the adoption of a national standardized policy in the form of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) (Canada 2003). The growing body of literature critiquing institutional ethics review policies and procedures reflect similar concerns in the US and other countries (Anderson 1996; Lincoln and Tierney 2004; Sieber 1992). Individuals connected to Canadian university contexts planning to conduct research involving human participants must first submit an application to the

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Research Ethics Board (REB). REB members review applications based on TCPS policy and procedures, and research may not proceed until approval has been granted.

University researchers have voiced serious concerns about the increased oversight and surveillance resulting from institutional ethics review policies and procedures (Fitzgerald 2005; Grayson and Myles 2005). Haggerty (2004) characterizes what he observes as an “ethics creep” that is advancing in contexts like universities. Ethics creep “... involves a dual process whereby the regulatory structure of ethics bureaucracy is expanding outward, colonizing new groups, practices, and institutions, while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit” (p. 394). This intensification is currently evident in the oversight applied to research conducted in schooling contexts, much of which in earlier years was considered inquiry within a “zone of accepted practice” (Zeni 2001, p. 158) and as such not always considered by researchers as under the auspices of an REB. Research requests were dealt with on an individual researcher level, between researcher, teachers, principals, schools, and districts. Currently, many school districts are formalizing research review processes that, although fueled by different purposes, reflect ethics review established in universities (Tilley and Ratkovic et al. 2006).

In institutional contexts a quest for standardization, efficiency, and control, is often a catalyst for development of new policy. The implementation of the TCPS and its application to all research involving human participants regardless of research paradigm, questions, or contexts, provides a structure to achieve the oversight desired, as might formal policies and procedures in place and being developed in school districts. An understandable result of the spreading of ethics creep is the implementation of policy and procedures that have a deep instrumental flavor. From a researcher perspective, the actual institutional ethics review process can often be experienced as a technical problem in need of solving before research can proceed, a process in need of constructive and substantive critique. As an REB member and reviewer of research applications, I also have concerns related to the instrumentalism embedded in the review process. Because of my multiple and simultaneous roles as academic, qualitative researcher, supervisor of student research, and REB member, I often felt conflicted as I engaged in what, at times, I considered a troubling political dance around issues related to the ethics review of research.

I write this paper in the hopes of engaging with other individuals asking questions that highlight the problematics of institutional ethics review. In particular, I argue there are unreasonable expectations of such review processes and what they can and should achieve. I draw from data collected through open-ended, in-depth interviews with seven university faculty members who served as REB members in the Canadian context after the implementation of the TCPS. Interviews (approximately 60–90 min) were audiotaped, and transcripts and synopses of interpretations sent back to participants for member-checking (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Participants were encouraged to give feedback on the documents provided. Although recognizing the limitations of cutting and snipping, juxtaposing quotes to craft a text, I use participants’ words extensively to help the reader better connect with the conversations. As well, findings from a qualitative study designed to explore the ethics review of school-based research through a content analysis of REB applications are used to illustrate some of the points raised in the discussion. Data include 211 REB applications that proposed research connected to K-12 schooling contexts (Tilley et al. 2005). My experience as an REB member over a 3-year term also influences the ideas addressed in the paper.

Clearly, even with standardized policy and procedures the work of an REB is interpretive work beginning with institutional and individual “readings” of the TCPS. The point of the discussion is not to generalize across REB members’ experiences. It would

be foolhardy to think that REB members' experiences would not differ and sometimes in substantial ways. My goal is to contribute to a fast-growing conversation related to the macro and micro issues that influence university ethics review processes and to focus specifically on faculty members' understandings of their work as REB members.

Macro Issues: Establishing and Maintaining an REB

The TCPS outlines the criteria for establishing an REB. A review board must have at least five members including males and females and:

- a. at least two members have broad expertise in the methods or in the areas of research that are covered by the REB
- b. at least one member is knowledgeable in ethics
- c. for biomedical research, at least one member is knowledgeable in the relevant law; this is advisable but not mandatory for other areas of research; and
- d. at least one member has no affiliation with the institution, but is recruited from the community served by the institution. (Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR] 1998, with 2000, 2002, 2005 updates, p. 1.3)

Although minimal requirements for establishing a board may appear on paper as not too onerous to meet, recruiting faculty members to serve on an REB continues to be one of the challenges many universities face. Universities need to recruit an appropriately *suited* mix of members to sit on the board, which becomes difficult in a climate where many faculty members across universities are frustrated with the institutional research review process, and are feeling the effect of ethics creep that they perceive as interfering with them getting on with their research (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee [SSHWC] 2004).

The operation of REBs depends on the size of universities and the various faculties that exist within the institutions. In small to mid-sized universities one review board for all research applications involving human participants may be in place while in larger universities multiple arms of an REB (even separate boards) operate for the purpose of ethics review. Many bodies need to heed the call to participate to fulfill policy and critics' requirements. At the same time, within the institutional discourse, an REB is often negatively characterized (for numerous reasons) as a surveillance mechanism that interferes with the work of academics while impinging on their rights to autonomy, "... kind of being the police" (participant 2). As well, faculty members' opposition to the work of the REB can sometimes lead to uncomfortable interactions between REB members and their colleagues, "Oh I can remember being chastised by two or three colleagues in the hallway in front of others because they didn't think ethics review was worth their time, whether it was useful (participant 5). The board's reputation and the material effects of serving on the board may contribute to faculty members' lack of inclination to take up such work.

At a macro level it is difficult to fight against the characterization of the REB as a hindrance to research initiatives. Common knowledge about REBs is often based on academic researchers' (and/or their students') experiences with ethics review and their knowledge of the experiences of others (embellished or not). Stories of the challenges people have faced travel fast across the community and often reflect the negative experiences of individuals seeking research approval. However, findings from the analysis of the 211 REB applications files related to school-based research indicated no decisions to withhold approval and a request for resubmission was made in only 10 instances. The characterization of the REB as a control and surveillance mechanism may have more to do with the decision Request for Clarification than outright denial (Tilley et al. 2005), a point

addressed more fully later in the paper. REB members interviewed spoke of their support for research applications in their individual review work.

I see the board as very supportive of researchers because we've never denied, ah, I've never denied one. I've asked for more information. We've asked researchers to come in and talk at full review. We've had interesting dialogues around them [applications]. (participant 2)

However, what board members consider (and with sincerity) as "interesting dialogue," researchers who ultimately feel they have been *summoned* to the board for full review may experience very differently and not necessarily in positive ways.

Recruitment efforts might be more productive if the benefits of sitting on the board were more widely understood. For instance, an interview participant discussed the benefits she/he derived from learning how the board actually operates:

Given my experience on the board now and if I did decide to do a phenomenological [study], I wouldn't see it as a hurdle because I feel like I could manage how to do the application and explain myself. For another researcher who is not familiar with the process and the board, I could see it as being a challenge. Yes, I could see it if you're different from the typical in your approach. (participant 2)

The participant above spoke specifically about understanding how to shape an application that would be approved in an efficient manner as a direct benefit of working on the board. She/he had developed an insider's perspective on the process, which was personally valuable. However, the downside to be considered is the possible deleterious effect of a process that encourages the shaping of research to TCPS requirements that some researchers have argued are often antithetical to particular kinds of research (van den Hoonaard 2002).

Most of the participants spoke enthusiastically of the educational benefits of working on the REB. They spoke of the knowledge they acquired, including methodological knowledge, as payback for their contributions to the board. They discussed how their experiences enhanced their supervisory work with students and connected them to other faculty members across the university who also served on the board.

[The work] has been good because it has helped me to develop a broad sense, an understanding of a broad range of research methodologies and I think a very strong foundational understanding of the research process.... My years with the REB were a superb experience and not just in learning about, you know ethical review and the need to develop strong ethical considerations when doing research and imparting those to my students, but also the people that I met across the university with the diversity of experience and knowledge was just tremendous. (participant 5)

I think that even though I've always been interested in research, research design, that was a way to sort of extend that knowledge or interest because I was reading x number of proposals. I liked to see the different types of research that were being done. It gave me practice in terms of figuring out the strengths and weaknesses of ethical issues and so many different designs. I became a better advisor by participating on the REB. And I think a better researcher. It's like reading, you know x number of journal articles a year but in an intensive way because you're having to be critical and evaluative. And then you learned from the discussions too. (participant 4)

As a new faculty member, I was warned against serving on an REB until after being granted tenure and promotion. Tenured faculty members are seen to be better protected from the

political heat sometimes resulting from the work of the board. Workload issues were also cited as reasons for new faculty, as well as those experienced, not to volunteer. REB meetings, full-board reviews of applications, individual member reviews, sub-committee work, all contribute to membership on an REB as being one of the most onerous in university contexts.

Board Members: How much Knowledge is Enough?

A common criticism of REB members is that they lack the necessary methodological knowledge to review REB applications, which reflect the diversity of research conducted by university faculty, in productive, and appropriate ways. According to Article 1.5, REB members are required to pay close attention to research design only when the research poses more than minimal risk: “The REB shall satisfy itself that the design of a research project that poses more than minimal risk is capable of addressing the questions being asked in the research (CIHR 1998, p. 1.6). However, over my years as an REB member, we engaged in many conversations about what many of us perceived as a fine line between quality research design and possible ethical issues. In hindsight, much of the research used to illustrate our arguments was not posing more than minimal risk for individuals choosing to participate. Although the TCPS has clear statements in regard to how to review research at the level of or below minimal risk and the need to adopt a “proportionate approach based on the general principle that the more invasive the research, the greater should be the care in assessing the research (CIHR 1998, p.1.7), an institutional interpretation of the TCPS is in operation which varies from university to university with no guarantees that TCPS principles are implemented as intended. In addition to the institutional interpretation, members apply their individual interpretations, which may or may not extend beyond the intent of the TCPS.

In the university context reference to the REB is often couched in language that serves to deemphasize the fact that the board actually consists of living, breathing people who reflect the individuals who are submitting applications. Many different areas of research expertise are represented on a board from social science and educational research to biomedical and health related research. Most faculty members sitting on REBs have a workload that designates 40% of their time to research. They understand the implications of constructing roadblocks that interfere with their own and colleagues’ research initiatives. Often members feel conflicted in the work of review because they are being asked to evaluate applications (albeit in specific ways, e. g., in relation to harms/benefits/ degree of risk) that result in decisions related to the research of their colleagues and student researchers. The troubling dance takes place as individual members find themselves both working against and being complicit in what they themselves question as inadequate, and sometimes inappropriate review. The participant below rightly highlights the need for “some real strong education.”

While lengthy, the following quote is *telling* in this regard:

How much time is there for [REB members] to really become educated about the varied research methodologies that exist within various domains? I saw people around the table who would just discount research as absolutely ridiculous, some [research] in education, some in other social science areas because there wasn’t a large sample size or, you know statistical analysis of the data. . . . Having said that too, on the other side of the coin one of the things I noticed that I thought was probably unfortunate was that some of the standard procedures in Applied Health Science, for instance that may be considered invasive, you know collecting blood samples and that, were really examined harshly in the eyes of those who may not understand that this is a standard procedure. Now, that doesn’t mean we

don't need to have the procedures fully explained at even a full board review in order to ensure that there is nothing harmful to the participants, but you know unless we understand that or are immersed in that particular kind of research, it's hard to get around that "hey we're putting holes in people." We're actually puncturing them, what can happen to them? ... And Applied Health Science people look at us and say, "We do this all the time. Look in the literature." So that kind of stuff is interesting and I think it calls for some real strong education on the part of people who are on review boards. (participant 5)

Attempts can be made to make appropriate matches between expedited review applications and REB members with particular methodological expertise to complete the review; however, it would be difficult to match all. REB members, in receipt of an expedited review, have the option of referring the application back to the Research Office if they do not feel competent to complete the review.

Criticism about the lack of methodological expertise of any given REB is related to an unreasonable expectation that representation across multiple (all) methodologies utilized by university researchers is a goal possible to achieve. The TCPS itself only requires a minimum of 2 members with broad methodological expertise. How much methodological knowledge would be enough to quell the criticism?

Of late, the more visible critics of the TCPS have been Social Sciences and Humanities researchers who argue that a standardized policy, which has historical roots in bio-medical research traditions, applied to all research regardless of research paradigm is inadequate for addressing ethical issues in interpretive, qualitative research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Lincoln and Tierney 2004; van den Hoonaard 2002). While sitting on the board and in conversation with colleagues, I often found myself engaging in dialogue that reflected the criticism of REBs regarding the bio-medical, positivistic influence embedded in the ethics review process (Pritchard 2002; van den Hoonaard 2002).

Multiple and differing qualitative traditions exist utilizing various methods and criteria for credibility. It would be impossible to know *all* or maybe even *enough* in relation to the different research paradigms and traditions. And what are the links to ethical issues—is expertise in the methodology a guarantee of understanding ethical implications of a research plan? In this case, the point is not that we need additional bodies with expertise in qualitative research serving on REBs (although that would be useful) but that, as board members, we need to be aware of what it is that influences the ways in which we conduct our expedited reviews and engage in our work on the REB, keeping in mind the principles as outlined in the TCPS—especially in regard to minimal risk and adopting a proportionate approach.

An Instrumental Flavor

I think the over-interpretation of the small, the small ideas with respect to ethics rather than the big picture of what it's all about, so the forms became huge. There were so many things to fill out, so many i's to dot and t's to cross and boxes to check. [Members] were trying to cover so much to be sure that we were thorough. I think in some cases, that we missed the forest for the trees. I think it's a little better now but I think this is an evolutionary process. I mean, we spent an inordinate amount of time one year rewriting that whole application form and at the end of it we thought we had a document. I'm not sure, in retrospect whether or not that's the case. I'm saying that's not a criticism of the process, we worked at it [revising the forms] really hard. (participant 5)

The instrumental flavor referred to in this paper is related more to the actual review process itself than the TCPS, which clearly articulates that it is not offering “definitive answers” to ethical questions and emphasizes the need for flexibility in the application of its principles and procedures (CIHR 1998). During my tenure on an REB we took multiple stabs at fine-tuning the application. Substantial work was done through sub-committees and in monthly REB meetings to streamline the application to ensure its user-friendliness and to make the application process more efficient. Our efforts were rewarded with what many people agreed was a *better* application form. To the researchers applying for research approvals, better often meant a form that was easy to complete and submit in a timely fashion. For the REB member, better often meant a form that shaped responses in ways that could be easily and quickly assessed.

A major portion of the work of an REB member is related to expedited review. Members are assigned applications to review, often with two members and the Chair reviewing each file. Reviewer recommendations are submitted to the Chair who then constructs a response that is sent to the researcher. Completing reviews in a timely fashion is often difficult. Participants found ways to deal with the workload through an itemizing and list checking process made possible through the structure of the application form. Out of necessity, an instrumental process became a way to cope with the work:

When the workload initially increased from year one to two, I found it very difficult to keep up, really difficult to keep up. But now that I've gotten better at the itemizing, I can go boom, boom, boom, through a review (laughing) and get it done very quickly, right?... Doing the reviews themselves, I've gotten very efficient.... It's [the review process] very itemized, rather than taking a holistic view of the person's project or their application. I find it's bounded very much in getting through some administrative kind of checkmarks. It's so structured to the point where it really isn't flexible enough for different kinds of research methodologies.... It's efficient but is it effective, right? (participant 2)

The participant above is rightfully aware that efficiency comes at some expense and ultimately loss of the Reviewer's focus on the “whole” research plan. She/he suggests that the review process is “structured to the point where it really isn't flexible enough for different kinds of research methodologies....,” a point being raised by many qualitative researchers in the field.

Members' individual interests in specific areas related to ethics also influenced their individual expedited reviews. Below a participant alludes to how the issue of deception might attract his/her attention.

But one of the challenging issues that I find is the notion of deception and research when in psychology, when they're saying it is for the benefit of the participants, I just find that really interesting.... I don't know when it comes to emotions, like emotional issues and ethical issues to me are very hard to separate and how do you ensure someone's psychological safety in those, you know some of those moral-social-emotional issues like shame and embarrassment. I don't know. I find those really tricky to deal with.

Question: So would you find it unacceptable then, a piece of research like that to proceed?

Well, I mean I think it's up to the researchers to provide, you know to explain their rationale and provide valid argument to defend their ideas, right? So if they can do that, that's wonderful and we're all open minded enough to accept their strategies. I just find that that's one of the intriguing sorts of issues. (participant 6)

This participant is likely to review applications giving special attention to research where deception is the plan whether or not more than minimal risk is involved. This might not be the case for REB members who actually employ deception in their research practices. It may be the *luck of the draw* for researchers when it comes to who actually reviews their applications and the emphasis the Reviewer chooses to give to a planned procedure that might raise red flags for particular individuals.

Especially at the beginning of their term, REB members may not have been clear about what was necessary for an appropriate review of applications. This is not surprising considering that many of us who are experienced continuously asked questions (of ourselves and others) related to what constitutes appropriate expedited review, especially if the principles related to risk and proportionate review are to be applied as the policy appears to have intended. Accusations from researchers that Reviewers were often focusing on minutia, rather than the important issues related to ethical implications of the proposed research, were fueled by Reviewer's excessive attention to what many believed to be surface concerns and issues not the concern of the REB:

Possibly like other people, I started with a very purist attitude about what should be happening here, everything should be gone into in the nth degree. You realize at the end of the day that that's unrealistic... The search for more information is perhaps to be constrained... (participant 1)

This "purist" attitude begins to fade not only as a result of members acquiring more knowledge and experience (although that certainly helps) but also as the reality of the workload tied to reviewing applications becomes evident. A comment recorded in the SSHWC Report (2004) states bluntly: "Professors avoid the committee like the plague because it is so time-consuming to read the files (p. 60).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) write of "procedural ethics" and "ethics in practice." The procedural ethics to which they refer reflect the process of research approval administered through institutional bodies such as a university REB. The ethics in practice, however, are tied to "ethically important moments" that arise in research contexts, the "... difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (p. 262). Often the critique launched against research ethics review is that even though the procedural ethics, the institutional policy(s) and procedures are in place, the ethics review process may do little to ensure that researchers are knowledgeable about or prepared to address the ethically important moments. Institutional ethics review cannot prepare researchers for ethical dilemmas that arise in the practice of research. Nor is it a reasonable expectation that it should. Some people would argue, especially in interpretive traditions, that the procedural ethics may actually work against respectful practice as researchers shape their research in ways that will successfully gain approval but which undermines the credibility of the actual research tradition (Halse and Honey 2005). In the final analysis, researchers themselves are ultimately responsible to ensure that the research is ethical.

REB Decisions: Fueling the Flames

I am assuming that researchers know what they're doing, just fitting it in to this form and knowing what to say, where and how much [to say] on the form was the glitch. So, I'm most of the time trying to explain to them [the researchers] give me this

information or provide this information rather than sitting there thinking, “The research shouldn’t be done.” (participant 2)

Of course my experience in reviewing helps students out too. Nonetheless, when I see [my own and/or students’] reviews come back, some of my students and I think, “Well, I’ve gone through this very carefully” and then I get back the responses and I see things that I look at and go “Okay. Really? We’ve already mentioned that two or three times. Do we have to go through this again? Are you not maybe nitpicking a little? Are you not really looking for risk where risk doesn’t exist?” I don’t know. It’s never been problematic. I tell them [graduate students], “Answer the questions and send it back” and almost without exception it’s accepted, Accepted as Clarified. I’m wondering if those things really needed to be clarified at all in the first place ... (laughs). (participant 5)

University REB decisions include a version of the following categories: Approved As Is, Request for Clarification, Request for Resubmission and Research Denied. For many researchers, fear of outright denial is often not what fuels their objections to the institutional ethics review process. A request for clarifications is more likely.

In the case of the school-based applications Request for Clarification was recorded 3 times more often than Approved As Is (Tilley et al. 2005). Clarification categorized as surface structure often required missing information such as contact information, a signature, or there may have been inconsistency across forms, for example, time needed for interviews, or editing may have been requested. It was not unusual to see a substantial list of “to dos” for the researcher. Substantive clarification were often related to issues of confidentiality, participant vulnerability, and possible coercion, which is not unusual considering the research being proposed was planned for schooling contexts. Clarification requested that were particularly problematic included requests that indicated various mis-readings of interpretive research applications, a quantitative lens being applied to qualitative proposals was apparent.

Individual Reviewer’s preferences also surfaced in the clarification requested. For instance, over a period of time clarification were consistently requested in relation to member-checking procedures as part of the interview process. Although member-checking may be an important strategy in regards to credibility for various forms of qualitative research and can provide participants with feedback and opportunity to ask questions to require it is a researcher’s decision or the responsibility of a student’s Supervisor and not appropriate as part of an ethics review process.

In the case of the school-based applications analyzed, quality of writing was clearly a problem in a number of cases. Although the REB Reviewers may not have seen editing as part of their job (and rightly so), comments in that regard often found their way in to a list of clarifications requested and when this happened they were categorized as surface. The majority of the researchers submitting these applications were graduate students. How much assistance faculty members give to their students in relation to ethics review was a question raised at times during my term on the REB. The work of review is made that much more difficult when supervisors do not take the task seriously. However, to address this issue constructively in an environment where individuals may distrust the REB to begin with is very difficult.

Participants explained the ways in which they dealt with their methodological limitations and worked at maintaining a focus on the ethical aspects.

... Sometimes with those [Health Sciences] research protocols I have difficulty understanding exactly what’s going on because there is sort of a mix of social science and science in there.... I certainly have a lot more understanding of quantitative work

because that's the background I come from... If I don't know the extreme details of the methodology yet the process that is being carried through seems to respect the rights of the individuals and not interfere with them in any way, I tend to pass them through. (participant 1)

Well I must say that I did my best not to look at the research itself, maybe that is wrong. I know I had some strong discussions with people on the board about whether or not we should be reviewing the research itself. I had so much difficulty really saying strongly whether or not it was good research. So I don't think I did much to look at that. My particular thing was how is the research participant protected within the research itself? What has the researcher done to ensure that there is benefit to the individual or from the research itself? That there is concern about lack of confidentiality for the participant, that there is informed consent, that the participant knows precisely what he or she is getting into with respect to this research. I (pause), I was less interested in the actual proposal itself. (participant 5)

In cases where it is clear that the board does not have the expertise, the TCPS recommends bringing in people with the necessary expertise. The problem becomes difficult when members are unaware of the limitations of their methodological (and other) knowledge and this is reflected in their reviews and serves to fuel researchers' criticisms and frustrations, particularly when researchers see their research as minimal or below minimal risk and argue that proportionate review was not conducted.

The Chair serves an important role as buffer between REB members and university faculty. Participants identified two main responsibilities of the Chair: to resolve complications and to review and coordinate expedited review comments. Participants discussed in detail the difficulties they experienced in relation to the latter role of the Chair, which included shaping of members' individual review submissions into a response sent to the researcher. At times, individual members perceived their efforts diminished in the bigger picture of the process—final decisions.

Participants described having opportunities to express opinions and having their views validated during regular meetings; however, they also reported disappointment and concern when their review comments were not included in the version sent to researchers. An opportunity to ask about these omissions is available to members when expedited review decisions are ratified at monthly REB meetings. However, that was not a common practice in my experience of REB board meetings. Below participants speak of the prerogative of the Chair in this matter.

I feel there have been instances where important questions I've had were not put forward but you kind of have to recognize you're one person in the mix with the Chair, the second Reviewer, and yourself and even now the Ethics Officer looking at this application. Is that one question that you had about an application critical or is it just you putting it out there and the majority rule in that group of four that kind of touch on the application at different stages. (participant 2)

Although members are not always pleased when they see their comments have been dismissed, particularly if issues were especially important to the individual Reviewer, there is an understanding that each of us is only "one in the mix" of people to have a say.

... after we raise our issues they are dealt with entirely by the Chair. Now I'm not saying I want to be involved in every one of these applications but certainly there have been a small number of occasions that I feel I've raised some issues that I really would

have liked to see addressed and then a short while later I just see that this poorly written application has been approved and I don't know what happened to my concerns. But I, I, don't think really the basic process is flawed in any way. And in that respect I've come to have more empathy for it, again the sheer amount of time it takes to review these things. (participant 1)

Although individual members and the Chair may not always see eye-to-eye, members were often sympathetic to the person willing to take on that role, recognizing the work (both physical and political) that being Chair entails. The emphasis the participant gives to the application being "poorly written" might also be an indication that when constructing the final response the Chair made decisions not to address issues that he/she felt were not within the prerogative of the board. Decisions made at this point can assist in weeding out inappropriate questions on the part of Reviewers.

... the answers [to her/his review questions] went back to the Chair, they didn't come back to me and it was approved. So that's a bit of a process that sometimes is difficult. I hadn't said, "No, I don't want it to proceed" I was just saying I'm really cautious. These are my questions for clarification. In our process when you ask for clarification, it doesn't come back to the two people who did the initial expedited review. I guess I should have said, "I think this should go to full review," but I did a request for clarification that went through the Chair and the Chair accepted it. (participant 3)

Much will depend on the background, knowledge, and experience of the Chair as to the ways in which he/she will approach this part of the review process. Clearly, the Chair is the one who deals most closely with the disgruntled academic who is called to come to a full review meeting. The Chair also performs a troubling dance when attempting to make decisions that affect the work of researchers and the relationships he/she has with board members and the university at large.

Regardless of type, requests for clarification extends the time necessary for the approval of research, often valuable time researchers resent losing. When faculty members perceive their autonomy and academic freedom under attack, and as one participant suggested when they have "a really strong sense of entitlement" the work of the board can be seen as an impediment to research put in place because academic researchers need oversight to ensure ethical conduct.

The Personal Lens

What has been highlighted often is that REB members' review practices are informed by their research knowledge and expertise; however, the extent to which their identities beyond academe play an important role in how they read and assess REB applications has garnered little attention. Individual members' unique perspectives were clearly articulated in the interviews. The participant below speaks of her parent identity and how that connects with her review process.

Yes, the biggest thing I probably focus on upon reflection and this is coming from the fact that I have children that are going to enter into school soon and if I was a parent and my child was going to be involved in a study. What would I want to know to make sure I felt my child was in a safe space participating? [When reviewing] I really ask for a lot more information on the forms, and on those consent forms, a lot more

detail around the anonymity because I'm worried about students getting ostracized if they don't participate in the study. I'm worried about parents not knowing enough detail of what's happening with the information about their child because I think about it as a parent.... These kinds of things concern me very much and I probably come at it more from a parent than a Reviewer when I'm looking at the school-based stuff to be honest. (participant 1)

Although participants may not recognize how much of the personal actually influences their reviews, their comments in the interviews were very telling in that regard.

... something that catches me when a few people say, "It's just a simple question around bereavement." There was one researcher who was going to research people's feelings regarding bereavement and was actually going to ask them to complete questionnaires [very soon after the death]... And I'm thinking, I thought NO, like I've [had a lot of experience with] palliative care and I'm thinking that's a real vulnerable time and I said that but it went, it went forward. It actually went forward... (participant 3)

... I see people as being in that, let's say it might be 12 to 18, whatever the age group might be, they're automatically vulnerable. It's not a question of wondering whether or not people are in a vulnerable population, people in that age group, to me, automatically are. (participant 1)

And that [connections between ethics and teacher research] would relate to action research and that kind of research. I know it's a huge thrust coming from the Ministry of Education and the teachers' federation supports that whole notion of teachers conducting research. But I do have many questions about ethical practices if educators are not, let's use the word schooled properly in it [ethical research practices]. I already know from my experience that teachers don't always handle data in a really confidential manner, so I think we've got work [to do] there. (participant 7)

All the participants above are indicating a personal stance—how they themselves make judgments in terms of what is ethical in the conduct of research. Their views will influence discussions to which they contribute at board meetings as well as determine what they see as important (or not) in the research applications they review. Education for those of us who have or plan to serve on REBs also needs to focus on the ways in which the personal as well as political influences REB members' review practices and the work of the REB.

Conclusion

The idea that we might reject the research of one of our colleagues is a bit scary. We know that the university prides itself on free-thinking and support for disparate ideas and yet—It's a political arena here just like anywhere else and you have to be careful that you're not necessarily, that something may not come back to haunt you. In other words, you have to do what you have to do as a member of the Research Ethics Board but there is always that concern.

Question: So it's like a juggling act?

It is. It is and I think that's unfortunate. (participant 5)

Many of us who have served as REB members are aware of the limitations of the TCPS as a standard policy for all research involving human participants, and have experienced the challenges REBs and individual members face in the work of ethics review. Common sense tells us that a standard policy and set of procedures applied to all research regardless of research paradigm, context, or participants is bound at times to be, at the least, inappropriate, and in other cases counter-productive. Some of us might even agree with the characterization of the REB as a mechanism of control and at times surveillance (Foucault 1980). However, many of us have experienced *up close* cause for concern with researchers' applications describing research plans and procedures that had ethical issues left unacknowledged or too easily dismissed, and as a result, we each "do what we have to do as a member of the Research Ethics Board."

Resources spent in terms of time and energy in the review process are heavy both on the part of board members and researchers. This is particularly true in the case of the decision process, which so often includes requests for clarification that many argue are often inappropriate and beyond what is called for in the TCPS. REB members' time and energy might be better spent examining how (if) the ethics review process and board decisions support and enhance ethical research practices in research contexts. As faculty members take up positions on REBs, we can find ways to work against the instrumentalism embedded in the review process that may unduly interfere with, rather than support, the work of academic researchers.

As part of the mandate of the TCPS, REBs focus on education from various angles including an emphasis on educating the university community about REB policies and procedures. Many forms of assistance are offered to individuals seeking approval for research projects. As well, an emphasis is placed on the training of faculty members who agree to serve on the board. Individuals on the board represent various forms and degrees of knowledge and expertise in regards to research and ethics. While understanding the process of review—how to do what we do—is important, an emphasis on why we review in the ways we do would also be useful as part of an education initiative. As Reviewers we need to reflect critically on what it is that informs our assessment of applications (including the personal and political) and whether or not we are stepping beyond what is appropriate when we complete our expedited reviews.

The REB for the most part is made up of faculty members—we are the REB—and change can be pursued through our membership on the board. Rather than dismissing an opportunity to serve on an REB, individuals might consider agreeing and working for change from within. Insider perspectives, particularly views from those who have worked as REB members, since the implementation of the TCPS and those who will in the future, are needed to inform efforts towards change. We need to engage in what Smith describes as reflexive critique to understand our current practices and to work for that change.

Working as an insider means that inquiry into "how things work," into the actualities of socially organized practices, makes what we are part of visible. In exploring social organization, we explore our own lives and practices. Thus critique is investigation and investigation is a reflexive critique, disclosing practices we know and use. (Smith 1990, p. 204)

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