

Research Ethics Bulletin #3: PROGRAM EVALUATION

Does program evaluation require REB review?

REB review would be required only if program evaluation falls within the definition of research or serves as a component of a research project. Although program evaluation may share some methods and techniques with those employed in research (such as data collection and data analysis), the intent and objectives of the data collection, as well as the further use of the collected data, may be determining factors for establishing whether it is research and whether it should be reviewed by an REB. It is important to note that choice of methodology and/or intent or ability to publish findings are not factors that determine whether or not an activity is research requiring ethics review (more information on publishing results below).

The determination of whether an evaluation study is research and therefore requires REB review should be made on a case-by-case basis, and should be guided by the definition of research in TCPS 2. Article 2.1 of TCPS2 defines research as “*an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry and/or systematic investigation.*”

Article 2.5 of TCPS 2 exempts from REB review program evaluation activities normally administered in the ordinary course of operation of an organization on the basis that such activities do not meet the TCPS 2 definition for research. This article refers to assessments of the performance of an organization or its employees or students that are within the mandate of the organization, or according to the terms and conditions of employment or training. Participation in these activities is required, for example, as a condition of employment in the case of staff performance reviews, or an evaluation in the course of academic or professional training. Other examples include student course evaluations, or data collection for internal or external organizational reports. Such activities do not normally follow the consent procedures outlined in TCPS2.

Program evaluation activities may, however, raise ethical issues that would benefit from careful consideration by an individual or a body, other than the REB, capable of providing some independent guidance e.g., in professional or disciplinary associations, particularly where those associations have established best practices guidelines for such activities in their discipline.

If the collected data for such activities is later proposed for research purposes, it is considered secondary use of information not originally intended for research, and may require REB review at that time. Please refer to Section D of Chapter 5 of TCPS2 for guidance concerning secondary use of information for research purposes.

Does publishing the results of a quality assurance study in a journal determine whether it is research, and whether it requires REB review?

Publishing or otherwise disseminating the results of an activity is not a factor that determines whether the activity is research or not. Publishing the results of a quality assurance study or another activity in a relevant journal (e.g., quality assurance and program evaluation journals) may inform practice, but does not alter that the main purpose for which the study was conducted is for quality assurance/another activity. To qualify as research as defined in TCPS 2, the study must seek to address a research question that may extend knowledge to other programs.

When in doubt about the applicability of TCPS 2 or the requirement for REB review of a particular research project, the researcher should contact Duncan Waltrip, Ethics Officer at ethicsofficer@hrea.ca or 709-777-8943. It is recommended to complete the Ethics Application Screening Tool in advance (<https://rpresources.mun.ca/triage/>).