



DMP Strat/CORA Research Ethics Board:

Two Year Performance Evaluation

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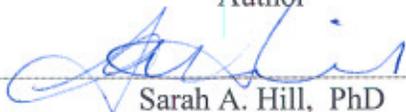
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Abstract

The Research Ethics Board (REB) established in 2003 within the Directorate of Military Personnel Strategy (DMP Strat) and the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA) has been operating continuously and without incident since its inception. After two full years of operation, the REB Chair requested a formal performance evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the REB and to solicit recommendations for its future. Evaluation of the available documentation revealed that the REB is functioning well, has maintained its focus, and provides valuable input to researchers involved in studies involving human participants. Continuation of the DMP Strat/CORA REB is recommended.

Résumé

Créé en 2003 au sein de la Direction, Stratégie du personnel militaire (D Strat PM), et du Centre d'analyse et de recherche opérationnelle (CARO), le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CER) mène ses activités sans interruption ni incident depuis ses débuts. Après deux années complètes d'exploitation, le président du CER a demandé, d'une part, la tenue d'une évaluation officielle du rendement du Comité, afin de déterminer son efficacité, et d'autre part, la formulation de recommandations pour ses activités futures. L'analyse des documents disponibles a révélé que le CER fonctionne bien, qu'il a maintenu le cap et qu'il fournit des données précieuses aux chercheurs qui mènent des recherches portant sur des sujets humains. On recommande que le CER de la D Strat PM et du CARO poursuive ses activités.

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1. Background

In 2003 a research ethics board (REB) was established within the Directorate of Military Personnel Strategy (DMP Strat)¹ and the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA)² to provide review of research involving human participants. After two years of incident-free operation, the Chair of the REB requested a performance audit/evaluation to ensure the REB is functioning as envisaged at its inception, and to generate recommendations regarding the future of the REB. This report presents the results of the requested evaluation, and concludes with recommendations aimed to improve the performance of the REB and to support its continuation.

As outlined elsewhere, there has been much debate in Canada over the past decade regarding issues of ethics, both in the research domain and more generally (Hill, 2003; Mancuso, 2006). Consistent with Federal Government guidance (e.g., *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, the 2002 Governor General's *Speech from the Throne*) and best practices in other contexts (e.g., academia), the Department of National Defence (DND) houses several REBs explicitly created to align research activities within the Canadian Forces (CF)/DND with standards of practice that are widely accepted as enhancing the quality and credibility of research. Ethical review of research is a process that permits researchers access to a range of expertise that may not otherwise be available to them for feedback on research methodologies and tools prior to launching a research project with human participants. Such review involves scrutiny of both processes and tools in order to ensure that human participants are not put in positions that might be damaging to them physically, mentally, socially, or professionally as a function of their participation in research. Further, the ethical review of research provides an unique opportunity to impartially weigh the relative benefits of particular research initiatives for the CF/DND and for the individual.

The context of the DMP Strat/CORA REB is such that questions of when review of research is required are the subject of ongoing debate. The line between “research” and “organizational monitoring” is not always clear-cut. One of the functions of the REB is to assist researchers in negotiating this grey area by providing pertinent opinion and advice in a systematic and documented way. One factor related to this challenge is the background and education of individuals engaged in research who may not have had specific training in research ethics, research design, or implementation of research methods. A secondary, and little-discussed, function of the REB is to engage in educating the research community served by the REB about rigorous, ethical, and credible research practice.

For close to 30 years, the CF/DND has supported the ethical review of research (Aker et al., 2004). At present, at least four REBs are active and recognized, of which the DMP Strat/CORA REB is one. The remainder of this report will evaluate the degree to which the DMP Strat/CORA REB has lived up to its own Terms of Reference (see Aker et al., 2004) and the degree to which the volume of research within the service group (i.e., research

¹ The Directorate of Military Personnel Strategy (DMP Strat) was formerly known as the Directorate of Strategic Human Resources (D Strat HR).

² The Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA) was formerly known as the Operational Research Division (ORD).

undertaken at DMP Strat or by scientists in CORA) that would benefit from REB review merits the existence of a dedicated REB for the group.

2. Evaluation: Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference (TOR) for the DMP Strat/CORA REB are specific in terms of the composition and duties of the REB³. Throughout, the numbered sections of the TOR are provided for reference, should the reader wish to consult the original document directly.

The Authority (3.1) and Purpose (3.2) of the REB as outlined in the TOR are aligned with the actual functioning of the DMP Strat/CORA REB (hereafter this will be the referent for all references to the REB). Reporting relationships are functioning as envisioned, and the REB has not drifted from its original purpose.

The policy requirements specifying the types of research requiring review and the circumstances under which review is not required are defined in the TOR under Application (3.3). The functional parameters of review are well understood by the REB, and all presentations and discussions regarding the REB reflect the full scope of research that should be subject to review.

The Definitions (3.4) used by the REB have not altered since they were adopted. Further, all definitions remain consistent with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. The Responsibilities of the REB (3.5) also reflect the current functioning of the board.

The section of the TOR document formally subtitled Terms of Reference (3.6) pertains to detailed procedures to which the REB should adhere in carrying out its functions. Of the 11 procedures listed in the TOR, eight are followed precisely. An audit of the official record of meetings and decisions reveals some deviation from the intended procedure for the remainder of the procedures laid out in the TOR. Table 1 lists the 11 procedures and details areas where the REB is, or is not, compliant with them.

³ Full copies of the terms of reference are available from the first author.

Table 1: Formal Procedures and Compliance Evaluation

Procedure	Compliance Evaluation
Communication of scheduled REB meetings to DMP Strat and CORA personnel.	Not compliant. Broad announcements about scheduled meetings are not regularly promulgated, printed materials are not updated with this information on a consistent basis, and it is not available electronically (e.g., on a website).
The review of all research protocols for research to be conducted by DMP Strat research staff and CORA, as well as research to be conducted by all others for DMP Strat projects (in accordance with the purpose identified above).	Compliant to the extent that individual researchers submit proposals for review (see next section).
Ensuring that all research protocols provide information to participants in accordance with Annex B (this annex lists and defines information requirements), to facilitate informed consent of participants.	Compliant.
Reviewing all policies, including related DAODs and the <i>Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans</i> , to ensure that the DMP Strat/CORA REB policy remains current.	Not compliant. No formal evaluation of policies, DAODs or other documentation appears in the record of meetings.
Advising DMP Strat/CORA on ways to improve research protocol on projects being conducted within and for DMP Strat and CORA clients, with respect to research ethics issues.	Compliant. Presentations to CORA staff at the Annual Meeting, general discussions with individual researchers, broad dissemination of information regarding the REB, and communication with individual applicants to the REB about specific projects constitute tools supporting this activity.
Communicating any amendments to research protocol requirements for submission to the REB, to DMP Strat and CORA research personnel.	Not observed. No such amendments have been made since the board's inception.
Maintaining accurate records of all submissions and decisions.	Not compliant. Documentation is mostly complete, however, gaps such as maintaining a copy of all decisions as communicated to researchers were noted in the review of REB documentation.
Communicating REB decisions to research OPIs and DMP Strat and CORA.	Compliant. Formal letters are sent to research OPIs to communicate the REB decision, and this letter is cc'd to both responsible bodies.
Considering potential for undue harm to the CF/DND	Compliant.
Considering potential for undue harm to individuals.	Compliant.
Seeking the contribution of a subject matter expert to the board deliberations in cases where the combined expertise of the standing board is insufficient to render a decision on a protocol involving a particular academic, theoretical or methodological approach.	Not observed. This has not been an issue (the REB membership has included sufficient expertise) to date.

3. Evaluation: Review Volume

Projects listed in the CORA Quarterly Activity Reports (QAR) from October 2004 to September 2005 were reviewed to determine the annual volume of research proposals that might have been submitted to the DMP Strat/CORA REB. The QARs are the only comprehensive sources of published information on all projects that may fall under the purview of the REB. Projects that involved human participants, or were thought likely to involve them based on the descriptions in the QAR, were identified and compared to the list of projects reviewed by the REB. The primary researchers for identified projects that had not been reviewed were contacted for further details. All identified projects that were not reviewed by the DMP Strat/CORA REB were found to have been: 1) reviewed as part of another project; 2) reviewed by another REB; or 3) did not require a review based on further details provided by the researcher. Other boards conducting the reviews were the Directorate of Personnel Applied Research (DPersAR) REB (Ottawa) and the Royal Military College (RMC) REB (Kingston). Table 2 provides a list of all 28 identified projects and their review status.

Table 2: Identified Projects, Review Requirements, and Reviewing Bodies.

Project Title	REB Review
Command Support Pilot Project	DMP Strat/CORA
Vehicle-Launched 76mm HE Grenades in the Anti-Ambush Role	DMP Strat/CORA
Joint Intelligence and Information Fusion Center (JIIFC) Project (Virtual Warrior IV)	DMP Strat/CORA
Support To Service Income Security Insurance Plan Financial Services	DMP Strat/CORA
PERSTEMPO and Human Dimensions of Deployment	DMP Strat/CORA
The Relationship Survey	DMP Strat/CORA
CF Culture Project	DMP Strat/CORA
Alternative Dispute Resolution Survey	DPersAR
Director Casualty Support Administration Survey	DPersAR
Ethics Research	DPersAR
Diversity Climate Survey	DPersAR
Employment Equity & "Your-Say" Continuous Attitude Survey (2 reviews as part of the same study)	DPersAR
Leader Development Project	RMC
Civil-Military Gaps Project	RMC

Project Title	REB Review
Socialization of Cadets at RMC	RMC
Women and Military Operations: International Perspectives and Experiences in Leadership Roles	RMC
Differential Assessment of the CF Aptitude Test (CFAT)	Not Required (NR)
CFAT Validation with CAO QL3 Training	NR
Canadian Forces Self Identification Census	NR
Canadian Forces Workforce Analysis	NR
Interest and Propensity	NR
Barriers to Female Selection for CF Command and Staff College	NR
Quality Of Life Index (Under Continuous Attitude Survey)	NR
Family Violence Survey	NR
Attrition in the DND Civilian Workforce	NR
DND Civilian Sick Leave Usage	NR

Out of a maximum of 28 possible reviews, the DMP Strat/CORA REB (based on the project lists for that one-year period) reviewed seven. Other boards reviewed nine and the remainder, had they been submitted, would not have required a formal review.

4. Evaluation: Ongoing Challenges

The fact that few, if any, Defence Scientists, or CF/DND researchers have been or ever will be found to be conducting research in an unethical manner makes the value of the REB a difficult thing to sell to those same researchers. In a very real sense, the REB exists to prevent a problem from developing rather than to correct one that exists. In this environment, the education of individuals not specifically trained in graduate-level social science methodologies about the necessity for obtaining REB approval for research involving human participants prior to carrying out such research remains as an ongoing challenge for the REB. Not surprisingly, there is resistance to this kind of oversight from individuals who feel they are carrying out assigned taskings, often under tight deadlines. These same scientists often resent the requirement for additional “layers” of approval and scrutiny of their work. The REB consistently transmits the message that REB review is not evaluative, is designed to strengthen research carried out within the CF/DND, and provides individuals with access to broader expertise than might otherwise be available to the researcher(s). Another message that is communicated is the risk reduction aspect of REB review, both in terms of risk to research participants and to researchers. Nonetheless, the lack of direct and immediate consequences for not obtaining REB review and approval when it is required carries a clear message to some individuals that this is an “optional” process, despite the official decision from the most senior organizational levels that REB review is a requirement for all research carried out with human participants. Though the attitudes and debates about the process are a concern, as the previous section demonstrated there is no evidence that research with human participants is being conducted within the associated areas without benefit of REB review.

There is anecdotal evidence that different REBs apply different definitions of research with human participants when calling for reviews of research. At the very least there is a perception among some researchers that different boards are easier to work with than others. The DMP Strat/CORA REB has made consistent efforts both to communicate the requirement for review when applicable, and to minimize any burden imposed on researchers and Board members. This practical, though uncompromising, approach to ethics review appears to be getting the message out to researchers that a review is both important and useful to them. Researchers who are uncertain whether they are required to submit a particular research proposal for review have approached REB members individually for advice. Board members consistently use the published guidelines to assist the researchers with their decision. This process is an excellent method of educating the researchers about the process, marketing the REB’s utility and ensuring that research is carried out according to Federal Government guidelines. This informal workload is not documented anywhere, and has not been perceived as a burden to the members of the REB.

Many researchers within CORA had no awareness of ethics review boards prior to the stand-up and promotion of the DMP Strat/CORA REB. Many remain unaware that there are other boards. This suggests that if the DMP Strat/CORA REB were to stand down, the perceived message would be that ethical review of research involving human participants is no longer necessary.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

There are two roles for the DMP Strat/CORA REB. The first, most important, and least frequent, is to conduct reviews and to intervene when required to prevent unethical research from being undertaken. The second, mundane, and most common role is to create and maintain an awareness within the research community that ethical considerations are important, and that the most common ethical lapses could be categorized as stemming from neglect or ignorance of the issues rather than from willful disregard for a participant's well being.

Based on the findings of this evaluation, two recommendations are put forward regarding the future of the DMP Strat/CORA REB:

1. The DMP Strat/CORA REB should continue to exist. It fulfills its mandate, and serves a critical function within the department by reviewing research with human participants to safeguard participants, researchers, and the CF/DND. In addition, through presentations and informal discussions, individual members of the REB regularly contribute educational benefits to the broader (CF/DND) research community by raising awareness of the benefits of ethical review of research.
2. Shortcomings in the existing functioning of the REB should be addressed immediately. Specifically, improved communications between the REB and the CF/DND research community, minor improvements to the consistency of documentation of REB decisions, and better awareness of the context of ethical review (i.e., alignment with pertinent policy and guidance) will enhance the value of the DMPStrat/CORA REB to the CF/DND and to the organizational research community.

6. References

1. Aker, T., Davis, K. D., Flemming, S., Hill, S., McKee, B., Schwartz, S., Wait, T. & Woodill, G. (2004). *The Director Strategic Human Resources and Operational Research Division Research Ethics Board: Terms of Reference (Updated)*. Unpublished Research Note: Department of National Defence.
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List of symbols/abbreviations/acronyms/initialisms

CF	Canadian Forces
CORA	Centre for Operational Research and Analysis
DMP Strat	Directorate of Military Personnel Strategy
DND	Department of National Defence
QAR	Quarterly Activity Reports
REB	Research Ethics Board
TOR	Terms of Reference

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The Research Ethics Board (REB) established in 2003 within the Directorate of Military Personnel Strategy (DMP Strat) and the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA) has been operating continuously and without incident since its inception. After two full years of operation, the REB Chair requested a formal performance evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the REB and to solicit recommendations for its future. Evaluation of the available documentation revealed that the REB is functioning well, has maintained its focus, and provides valuable input to researchers involved in studies involving human participants. Continuation of the DMP Strat/CORA REB is recommended.

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