

## Four Pitfalls to Avoid In Your Ethics Submission

Researchers and the Research Ethics Board have the same goals of generating high quality research while doing minimal harm to participants. As part of this process, researchers are required to describe their research and pertinent ethics issues to a Research Ethics Board that then ensures the research meets ethical standards as set out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement 2*. To try to speed up the REB process, this document notes the four biggest trouble areas for ethics submissions. Ethics submissions that avoid these four main pitfalls will likely be approved much faster and the process will seem much smoother to both researchers and REB members. Although this document was originally written for applications undergoing full review, the same principles still apply for applications submitted for Unit-Level review.

### **Pitfall 1: Objectives and Methods Do Not Match**

Many applications have methods that do not seem designed or able to answer the researchers' objectives or research questions. REB's are required to weigh the benefits of the research against the risks. Please make it easy for the REB to assess whether your research can adequately address your research questions. For example, if your main research question involves determining the relationship between two variables, then your methods should include how those two variables will be measured and what data analysis technique will be used to assess the relationship. Making the explicit links between research questions and how relevant variables will be measured/analyzed will greatly help your application.

### **Pitfall 2: Low Quality Measurement Instruments**

REB's are required to weigh the benefits of any research against the risks. Therefore, for an ethics application to be approved, there must be a reasonable chance useful information will be collected. Often times, ethics submissions include data collection methods/instruments so poor that it essentially negates any chance of useful information being collected. This situation is seen, for example, in surveys with nonsensical questions, scales that do not agree with the items (e.g., a frequency scale used when respondents are asked for their agreement to an item), and items that violate basic survey principles. It is also seen in qualitative research, for example, where many closed-ended questions are asked for a data analysis method that requires open-ended questions. The REB is obligated to return these submissions until the instruments make sense and meet a standard that ensures valid data collection. Researchers should always be familiar (that is, have taken a course or gained an understanding of the method through other means) with the data collection method they are using or have someone on the research team who is familiar with the method.

### **Pitfall 3: Risks Inadequately Addressed**

The foremost concern of REB's is to protect study participants and minimize their exposure to risk. However, many applications do not include an adequate coverage of the risks involved in the study. Sometimes, it appears that researchers are concerned about acknowledging risks because the REB will then see the study as too risky. Other times, researchers seem to believe a minimum risk study involves no risk. All studies involve some degree of risk, discomfort, and/or inconvenience for participants and the REB knows this, therefore, acknowledging study risks will not decrease the chances of your research receiving REB approval. In fact, just the opposite is true. What the REB pays close attention to is acknowledgment of the risks specific to your study and that you have thought about and taken steps to minimize the risk to participants. Not having an adequate discussion of risks and how you addressed them is a sure way of having your application returned to you for revisions.

### **Pitfall 4: Information To Be Seen by the Public or Study Participants is of Low Quality**

All material that will be seen by the public or study participants must be of high quality. This standard means that materials must be written at a level the targeted readers will understand and be essentially error free. There should be no grammatical errors, word usage errors, poor sentence structure, etc. If Consent Forms are of low quality, it means that participants may not be able to fully understand the study or what they are agreeing to. Low quality collection instruments lead to unreliable and invalid data. All materials that will be seen by the public or potential research participants will be assessed to ensure they are written/presented clearly and accurately. There are no exceptions, including materials associated with undergraduate student research.

### **Other Quick Tips to Help Your REB Application**

- Keep the Background fairly short, generally no more than two pages. Just provide a bit of background about the research, why it is important, and why you are undertaking it. Provide enough information that the REB members can understand the logic behind the research objectives and/or questions.
- Provide enough detail in the Methods section that the REB understands exactly what will happen to participants in the study, particularly any risks they may encounter.
- Ensure the data analysis section contains enough information that the REB understands how the main research objectives or questions will be addressed.
- In the Consent Form, describe the research as simply and briefly as possible. In most cases, for minimal/low risk research, describing the research should be accomplished in no more than three sentences.
- Ensure the Consent Form is written in second person ("you").
- For a student submission, ensure that your supervisor thoroughly reviews the final copy before submission.
- Number the pages of your submission.