

Submission to the CIHR International Peer Review Expert Panel

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I have three inter-related key messages to convey. They speak primarily to questions 2 and 4 that you have been asked to address, and they map onto the grant review process as it has been outlined and refined for the fall 2016 project grant competition (CIHR 2016a; CIHR 2016b; CIHR 2016d).

Key Message#1: *CIHR should ensure that reforms to its funding programs reflect CIHR's statutory mandate to support health related research in the humanities and social sciences*

In my view it is essential for this Panel to consider CIHR's recent reforms not in a vacuum, but rather with a larger understanding of the challenges faced by Canadian-based social scientists and humanities researchers engaged in health related research.

By law CIHR has a mandate to support research that "pertains to all aspects of health", which includes not only biomedical and clinical research but also "research respecting health systems, health services, the health of populations, societal and cultural dimensions of health and environmental influences on health". (CIHR Act, s 4(e))

However, a range of qualitative (Albert et al. 2008; Albert 2014) and quantitative data (Krahn and Fenton 2012) suggest that CIHR has since its inception in 2000 failed to support research across the full breadth of its statutory mandate.

In addition, researchers in the social sciences and humanities who have worked in CIHR in a variety of capacities, whether as members of its governing council, as directors of CIHR institutes, or as peer review committee members, have consistently sounded concerns about the absence of appropriate peer review. Simply put, CIHR funding applications submitted by scholars in the humanities and social sciences are frequently reviewed by researchers without relevant expertise. Funding applications submitted by legal scholars should not, for instance, be reviewed solely by philosophers and social scientists just as social science funding proposals should not be adjudicated by lawyers or bioethicists. However, this routinely occurs in the context of CIHR funding competitions.

Meanwhile in 2009 SSHRC—the federal research funding council best positioned to ensure meaningful peer review for social scientists and humanities researchers—deemed all health related research to be formally ineligible for funding.

As a result, social scientists and humanities researchers are forced to make an impossible choice: Either take their chances with CIHR and hope that reviewers will have relevant expertise, or reorient their research away from health and apply to SSHRC (Klassen and Albert 2014).

This state of affairs both increases the risk that important health related research by humanities and social science researchers will be left “undone” (Hess 2007), and the risk that health related research by researchers in those disciplines that is funded by CIHR will not have the benefit of rigorous peer view and thus be of lower quality.

It is imperative that CIHR’s reforms to its investigator-initiated funding programs improve upon this state of affairs if CIHR is to meet its statutory mandate of supporting research excellence in the humanities and social sciences.

Key Message #2: CIHR should renew its efforts to ensure qualified, rigorous peer review for health related research in the humanities and social sciences

Under the proposed reforms, CIHR has initial responsibility for matching applications with qualified reviewers; reviewer assignments are then subject to the approval of Competition Chairs in collaboration with Scientific Officers. However, this process is unlikely to work for two reasons.

First, the available evidence shows that social science and humanities researchers often elect to “erase” their preferred theoretical frameworks and methods in an effort to make their funding applications more palatable to CIHR reviewers that are likely to lack disciplinary relevant research training. According to one interview-based study of junior researchers seeking CIHR funding, participants reported that they chose not to include references to feminist theories, community-based Aboriginal research methods, and emergent (rather than hypothesis-driven) research designs in their funding applications because they had learned from their supervisors and other experiences that those theories, methods, and designs would not be well received by CIHR reviewers (Albert 2014). This impedes CIHR’s ability to appropriately match funding applications with qualified reviewers.

Second, even when CIHR is able to identify appropriate reviewers based on the discipline of the proposal, many of those putative reviewers from the social sciences and humanities will not accept the invitation to serve as a reviewer for CIHR. This is the elephant in the room. Qualified reviewers have long complained about the absence of rigorous peer review for humanities and social science research and have thus withdrawn their services from CIHR’s peer review processes.

In order to mitigate the observed tendency of social scientists and humanities scholars to frame their proposals in ways that are perceived to be more palatable to reviewers outside those disciplines, and to encourage qualified reviewers to return to the peer review process, CIHR

should take steps to restore humanities and social science researchers' confidence that funding applications will be appropriately matched and rigorously reviewed by their peers.

As a start, CIHR should make the disciplinary training of its Competition Chairs as well as its Scientific Officers transparent to applicants. (At present, only the background of the College of Reviewers' College Chairs is publicly available, and only 3 of 17 such Chairs have training outside the biomedical sciences. (CIHR 2016c)) CIHR should also initiate an independent working group to i) examine CIHR's process for identifying qualified reviewers, ii) define eligibility criteria for serving as Competition Chairs and Scientific Officers, and iii) develop a strategy to encourage qualified social scientists and humanities researchers to return the peer review process.

Key Message #3: CIHR should require face-to-face reviews for interdisciplinary research proposals involving researchers from the humanities and social sciences coupled with researchers from the biomedical sciences prior to rejection

Based on the fall 2016 Project grant competition it appears that investigator-initiated grant applications will, going forward, be reviewed in essentially two stages. Stage 1 is entirely virtual: CIHR identifies potential reviewers and Competition Chairs (in collaboration with Scientific Officers) sign off on assignments; four reviewers will be assigned to each proposal and each reviewer will complete 10-12 reviews online. Stage 2 occurs in person: approximately 60% of all applications are culled from the pool and the remaining 40%, which have on average consistently scored above a certain threshold or receive widely divergent scores from 2 or more reviewers, are discussed in face-to-face meetings referred to as "cluster-based panels"; these cluster-based panels are populated by 2 of the 4 Stage 1 reviewers of each application and a some unspecified number of other researchers, presumably with research expertise befitting a given cluster.

The restoration of some face-to-face review during Stage 2 is positive. However, culling roughly 60% of applications prior to face-to-face discussion by cluster-based panels remains problematic from the perspective of interdisciplinary research, particularly interdisciplinary research involving biomedical researchers coupled with humanities and social science researchers.

These two streams of researchers occupy entirely different "epistemic cultures", where the research methods and contributions to knowledge are produced and measured in fundamentally different ways (Albert et al. 2008). Lacking an opportunity to address this divide in a face-to-face conversation, online reviewers would seem ill-equipped to assess such interdisciplinary research proposals.

For example, imagine a research proposal that encompasses both clinician scientists and anthropologists, and 3 out of the 4 reviewers assigned at Stage 1 are clinicians. (CIHR has a larger pool of clinician and biomedical researchers to draw upon for assigning reviews). It is plausible that the clinician majority of reviewers will score the application low, for example,

because the publication records of the anthropologist researchers appear less productive and/or the emergent nature of their participant-observation research seems less well defined than those clinicians are accustomed to reviewing. Without an opportunity to ‘norm-check’ in a face-to-face conversation, the social scientist reviewer is denied the ability to explain to the clinician reviewers why—according to her discipline’s norms—the anthropologists’ publication records and proposed methodologies are in fact strong and appropriate.

Consider also a funding application involving researchers from several different disciplines, say, law, ethics, neuroscience, and sociology. CIHR is able to identify Stage 1 reviewers corresponding to each discipline encompassed in the proposal. In the course of reviewing the proposal online, each reviewer finds that aspects of the proposal within her discipline are strong but, without the ability to understand or judge the other aspects of the proposal, concludes the application overall is weak, assigning a low score. This illustrates how virtual review of research can be less than the sum of its parts, especially in the context of interdisciplinary research.

CIHR has a statutory mandate to encourage interdisciplinary research (CIHR Act, s. 4(d)). Putting into place a review process that rejects interdisciplinary research proposals solely on the basis of online reviews is at odds with CIHR’s statutory mandate.

Conclusion

In sum, the proposed reforms to CIHR’s investigator-initiated programs promise to exacerbate the challenges that researchers in the social sciences and humanities with a focus on health already face in Canada. To begin addressing the above concerns, this Panel should recommend that CIHR:

1. Disclose the disciplinary training of its Competition Chairs as well as its Scientific Officers to prospective applicants.
2. Create an independent working group to:
 - i) examine CIHR’s process for identifying qualified reviewers,
 - ii) define eligibility criteria for serving as Competition Chairs and Scientific Officers, and
 - iii) develop a strategy to encourage qualified social scientists and humanities researchers to return the peer review process.
3. Establish a separate review process for interdisciplinary research proposals that encompass both clinical/biomedical research and social science/humanities research, which requires face-to-face discussion prior to rejection.

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