TCPS Principles Module Transcript

Research Ethics in Canada

All research involving human participants in Canada is governed by the Tri-Council Policy Statement[1] (also known as the TCPS 2) and refers to a research policy developed by Canada's three federal granting agencies. These agencies are the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (or CIHR), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (or SSHRC), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (or NSERC). The first statement came out in 1998 and has seen a number of revisions since then.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement guides the review of all research conducted at research institutions funded by any of those 3 agencies. This includes all Canadian universities and many hospitals. It is considered the minimal standard for the ethical review of research involving humans. The interpretation and enforcement of these principles found in the Tri-Council Policy Statement is left up to the institutions, most of which have their own Research Ethics Boards (or REBs) whose job it is to review research proposals, as well as monitor ongoing research to ensure it adheres to these policies.

Tri-Council Policy Statement (2018):
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans

We will now get into the eight main ethical principles that govern research involving human participants according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement, which of course applies to all Canadian research institutions, including Huron. The full statement is provided in the "Linked Resources" tab where this module is located.

The first ethical principle is **respect for Human Dignity** and is expressed through 3 core principles, the first being *Respect for Persons* which involves recognizing the intrinsic value of human beings and the respect and consideration that they are due. The second is *Concern for Welfare* which means that researchers should aim to protect the physical, mental, and spiritual welfare of participants by considering their physical, economic, and social circumstances, this can include housing, employment, security, family life, community membership, and more. The third is *Justice,* which refers to the obligation to treat people both fairly AND equitably, this means allowing all participants equal access to benefits from research, as well as ensuring an equal share of burdens across participants.

The second is **respect for free and informed consent voluntarily given**, meaning to respect participants' autonomy in research it is required to seek their free, informed and ongoing consent. This means participants should know exactly what they are consenting to, therefore they should be informed of the potential risks, potential

benefits, and so on, so they can make an informed decision as to whether or not they would like to participate in the research. The process of giving consent is ongoing, therefore participants can revoke their consent at any time during the research without consequences to them.

The third principle is **respect for vulnerable persons.** Vulnerability is often caused by limited decision-making capacity, or limited access to social goods, such as rights, opportunities, and power. Individuals or groups whose circumstances may make them vulnerable in the context of research have historically included children, the elderly, ethnocultural minorities, students, women, prisoners, those with mental health issues and those with diminished capacity for self-determination. People or groups whose circumstances cause them to be vulnerable or marginalized may need to be afforded special attention in order to be treated justly in research. For example, working with a vulnerable population such as children would require parental consent for their participation, as well as involving the child in decision-making processes wherever possible, such as receiving their assent or dissent in engaging in the research. It is also important that individuals or groups whose circumstances may make them vulnerable in the context of research should not be inappropriately included or automatically excluded from participation in research on the basis of their circumstances.

The fourth principle **is respect for privacy and confidentiality. Respect for privacy** means the participant has agency over what they choose to disclose, and it involves attempting to minimize intrusion as much as possible as the researcher. **Respect for confidentiality** is what you then do with the information participants give you, and that involves keeping that information as anonymous as possible. It is the responsibility of the researcher to identify and minimize risks by ensuring privacy and confidentiality of both the participant and their data at *all* stages of research, this includes initial data collection, data analysis, dissemination of findings, storage of data, etc. Some examples of how to achieve privacy and confidentiality of participants and their data include telling participants not to put their name on any data collection documents so their data cannot be traced back to them, or if participants are completing more than one task, survey, etc., have them create a participant ID to put on all documents, that way these items can be connected when doing your analysis, without disclosing the identity of the participant.

Tri-Council Policy Statement (2018): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Continued

The fifth principle is **respect for justice and inclusiveness**, this is the obligation to treat all people fairly and equitably, and therefore treat all with equal respect and concern. This includes using appropriate inclusion and avoiding inappropriate exclusion when recruiting participants, as everyone should have an equal opportunity to become a part of the research. It means that certain populations cannot be excluded on a random basis, there must be a very strong rationale to exclude certain populations from participating. Actively including Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in your research design not only is the right thing to do, it also leads your results to be more

generalizable, which leads to a greater impact in a wider range of communities, and higher quality research results. Equity involves removing systemic barriers and biases enabling all individuals to have equal opportunity to access and benefit from your research, so it is important to think critically about your own research design and what barriers may exist to certain individuals or groups and implement ways to overcome some of these barriers. Chapter 4 of the TCPS 2 gives the example of age often being used to exclude individuals from participation in research, with many studies only accepting participants between the ages of 18 to 35, resulting in sufficient research not being conducted with certain age cohorts, delaying the advancement of knowledge in these groups. Respect for justice and inclusiveness also means that groups or communities participating in your research should not bear an unfair share of the burdens of participating in research. It does not mean treating everyone the same, but rather treating everyone in a manner that is just, and what is just may look different for different populations. Let's use the example of one doing research that involves both young adults, and a vulnerable population such as the elderly. Now more than ever data collection is being done virtually, and while this may not pose a challenge to the younger participants, those older participants who tend to be less experienced with technology end up taking on a disproportionate amount of the burden in participating in the research.

The principle of **balancing harms and benefits** states that when conducting research there is an ethical obligation to design, assess and conduct research in a way that protects participants from any unnecessary or avoidable risks.

Minimizing harm is another principle that guides research with human participants. Harm is anything that has a negative effect on the welfare of participants, the harm may be social, behavioural, psychological, physical or economic in nature, and so researchers should attempt to assess the potential for harm from the perspective of participants, to the greatest extent possible.

Last but not least is the principle of **maximizing benefits** to participants. Research involving humans may produce benefits that positively affect the welfare of society as a whole through the advancement of knowledge for participants or future generations, however, much research offers little or no direct benefit to participants, so it is important to consider in what ways you can maximize the benefits participants are getting from being involved in your research.

Potential Ethical Dilemmas

We will now look at some of the potential ethical dilemmas that can arise when doing research. This information is taken from the *Ethics in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*[2] document provided in the "Linked Resources" tab where this module is located on OWL. This document discusses key principles and strategies for ethical practice by reviewing the Tri-Council Policy Statement. It is a great resource in helping you plan your own ethical research, as well as in getting to know your own rights if you are participating in research conducted by your instructors. Section 1.3 of this document

outlines the potential ethical dilemmas that can arise when instructors are the researcher and students are the participants, however these ethical dilemmas can also come up in student research and can be particularly problematic within a small environment such as Huron where everyone knows everyone.

The first issue that may arise is **power relationships**, which can still exist in research in which both the researcher and participants are students. If a researcher for example has a role in the university such as in student politics that puts them in a position of power, this can create conflicts through influence, power imbalances or coercion that could affect relationships and decision-making procedures.

This can lead into issues in **consent processes**, as this difference in power between the student participant and student researcher may make the participant feel obligated to participate in your study. This is especially problematic at Huron, where your participants may be fellow classmates or acquaintances, who may feel like their relationship with the researcher will suffer if they do not choose to participate. Therefore, it is important that prior to asking participants to consent to your study, that they are fully informed of the purpose, benefits, risks and consequences of your research, and ensuring they are made aware they have the autonomy to freely choose to participate, refuse to participate, or withdraw from participation at any time during the research without consequences, so that they can make an informed decision of their own volition regarding their participation.

Issues in **fairness and equity** in research participation of course also applies to student research, that is being inclusive, fair and equitable when selecting participants by not excluding individuals from the opportunity to participate on the basis of attributes like culture, language, religion, race, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency, gender or age, unless there is a valid reason for the exclusion. This also includes making research results available, accessible, and understandable to all participants upon completion of the study, this would involve debriefing participants after the study using language that those not in your field or not in academics can understand. Making a commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in your research not only means not purposefully excluding others from your research, but also actively thinking of and implementing ways to reduce barriers that may exist that prevent certain individuals or groups from participating in your research.

Finally, we'll discuss issues in **privacy and confidentiality**. Student researchers are obligated to protect participants' information and data at all stages of the research, this includes meeting the privacy and confidentiality obligations outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement, as well as implementing any additional security measures that may apply to your specific research. For example, in a time when a great deal of data collection is being done online, it is important to take steps to protect participants' data through whatever virtual mediums you are using. This could include, but is not limited to, password protecting documents so that only the researcher (or researchers) can access them, making zoom calls private if doing virtual interviews with participants, etc.

For more information on how to best protect participants' data, check out the "Data Management" tab on the OWL page.

References:

[1]Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, December 2018.

[2]Fedoruk, L. (2017). Ethics in the scholarship of teaching and learning: Key principles and strategies for ethical practice. Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning Guide Series. Calgary, AB: Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary. www.ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/guides