

Research Access Barriers as Reputational Risk Management: A Case Study of Censorship in Corrections¹

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De nombreux organismes de justice pénale, notamment le Service correctionnel du Canada (SCC), donnent accès aux chercheurs à partir de leurs propres services de recherche. Dans le cadre d'une recherche sur l'élaboration de programmes et de politiques en lien à la toxicomanie en prison, j'ai tenté en vain d'interviewer des employés du SCC. Par conséquent, j'ai transformé mon expérience en étude de cas, où ma correspondance avec le SCC est traitée comme source unique de données. Bien que d'autres études de cas portant sur un refus d'accès aient déjà fait partie de la recherche sur les prisons, j'ai choisi d'appliquer une nouvelle perspective, c'est-à-dire la gestion des risques liés à la réputation, afin d'étendre la boîte à outils conceptuelle dont les chercheurs futurs peuvent se servir. J'ai aussi utilisé des données tirées d'entrevues effectuées avec un échantillon de 16 participants – d'anciens agents principaux d'administration du SCC, d'anciens employés de première ligne du SCC et des intervenants externes – pour compléter mon analyse. L'étude de cas et les entrevues dévoilent de nouvelles connaissances en matière d'obstacles à l'accès, de censure et du caractère insulaire de la recherche du SCC. Ces restrictions peuvent entraîner des conséquences défavorables, notamment la (re)production de connaissances limitées concernant le service correctionnel et la réduction de solutions novatrices. J'encourage donc les chercheurs à raffiner encore plus l'application du risque lié à la réputation au contexte de justice pénale et de faire preuve de persistance quand vient le temps d'accéder aux organismes de service correctionnel.

Mots clés : accès à la recherche, censure, service correctionnel, réputation, organisations, pénologie canadienne

Many criminal justice organizations, including the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), grant research access through their own research branches. I attempted to interview CSC employees for research about programming and

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policy in relation to in-prison substance abuse, but access was denied. I have turned my experience into a case study, where I treat my correspondence with CSC as a unique source of data. Although access-denied case studies have appeared in the literature on conducting prison research, I apply a novel lens, reputational risk management, to expand the conceptual toolkit for future researchers. I also use interview data from a sample of 16 participants – former CSC senior administrative officials, former CSC front line staff, and external stakeholders – to supplement my analysis. The case study and interviews reveal new insights regarding access barriers, censorship, and the insular character of CSC research. These restrictions can lead to adverse consequences such as the (re)production of limited knowledge about corrections and the curtailment of innovative solutions to problems. I thus encourage researchers to further refine the application of reputational risk to criminal justice settings and to be persistent in their efforts to access correctional organizations.

Keywords: research access, censorship, corrections, reputation, organizations, Canadian penology

Introduction

Gaining access to correctional institutions is often time-consuming and unpredictable, and the pressures brought to bear can divert a study from its original plan; access is sometimes achieved via “some admixture of fortuitousness, a willingness to compromise, and capitalizing on pre-existing opportunities” (Goodman 2011: 600). Access has traditionally been treated as a methodological issue, a process that unfolds in a series of steps, as researchers establish rapport and obtain permission to recruit participants or examine agency-produced data (King and Liebling 2008; Noaks and Wincup 2004; Patenaude 2004; Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings 2004). A key rapport-building step involves approaching “gatekeepers,” those who have the power to grant or refuse access to people or activities (Burgess 1984). Many criminal justice organizations, including the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) – the federal prison agency that supervises offenders sentenced to two years or more – grant access through their own research branches, which review proposals from academic researchers (Hannah-Moffat 2011). Although identifying the methodological issues and offering practical solutions are important contributions to the criminological literature, “negotiating a way in” (Mopas and Turnbull 2011) and dealing with gatekeepers are more than administrative hurdles. Research access

protocols are worthy of study, as they can reveal information about how institutions present themselves, insulate themselves from public scrutiny, and suppress information that is unfavourable to their own and/or government agendas.

Scholars have been troubled by barriers to accessing corrections due to the potential for such barriers to produce and reproduce certain knowledge(s). For example, if researchers must resort to collecting data from, say, a handful of jurisdictions or institutions that regularly permit access, over time the impacts (e.g., limited insights and difficulties with generalizing) may spread to penal scholarship more broadly (Spivakovsky 2011). Reiter (2014) recently described prison research in the United States as “pixelated,” due to the fact that access to prisons is relatively limited and that very little qualitative prison research has been done in the twenty-first century; this pixelation has resulted in a hazy understanding of contemporary corrections. Hannah-Moffat (2011) has observed that obtaining approval from research review branches has become increasingly difficult for scholars who “challenge the assumptions underpinning hegemonic correctional approaches, or whose research may bring the system into disrepute” (446). Even when research applicants have already obtained ethics approval from their own departments or universities, correctional research branches often deny scholars access by citing various concerns with methodology and research questions and/or claiming that there are not enough resources to meet the needs of the proposed study (Hannah-Moffat 2011: 447; Martel 2004; Yeager 2008). My access experience followed this well-trodden pattern.

I attempted to access CSC employees for doctoral criminology research on in-prison substance abuse programming and policy, but access was denied. I have turned this experience into a case study where I treat correspondence with CSC as a source of data and apply a reputational risk management framework (Power 2004, 2007) to reinterpret my research proposal as a risk to be managed from the organization’s point of view. A second source of data, interviews with former and current correctional system informants, supplements the analysis. Although an access-denied case study is not unique to the literature on doing prison research, including research proposed to CSC (Martel 2004; Yeager 2008), my use of reputational risk as a lens through which to view the issues expands the conceptual toolkit for researchers who endeavour to be more reflective about access barriers. This case study helps validate the relevance of a strand of reputational risk literature – that has been based on studies of corporate and financial organizations – to the study of

correctional organizations. In addition, the insights I collected from varied stakeholders constitute a unique empirical referent that not only complements my close inspection of personal interactions with CSC but reveals important concerns about wide-reaching consequences that may stem from CSC's research access barriers.

It is hard to quantify CSC's relationship with external researchers without access to internal decision making about how different types of research are characterized, practised, facilitated, and denied. According to a report about the early development and function of CSC's Research Branch (Porporino 1989), research at CSC was understood as a process that "should not be rooted in any single discipline, nor oriented only towards a narrow set of easily researchable issues" (5). Openness was expressed regarding "all types" of scientific inquiry, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, capable of collecting data relevant to current and emerging correctional issues and practice. The same report recognized the value of "active collaboration" with academics and communication of research findings to the broader criminal justice research community (Porporino 1989). This initial vision can be contrasted with the CSC Commissioner's Directive (CD) 009 on research (revised in 2004) which, I suggest later in the present article, offers a narrower definition of research.

Other signs of shifts from the initial vision can be found. I have had involvement with researchers at a variety of Canadian universities who reported that collaboration is rarely sought by CSC and that, in recent years, only a limited group of researchers or agencies have had proposals approved. CSC's Web site provides numerous research reports on a range of topics, including substance abuse, but there appear to be changes over time in the types of research reported (e.g., an increased focus on offender profiles and characteristics). Online release of issues of *FORUM on Corrections Research*, CSC's research magazine - which began publication in 1989 and was to serve as a wide-reaching dissemination strategy for research findings - appears to have halted since 2007. Archived copies of CSC's annual research plans and priorities are not easy to locate. The 2010-11 Research Plan (CSC 2010: 5) (the year I embarked on my research) stated that the Branch received 31 project requests from external researchers in addition to the projects outlined in the plan but did not specify how many external requests were approved. My own count, in preparation for my research, found that of the 66 project descriptions contained in that plan, only 6 mention academic or university partners as collaborators. Most research collaborators listed were a variety of CSC or internal sectors, while other

government departments and external agencies were also included, but less frequently. Recent annual reports on CSC plans and priorities contain hardly any mention of research (e.g., [CSC 2008](#); [CSC 2013](#)).

These signs that access for external researchers is being closed off and, potentially, that organizational interest in certain types of correctional research is diminishing, appear to have parallels within the wider political context. At the time of writing, Canada has recently implemented tough-on-crime legislation, the Safe Streets and Communities Act, which makes amendments to a number of different Acts including, for instance, imposing tougher penalties for drug offences under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (Safe Streets and Communities Act, ss 39–46), and there are widespread public concerns about government transparency and information sharing. Problems of government information sharing are increasingly evident from media stories about researchers being effectively “silenced” across federal sectors (see, e.g., [Klinkenborg 2013](#)), especially when their research findings do not match the current political agenda. There is a pattern here that suggests reluctance to approve external research could be a by-product of a much larger government agenda of non-transparency and suppression of research findings. My analysis is, therefore, timely and contributes newer evidence that reinforces this troubling picture for contemporary researchers. Again, I use concepts that have not yet been applied in previously published case studies of access.

The next two sections prime the reader for the case study – an overview of the reputational risk management literature that I was drawn to and brief context about substance abuse as a CSC priority area.

Overview of reputational risk for organizations

There are countless potential “encounters with risk” ([Hutter and Power 2005](#)) that organizations may confront, ranging from brief moments that fail to garner much attention to events that prompt major organizational change. A significant portion of the organizational risk management literature and of the theoretical contributions highlighted here, in particular those by [Power \(2004, 2007\)](#), emerged from examining operations, auditing procedures, and crisis management within large corporations and financial institutions. The relevance of this work in the context of criminal justice organizations is uncultivated scholarly territory.

For Power (2004, 2007), our social world is not only preoccupied with risk, but *all* risk is becoming increasingly framed as manageable. He argues that an ambitious “risk management of everything” agenda is having far-reaching impacts on how organizations design their operations, including the proliferation of internal control systems. One of the defining features of risk management saturation is growing organizational preoccupation with managing external relationships. As Power (2007: 196) states, “More is now expected of organizations; risks must be managed and must be seen to be managed.” In highly legalistic environments (Sitkin and Bies 1994), organizations are expected to make their actions appear visible, auditable, and justifiable to maintain legitimacy. In addition, media-rich environments along with public appetite for transparency feed into organizations’ concerns about the external world (Backer 2001). While there is much organizational activity that is not readily made transparent to the outside, when activity does catch the attention of those outside, many people can now be made aware of it in rapid time, courtesy of modern technology. Power (2007) explores, in detail, corporate sensibilities and anxieties regarding potential gaps between public expectations and actual risk management performance. To prevent gaps, reputational risk comes to take on greater importance than the primary risks (e.g., workplace health and safety, bankruptcy) that organizations must always monitor. Although as Power (2007) also suggests, the boundaries between primary and reputational categories of risk have become increasingly blurred.

Scholars have provided compelling arguments that risks are not objective facts but are socially constructed phenomena (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Hilgartner 1992). Reputational risk – reputation being an *intangible asset* for organizations – has been described as “the ‘purest’ of socially constructed risks” (Power, Scheytt, Soin, and Sahlin 2009: 310). This type of risk, similar to more tangible risks, becomes instrumentalized through metrics and rankings developed by external bodies such as, for example, those Power et al. (2009) examined in the context of English universities. These calculations are consistent with a contemporary risk management ethos that places “trust in numbers” (Power 2004) and amplifies incentives for organizations to be concerned about reputation. Reputational risk thus guides both public and private sector organizations to become extra cautious so as to avoid external perceptions of illegitimacy, employing strategies like expanding corporate social responsibility agendas, implementing specialized risk management positions (such as chief risk officers), and increasing the use of standardized protocols, checklists and “box-ticking,” disclaimers, and small print (Power 2004, 2007). In this way, reputational risk

becomes more than an abstract risk to be managed; it becomes a deeply internalized “logic of organizing” (Power et al. 2009). An example of such logic in action comes from a study of policing and risk that documented how police, under constant internal and external pressures to provide knowledge, continually try to refine their communication formats (Ericson and Haggerty 1997). Aware that offence classifications and counts affect the appearance of efficiency and, ultimately, organizational access to resources, police try to negotiate how they work within reporting systems that rely on use of multiple, routine forms (Ericson and Haggerty 1997).

Increased efforts to protect reputation can have adverse consequences for organizations, and Power (2004, 2007) provides numerous examples of corporate over-defensiveness. While risk management is promoted as increasing organizational efficiency and legitimacy, preoccupation with risk management narrows the ability to see beyond predefined risk categories, leads to censorship of data that does not conform to set standards or norms, and therefore curtails development of rational, effective solutions to new problems. Overemphasis on risk management contributes to organizational cultures of blame and fear that also weaken willingness to experiment or critique accepted ways of doing things; complex solutions and long-term goals are dismissed in favour of more pragmatic solutions that can be readily, quantifiably measured. However, despite all precautions, reputation remains subject to dynamic social forces and fluctuations. Power’s work invites further theoretical and empirical study to unpack reputational risk management processes in different fields, and such studies will help inform how organizations can intelligently cope with some degree of failure or mistake and boldly experiment with new management strategies.

Understanding substance abuse as a correctional priority

Before delving into the case study, it is important to note that substance abuse is a major area of concern for CSC. The organization’s documents often cite the statistic that approximately 80% of federal offenders have substance use problems (Grant, Kunic, MacPherson, McKeown, and Hansen 2003). Substance abuse is regarded by CSC as a criminogenic need area, a domain that contributes to criminal offending, and this framing is based on empirical evidence (Andrews and Bonta 2006). Substance abuse is, thus, an important primary risk to be managed by CSC, an organization tasked with maintaining secure custody and safely returning offenders to communities. Non-prescribed

psychoactive substances are strictly prohibited inside all federal institutions. A strong commitment to zero-tolerance enforcement can be found in the 2007 *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* report by the CSC Review Panel (CSC Review Panel 2007).² The report, which sparked the development of CSC's Transformation Agenda, lists "eliminating drugs from prison" as one of five key areas to be improved in order to allow the organization to provide "greater public safety results to Canadians" (CSC Review Panel 2007: vi). In 2008, the Minister of Public Safety announced that \$120 million would be invested over five years to support CSC's anti-drug efforts, including expenditures on security and detection technologies (Office of the Correctional Investigator 2012). Given oversight of public spending, generous funding has placed additional pressure on CSC to appear responsive to substance abuse, measure the strength of its response, and be accountable. Within this space of responsiveness, gaps between expectations and actual organizational performance can occur, making substance abuse a potential source of reputational risk and therefore a sensitive organizational priority. A recent study on drugs and alcohol in federal prisons, undertaken by a Canadian House of Commons committee that reviews policy and programs of public safety agencies, nicely illustrates the political and public interest in how CSC manages what is framed as "an alarming problem" (Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security 2012).

In terms of responsiveness on the research front, CSC established in 1999 and officially opened in 2001 an Addictions Research Centre (ARC), located in Prince Edward Island (PEI), to conduct research on substance-abuse-related issues in corrections and provide relevant training opportunities (Grant 2001). ARC's varied projects have included evaluations of CSC's substance abuse treatment programs, a redesign of substance abuse assessment procedures, and the identification of substance use needs among offender populations (CSC 2010) – projects that have sometimes been conducted in partnership with other CSC sectors or government departments, non-governmental agencies (including community and health services), and academics. According to its role statement, ARC was "committed to enhancing corrections policy, programming and management practices on substance abuse through the creation and dissemination of knowledge and expertise" (Grant 2001: 30). A quick perusal of CSC/ARC reports on substance abuse (e.g., Gobeil 2009; Grant et al. 2003; MacPherson 2004) confirms the stated commitment to evidence-based understanding of offender addictions and enhancement of institutional responses. Given my

research interests, it seemed most appropriate to begin my relationship with CSC by targeting ARC.

Access as a case study: Signs of reputational risk management

My introduction to ARC was facilitated by connections I had developed from working at an addictions and mental health organization. I first contacted ARC in late 2009 and was advised that ARC co-hosted a National Summer Institute on Addictions. In July 2010, I attended the sixth institute in PEI. I met other attendees, including senior personnel, and explained to them that I hoped to learn from CSC employees what in-prison approaches to substance abuse (e.g., enforcement, treatment programs including methadone maintenance) are perceived by staff to be working, what gaps may exist between official protocol and actual practice, and what is the perceived organizational willingness to explore alternative approaches (e.g., in-prison safer drug use education and infectious disease prevention programs). I was invited to visit ARC's facility after the event, where I learned that ARC housed an extensive body of archival data. During this visit, I received encouragement from other researchers to pursue my research, which would examine CSC's responses to substance abuse. I became formally engaged in CSC's research application process in fall 2010.

In October 2010, I received an e-mail from CSC's Prairie Region regarding a preliminary interview request I made that had been forwarded. The e-mail stated that, "Research is a carefully monitored activity within CSC" and advised that I must submit a formal research application and go through the review process, "which can take a number of months" (15 October 2010). This was an early indication that correctional staff were instructed to seek approval before participating in research and to immediately report any requests. The e-mail included, as attachments, CD 009 on research, accompanying guidelines, and a Prairie Region research application. CD 009 included the objective "to conduct research in support of correctional policies and practices that reduce reoffending" (Commissioner of the CSC 2004a), while the guidelines defined research as "the systematic, controlled investigation into a subject to provide an organized body of knowledge" (Commissioner of the CSC 2004b). These statements draw boundaries around the types of investigations that are permitted. I considered how I might work within or around the boundaries created by the stated policy objective and definition of research. In other words, these statements started to (re)frame my research from the outset.

I submitted a research application to the Prairie Region headquarters in January 2011. The application form indicated that the approval process normally takes approximately six to eight weeks, with a potentially longer timeframe for research pertaining to staff. Fortunately, three weeks later, I received preliminary reviewer feedback. The reviewers requested more detail about participants and my recruitment strategy, more discussion of what the literature shows regarding substance use trends, and whether my focus would be CSC's "core" substance abuse programming or would include other types of interventions (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous groups, chaplain assistance). The reviewers suggested that I consider speaking with security intelligence officers to explore organized crime and gang presence within prisons as challenges to how CSC delivers substance abuse interventions. The reviewers further commented that it would be interesting to compare current approaches across institutional security levels and asked if I would offer recommendations as to how CSC can better meet the needs of high-security offenders. I interpreted these suggestions as the reviewers taking steps to shape my proposal in line with organizational priorities, given that organized crime and gangs have become major concerns for CSC and the delivery of intensive interventions to "high-risk/high-need offenders" is organizationally important ([CSC Review Panel 2007](#)).

While I was revising my application, concurrent correspondence with the regional office and the Research Branch at National Headquarters (NHQ) revealed that proposals with a national scope must be submitted to the Research Branch. Since I was planning to approach staff across regions, I decided to tailor my application for NHQ and my file in the Prairies was closed accordingly. A comment I received from the regional office foreshadowed later comments, discussed below, that I received about my proposal; I was advised that I should not expect to hear about variation in how substance abuse programming is implemented because all programs must be implemented in a "standard" way in all institutions across the country. Top-down, standardized rules and practices facilitate appearance of decision-making coordination across an organization ([Vaughan 2005](#)). Stating that program implementation should be the same across all institutions gives an impression of policy and operational consistency; an impression that, if agreed to, might have restricted anyone asking questions about regional or institutional variation in practice.

The Research Branch provided me with a new application template and a list of research proposal assessment criteria employed by CSC,

also found in CD 009. Assessment criteria are, of course, standard in research, but assessment is also a crucial part of risk management, as it covers decision making with an official, quality assurance façade, which can, in turn, help protect an organization when it is faced with an audit or external demands for transparency. Some assessment criteria were fairly standard appraisal criteria that one finds in research grant and ethics protocols (e.g., methodological quality, researcher qualifications). Other criteria were more specific to organizational operation and efficiency (e.g., contribution to the achievement of CSC's mission statement and priorities, level of disruption to implementing correctional objectives, anticipated benefits, and "value for money"). These criteria made it seem as though research – presumably, quantitative research involving easy-to-administer measures and some predictable outcomes – that promises economic value and little disruption (see also [Walters 2003](#)) would have a much better chance of being approved than unstructured, qualitative research. Further, above the signature line, the application stated that

Once a proposal has been approved, where necessary a written agreement between Correctional Service Canada and the researchers shall be drawn up. The written agreement shall comply with the "Privacy Act Use and Disclosure Code, National Parole Board/Correctional Service Canada," and in addition shall include items from CSC Commissioner's Directive 009 (Research).

The "written agreement" component meshes with organizational strategies to reduce and manage risk from external observers (i.e., researchers, in this instance). Such a written agreement could play a role in shaping the content of research findings ahead of time, if certain restrictions were stipulated by the organization. The wording of the agreement reminds the researcher who is applying to keep in mind compliance with CD 009, and this again frames what research should do. Having to sign an agreement about potential research findings may, in fact, deter many external researchers from even applying.

In May 2011, I submitted an application to the Research Branch and was promptly informed that my proposal would be presented to an internal review committee. I was also advised that ARC could provide historical background suitable for my research and was asked if I had the resources to support another visit to PEI. At this stage, I began to view my application as unproblematic and thought that ARC was being facilitative. I then received from ARC a series of suggested responses for the review committee template that included my agreement

regarding closely coordinating with ARC, not using personal identifiers, forwarding copies of all reports that would result from my research to the Research Branch “for information purposes,” and sharing my findings “service-wide through research publications accessible on the Infonet and Internet” (20 May 2011). These suggested responses, directly in line with CD 009 as well, again highlight an organizational strategy that seeks control over external research. Hoping to move my application along, I agreed to the suggestions but asked for clarification regarding timelines and CSC review before publication. I was advised that I would have latitude to publish and present my findings, although was left feeling somewhat unclear about whether CSC would subsequently request any data ownership and, potentially, censor the findings.

During summer 2011, the application review committee requested to see all interview questions and asked for more detail regarding how I would contact correctional staff. I provided sample questions under each identified topic area (e.g., substance abuse programming available in institutions). I explained that my questionnaire would be flexible (i.e., not necessarily following a predefined order), yet focused on the identified topic areas. I provided additional detail regarding how I would recruit participants and select institutions. After providing the sample questions and further explanation, I was again asked to send a complete semi-structured interview, though this time the request acknowledged that I could ask probing questions that built upon interviewee responses. I prepared and sent two full interview protocols. Given that the application would have stalled had I not completed these steps, doing so was a necessary part of negotiating formal access and further shaped what my proposed research would be able to explore.

On 24 August 2011, I received e-mail notice that CSC would not support my proposal, and that message included the statement that

[i]t is important for you to know that requesting feedback from within the organization is becoming more and more the practice for our Branch as we aim to ensure that we undertake and support applied research that is viewed as relevant to the operations of the Service.

To fully understand the decision and determine if I could revise my proposal, I requested detailed feedback from the review committee. I received a bulleted list of points in the body of an e-mail (29 August 2011). This list further revealed organizational concerns that align with

scholarly observations of reputational risk management and illustrated how CSC maintains stringent control over research. The review committee comments focused on my research questions and qualitative interview methodology. My proposal outlined six research questions, the first five of which asked (1) what the operative substance-abuse-related policies and procedures were, (2) how these policies and procedures might have changed over time, (3) what the range of institutional substance abuse programming was and what models that programming was based on, (4) what the goals of substance abuse programming were and how offender progress was monitored, and (5) how substance abuse programming tried to minimize risk of reoffending. The feedback I received indicated that use of interviews to address these questions would not be "necessary or appropriate" given that all policy and program materials (including various CDs) could be found on CSC's Web site, while additional program information could be found in program manuals. It was noted that CSC can release program manuals to non-staff members "under certain circumstances but require individuals to sign a non-disclosure agreement" to protect intellectual property.

I initially interpreted this response as telling me that asking the questions I pitched could result in no new knowledge, which I found puzzling. How could *all* possible information regarding the organization's substance abuse programming be available on the Web site and in the relevant program manuals? What about, for example, emerging challenges and any changes in practice? Closer consideration in light of reputational risk management can help unpack how statements like that above demonstrate falling back to official policy (i.e., more CDs) as a way to legitimate and insulate the organization's decision. While stating that it was possible for more detailed information to be shared via access to the manuals, it was simultaneously made clear that there were limits around sharing, with the vague phrase "under certain circumstances" and a reference to signing a(nother) written agreement.

My sixth research question asked about staff perceptions and roles; essentially, whether CSC program personnel had observed any change in the behaviours and attitudes of offenders participating in substance abuse programming and what roles non-program personnel played in the management of offender substance abuse. This research question was cited as "problematic" because

CSC currently uses a variety of actuarial tools to assess change and the impact of a program, which have been demonstrated to be

more effective than clinical assessment. Accordingly, the basis for asking for opinions is not supported by research.

Use of actuarial tools – consistent with CSC evaluations of substance abuse programming (e.g., [Gendreau and Goggin 1991](#); [Matheson, Doherty, and Grant 2009](#); [Kunic and Varis 2010](#)) – readily fits with risk management that relies on quantitative data and the sort of “trust in numbers” [Power \(2004\)](#) describes. Quantification also suits the CSC guidelines that define research as “systematic, controlled investigation.” Rooted in a history of correctional research that supports actuarial over clinical indicators of change and prediction of risk ([Andrews and Bonta 2006](#); [Hannah-Moffat 2004](#)), such quantitative schemes leave little space for “opinions.” In qualitative research, asking for opinions is a common, useful strategy to learn new information; in this case, new information could be obtained about offender substance use and related challenges to program implementation. From a reputational risk management perspective, however, opinions are unpredictable, subjective, and harder to manage than more static information. Asking for staff perceptions could potentially open a door to problems or criticisms that would demand organizational attention and modification of the status quo. By taking such questions off the table, the organization immediately censors and limits the kind of knowledge that research can produce. Although the explanation is speculative, perhaps I was subject to this action, in part, because CSC was concerned that I might uncover perceived faults or ineffectiveness in their substance abuse policies and programs.

Similarly, I received comments about my proposed interview questions that would focus on participants’ understanding of how CSC’s substance abuse programs have been implemented within institutions. This line of questioning was deemed unnecessary and “problematic because it should essentially be answered ‘according to the policy’ and the Annual Program Plan.” This comment was also applied to my proposed interview questions about observed gaps or tensions between policies and the practices of front line staff, about opportunities for interaction between senior personnel and front line staff regarding substance abuse policy and programming, and about knowledge with reference to alternative approaches for managing offenders who have substance use problems. These comments are as telling about standardized rules and procedures as the comments received during my earlier correspondence with the Prairie Region. The organization already has its preferred answer regarding substance abuse program implementation (i.e., *must* be according to policy

across institutions) and, when this is stated, rigid boundaries are again drawn around the types of questions that researchers are permitted to ask. Again, while the explanation is speculative, there may have been organizational concerns about what information the proposed qualitative research could reveal about program implementation.

The review committee flagged other issues, including sampling and clarification of substance abuse interventions that were of primary interest. I broadly described my proposed sample so as not to exclude any personnel who might have relevant knowledge. I was advised that the terms “non-program” staff and “senior employees” were vague, and that more detail was needed on who would be interviewed. From a risk management lens, additional detail about potential interviewees would better assist CSC in controlling the sharing of organizational information. As well, the comments recommended that I plan to ask interview questions that would be consistent with participants’ duties and expert knowledge. Although these are fair comments, from a methodological standpoint, initial flexibility in the sampling frame assists the researcher to become acquainted with different organizational actors’ knowledge and learn how to draw out relevant points of interest. I noted the need for this flexibility in my proposal. However, the comments indicated that external researchers must have all goals of their proposed research, and all research and interview questions, finalized in advance of seeking CSC approval. To understand the on-the-ground application of in-prison substance abuse policy and programming, I proposed to interview between 30 and 40 current CSC correctional officers and addictions program staff. This sample-size range seemed manageable and surpassed the upper end of sample sizes of 15 to 30 that have been recommended for reaching thematic saturation (Creswell 1998, 2002). My proposed sample was deemed “too small” and the reviewers questioned whether the proposed qualitative method was appropriate, as it appeared to them that I might generalize my findings across CSC substance abuse programs, though I had not indicated that I would make such generalizations. Finally, the reviewers questioned how my research would benefit the organization, in a comment that stated “the benefits to the Correctional Service of Canada are not clearly articulated.” As noted earlier, CSC’s research assessment criteria include “value for money.” Although this was not made explicit, I suspect that my proposed study was viewed as not meeting this criterion, as concrete or financial benefits from qualitative investigations into practice and process are hard to predict or clearly define at the outset of the research.

After reading the comments, I wondered if approaching correctional staff was of greatest concern to the organization. I inquired about modifying my proposal to approach only personnel in the addictions-related research, evaluation, and policy domains at CSC, including people at NHQ. I expressed a strong, continued interest in learning about correctional substance abuse programming development. I was advised that speaking with relevant staff in these areas would require approval from the research review committee. In terms of other sources, while the CSC Web site is public, access to program manuals, as noted above, is at the discretion of the organization. I followed up with my request to view CSC's substance abuse program manuals and was advised to contact the Offender Programs and Reintegration Branch. Permission to view the manuals was denied. Lastly, I requested, several times, samples of successful proposals submitted to ARC by external researchers but never received a response to these inquiries. Despite initially positive indications that my research application would be facilitated, it became evident through follow-up communication with ARC that my proposal would not be granted an opportunity for reapplication.

By turning to stakeholder interviews that I did conduct, I will provide additional evidence of reputational risk in action.

Stakeholder interviews

Methods

In addition to presenting my access experience as a case study,³ I draw on a purposive sample of participants with relevant expertise. Purposive sampling involves the researcher employing her or his judgement to select participants according to a known characteristic (May 1997). Researcher bias is a potential drawback of this approach, but is most likely to interfere when subjective judgements about participant selection are not acknowledged or well informed. I had no previous employment or related experience with the government or corrections but was able to rely on the connections and expertise of my doctoral thesis committee members to assist in locating suitably knowledgeable participants – individuals who had worked for CSC, had years of experience in criminal justice or corrections, and/or likely had knowledge relevant to my research. Once I began contacting people who had worked for or were in some capacity related to CSC, I asked them to provide names of others who might have expert knowledge and could

participate in the study. There was considerable consistency or agreement in the recommendations as to what individuals (and, in a few cases, agencies) to contact. Miles and Huberman (1994) provided a "checklist" of six criteria to evaluate qualitative sampling, which includes asking whether the sampling strategy is appropriate for the research questions, will enable phenomena of interest to appear, and is feasible and ethical. My sampling strategy met these criteria.

Between September 2010 and January 2012, I conducted a total of 16 semi-structured interviews with former CSC senior administrative officials, former CSC front line staff, and external stakeholders. Some participants had work experience as correctional officers or programming staff. Semi-structured interviews allow for a conversational format and enable researchers to explore meanings of concepts in greater depth than in standardized interviews, yet there is more structure and control of content than in unstructured or focused interviews (May 1997). Initial interviewees were asked to suggest specific organizational policies or practices to ask about with future participants, and I incorporated their feedback into the set of interview questions. Although I did not specifically ask about CSC approval for research projects, several participants shared stories about the access process and perceptions of CSC research on substance abuse and other topics.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 9 software⁴ for data management and analysis. Analysis followed steps similar to those outlined in standard qualitative analysis guides (e.g., Corbin and Strauss 2008; Rubin and Rubin 2005), although this was not a grounded theory study, as I employed themes from reputational risk management. All transcripts were closely read and re-read and memos were kept to describe and summarize excerpts that appeared most relevant to or expressed core elements of reputational risk management (e.g., reluctance to approve external research, censorship of findings). Excerpts were also extracted and saved in another file and were read again to check for consistencies and inconsistencies among interviewees.

This research received ethics approval from the University of Toronto. That ethics application was underway when I began making contact with CSC and acknowledged that I would also be seeking CSC's approval. The university approval was received by the time I submitted my full research application to CSC. Once denied access, I

amended the university ethics protocol to include sampling other stakeholders and approval was granted.

Insights on CSC research and (non)transparency

Several interviewees commented on how CSC research in general, including research on substance abuse programming, has become increasingly “in-house” and insular over time. Interviewees with longer occupational histories drew comparisons between past and present approaches that suggested that the way CSC conducts research has changed. Those with knowledge of how the organization operated in the 1980s and 1990s believed that, in the past, CSC had more extensive and open partnerships with external agencies and researchers and engaged in more sharing of knowledge about programming via research forums. A few noted ongoing research partnerships that are active today, which at least give an appearance of openness to external research and perspectives.

[T]here is an exchange . . . CSC has a good training syllabus, they're active recruiters. They've had national symposiums on mental health and corrections and addictions . . . they support the Addictions Research Centre. They've done partnership programs with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (External stakeholder #2)

I know that CSC at one time was holding research forums . . . this is going back probably to around 1989, '90, '91, when the Research Branch occasionally would have a research forum . . . they would invite front line staff – well, front line at the sort of the manager level, perhaps director level – from across the country to these research forums to kind of share information from the research findings in a particular area . . . they used to have actual conferences to share those, but I don't think those have been held for a while now. (External stakeholder #5)

Oh, it [*research*] has become completely in-house and quite irrelevant . . . the research now is really more to . . . try to support the policies of the prison service. You know, it's not really research that's done to challenge what the prison service is doing . . . I think that's completely changed. But again, that's also related to the fact that we're living in a different political kind of environment as well, right. I mean, I always felt . . . every research report that came out of the research department at the time was completely left uncensored. There was never any, you know, never any sort of

attempt to muzzle in any way, but that's just not the case now.
(Former senior administrative official #2)

Many interviewees indicated that contemporary CSC research must fit a broader policy agenda; otherwise, the current political environment stifles it. These interviewees reported that research proposals perceived by CSC as incongruent with or as challenging the organizational agenda and dominant politics would likely be denied approval. These and other comments show that external researchers seeking approval for research that might in any way contribute to critical scholarship on corrections would be disadvantaged. As discussed above, strategies that protect an organization from external critique and preserve accepted ways of doing things are well summarized in the reputational risk management literature. The real-life situation for researchers was described as rife with access barriers.

I've talked to so many community-based researchers who have had like research approved by their funder and by a research ethics board and at the last minute just denied by CSC. (External stakeholder #3)

Well, that's why there isn't any research being done on federal corrections. I mean, that's the real tragedy. Except they do their own psychological research, you know, relating to their programs and that's it. You know, there's nothing else that analyses corrections and correctional policy from, with any reasonable access to the system and that, to me, is just absolutely tragic. It's really a very secret world and one that you would think they would want to encourage that kind of research by others, but they don't. They haven't for a very long time. (External stakeholder #7)

The first excerpt demonstrates a potential strategy (i.e., denial of applications at the "last minute") that could augment the access barriers experienced by researchers (i.e., not enough time to complete a project or design a new proposal). The second notes that access barriers have the "tragic" effect of preventing external researchers from studying corrections. What happens is that the same kinds of research (i.e., psychological-type research on programs) get (re)produced, while opportunities are closed for innovative research or new areas of study.

Access barriers to CSC information also shape how research findings are released. Interviewees discussed instances of non-transparency, censorship, and otherwise stringent control over findings. Several interviewees provided examples of reports that would have been of

interest to my research – in particular, one on prison-based needle and syringe programs and another on CSC’s cancelled pilot “safer tattooing” project. The original versions of these reports purportedly contained positive endorsements for harm reduction programming, but interviewees stated that the originals had disappeared and that report recommendations were heavily edited before release. Difficulty accessing those materials through Access to Information Act and Privacy Act (ATIP) requests was also noted, as the government vets ATIP requests. Given the policy leanings of the Conservative federal government in power at the time of this study, interviewees explained that outsiders would be hard-pressed to obtain contradictory evidence from CSC. Other relevant examples were provided.

In the context of discussing a document that may need ATIP request I suspect they’ll [CSC *will*] be happy to hand you the results of all of their assessments and all of their research that supports what they’re doing, but they’re going to be very reluctant to give you what kind of, you know, I’ve said this before. You can demonstrate almost anything through research if you aim – it depends on how you’re aiming it. They will not want anything that’s going to undermine their public stated result. (Former front line staff #4)

And so those reports [CSC *research reports*] don’t reflect reality . . . they don’t report on incidence of HIV inside prisons. How many people get infected inside, nobody knows because they don’t release those reports. And if they do it, they are not accurate . . . and also that if they come out with the truth, um, that too will have serious consequences for them, right, because people are getting infected inside all the time, every day. (External stakeholder #1)

Consistent with examples in the reputational risk management literature, the examples above were linked to organizational concerns about public perceptions and preferences for research that supports, rather than questions, what the organization is doing. It also seems that there is a tendency to reduce information sharing once a given issue, from the perspective of CSC, appears to have been addressed.

Various concerns were raised about the control or ownership that CSC takes of research, including instances when external researchers have been permitted access. One interviewee spoke from experience about research conducted in federal prisons “independent of CSC,” having observed the organization attempt to “sit on the results.” Others noted

that restrictions are placed on what researchers can do with data they have collected.

I just think it's so hard to do any research with corrections now. It always was hard, but now it's worse than ever and it's very difficult to get information. It's very difficult to keep information. It's very difficult to get the permission for anything and when you do then they own it. And then you find yourself in situations where you've done your work and then you can't use it. (External stakeholder #7)

As I learned from my access experience, written agreements are one tool for implementing such restrictions, and requiring such agreements is likely a strategy to prevent external research.

Some interviewees also mentioned that staff, especially front line staff, represent a difficult-to-access group. I was told that front line staff has little contact with researchers and policy makers within the organization, even when it comes to internal research, though lack of interaction was typically attributed to CSC's hierarchical structure. Interviewees perceived that front line staff would have a considerable amount of useful information to share about substance abuse programming and numerous other matters, but that sharing is limited because opportunities for interaction are greatly limited.

It's a top-down organization and Ottawa feels that if anybody has any questions, Ottawa provides the answers and the people on the ground who are actually doing the work are not supposed to have any input into that. And so, yeah, it's not a happy environment in which to get information out of people . . . The policy guys will pussyfoot around and not tell you very much, but the nurses and the docs on the front line have some very strong opinions about what needs to be done and isn't getting done. (External stakeholder #4)

[Y]ou ask a front line parole officer or a program person . . . someone who delivers a program, if they've ever had any kind of input in terms of the Addictions Research Centre in PEI. Not a chance . . . there's a huge disconnect and the front line person delivering the program or the front line correctional officer or the front line parole officer whatever, they're not engaged in that . . . It's just basically, you know, "Here's the policy" and there's very little input from the people at the bottom. (Former front line staff #6)

These views are congruent with a larger organizational strategy that seeks to minimize disruption to routine operations and institutionally accepted policy.

Finally, a few interviewees added how CSC's research process has led the organization to narrowly look inward when it comes to evaluating its own programs and identifying topics of study. Access barriers have come to deter external researchers from even trying – noted in an earlier quotation as well – and have stifled creativity among in-house researchers.

We've benefitted as much as we can from in-house [research]. It's time now to renew the cycle, start from fresh. In terms of the research, I would stop looking inside and [go] outside or at least spend [more] of the resources, of the budget, researching what exists elsewhere. (Former senior administrative official #1)

[F]or one thing the creative juices aren't there anymore . . . to do creative research that can have an impact in changing policy or changing practice. I mean, that's just not the, that's just not what's being asked for anymore, right. So what you do is you do research that sort of documents . . . the profile of the population and . . . problems that you're dealing with so that you can try to get more funds from treasury boards, you know, that kind of stuff. It's more statistical research than it is true research. (Former senior administrative official #2)

These comments align with Power's suggestions regarding how over-protective reputational risk management ultimately narrows an organization's willingness to see beyond the standard ways of doing things and to find new solutions to problems.

Other implications and considerations for researchers

CSC and other correctional agencies are entitled to carefully monitor research activity that might involve them. What is troubling is that their monitoring activities lead to censorship and appear to be organizational attempts at insulating internal policy and programming from outsider criticism. That said, external critique does have the potential to damage an organization's reputation and, in turn, its legitimacy in the eyes of the general public and its access to resources. Power (2004, 2007) provided several examples of corporate scandals and disasters (e.g., financial mishandling, environmental harm) that

caused irreparable reputational damage to businesses. CSC is certainly not immune from reputational damage, as was powerfully witnessed following the highly publicized case of Ashley Smith, who died in custody. Her case raised many allegations of rights violations and brought to public attention the prison system's failure to effectively and humanely address offender mental health needs ([Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies 2009](#); [Office of the Correctional Investigator 2012](#)). The jury in the coroner's inquest stopped short of finding criminal or civil liability but judged Smith's death a homicide and provided 104 recommendations mostly aimed at how CSC should improve support for female inmates who have mental health issues.⁵ Implementing the full series of recommendations would require a substantial redistribution of resources and overhaul of the "penal status quo" (see [Page 2011](#)). Thus, clamping down on external research access affords some protection from discovery of correctional practices or incidents that may threaten reputation and demand major organizational change. Reputation is inherently unmanageable, and therefore reputational risk is ever-present for organizations ([Power 2007](#)), which makes finding ways out of the overprotective, research-access-denial cycle a challenge.

Although my experience seems part of a common pattern with CSC ([Martel 2004](#); [Yeager 2008](#)), and other researchers have abandoned multi-year projects due to state control over research design and findings (e.g., [Cohen and Taylor 1978](#)), I would not recommend that future researchers despair in the face of prison research access barriers. As the reputational risk literature has noted, and some interviewees also mentioned, a serious potential downside of the failure to let in external researchers is the curtailment of innovation and new solutions to problems. Given the importance of understanding contemporary correctional practices, researchers should be as persistent as they can be, in light of their time constraints and resources, and importantly, consider newer methods and concepts to navigate through the access process. In terms of methods, ATIP requests may yield valuable information, in some circumstances. ATIP requests can result in retrieving classified information or hard-to-find documents, including documents that reveal backstage government or organizational processes ([Larsen and Walby 2012](#); [Walby and Larsen 2011](#)). ATIP requests might have been a viable route to learn more about CSC substance abuse programming. I opted not to prepare such requests during the course of this research because I was in the middle stages of a doctoral program, with time and financial constraints attached, and was already engaged in what could have turned into an even more

time-consuming process of trying to secure access to CSC personnel (see also [Yeager 2006](#)). ATIP can sometimes involve long delays and mounting fees, and requests do not always lead to identifying or receiving the information sought (e.g., sometimes heavily redacted documents are returned). My research also began in a rather exploratory manner and it would have been difficult early in the process to specify documents in enough detail to facilitate ATIP requests. Nevertheless, employing ATIP can “get at the texts behind the rhetoric, as well as the texts used in coordinating government practices” ([Walby and Larsen 2011](#): 626) and, in hindsight, had time permitted, this method could have served as a useful, adjunct strategy. Indeed, in another study based on this research, I examined the ATIP-obtained materials about in-prison harm reduction programs that others shared with me, and those documents tellingly suggest that evidence suppression lies behind CSC’s (non)reporting of outcomes that would challenge prevailing political agendas ([Watson 2014](#)). The [Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada \(OICC\)](#) had given CSC an F-grade in 2008–9 for its level of compliance with ATIP requests ([OICC 2010](#)), but by 2010–11 CSC’s performance had improved because its deemed refusal rate and average time to complete requests had been reduced ([OICC 2012](#)).⁶ Such ATIP failures (see, also, “[Feds ‘not the most transparent’](#)” [2013](#)) can also be regarded as evidence of a larger pattern, noted at the beginning of this paper, of government non-transparency and non-sharing of information with external researchers. This pattern is highly worthy of investigation as well.

Regarding concepts, I invite researchers to continue to refine understandings of reputational risk from [Power’s work \(2004, 2007\)](#), particularly within the context of criminological research access. If passionate and patient enough to carry out proposed research with CSC or similar organizations, researchers could try to use these understandings to their advantage. Of course, it is impossible to determine whether I would have gained access had I approached my research differently, perhaps more strategically in terms of, for example, how I framed my research questions – mine was, like previous studies, very much a learning-the-hard-way experience. I am not suggesting that researchers abandon their hopes of doing projects that might contribute nuanced understandings of processes and potential variations in institutional practice, as there is much value in qualitative research on prisons (see [Liebling 1999](#)), and broader scholarship would benefit from more of this work. It would, however, be useful for researchers to familiarize themselves with the CDs and guidelines at the very beginning of their projects and find ways, if possible, to mention organizational priorities,

operations (e.g., minimal disruption), and anticipated organizational benefits in their proposals. Further, reputational risk is one facet, albeit a key facet, of [Power's \(2004, 2007\)](#) work on organizational risk management. It would be fruitful to study in depth how other, related organizational risk management elements, like internal control systems and auditing, may or may not apply and what we can further learn about research access.

Finally, other changes linked to budgetary concerns are occurring as well, including a recent change internal to CSC that is specific to research on substance abuse. In June 2012, the Government of Canada announced that CSC would be "consolidating addictions research activities" and ARC would be closing, and that the closure would result in taxpayer savings of \$1.6 million (see [Public Safety Canada 2013](#)). This announcement was met with little public attention or fanfare. Subsequent to learning the news, I contacted ARC about the status of research projects that were underway or planned. Their response indicated uncertainty about which projects would continue during the consolidation; all ARC staff received letters and would be unemployed by April 2014 unless willing to move. It is possible that the impending closure was already known by some senior personnel during my contact with ARC and affected openness to new research proposals. The dismantling of a dedicated research facility raises important questions about the future of substance-abuse-related research in federal corrections. A highly costs-savings-conscious government may no longer see substance abuse research in corrections as "value for money," despite the continuing high rates of offenders with substance use issues. With the national Research Branch taking over substance abuse research, external researchers may encounter even greater organizational oversight and tighter control – though this is speculative and worthy of study. Hopefully, my account of access as a case of reputational risk management opens new reflective space for future researchers and offers ideas that may assist them in understanding and, ultimately, getting through the gates of hard-to-access correctional organizations.

Notes

- 1 The author wishes to thank the interview participants for their time and willingness to share their perspectives.
- 2 It is worthwhile to note that this report has been highly contested. See also [Jackson and Stewart 2009](#).

- 3 Although the case setting was not selected in advance to answer a particular research question or set of questions, some readers may find literature on traditional case study methodology informative regarding the utility and validity of case studies, including the use of cases to build and test theory (e.g., Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2014).
- 4 NVivo software is a standard and practical qualitative research tool for storing, organizing, and coding unstructured data. More information can be found at www.qsrinternational.com
- 5 For a sample news story and a link to the jury verdict and recommendations, see [Canadian Press, National Post Staff, and Postmedia News 2013](#).
- 6 For more information, consult [OICC 2010](#) and [OICC n.d.](#) However, it should be noted that the assessment of CSC only improved to a D grade. There was an increase in the number of complaints about CSC that the OICC received.

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