

## Ethical issues in autoethnography

Asking permission to interview oneself may seem rather strange but, in fact, autoethnography is not just about the researcher him/herself.

When researchers reflect on their experiences in one or more aspects of their life, it is inevitable that other people will have been affected/influenced/helped/hindered/etc. in some way by the experience/s being researched. This generally involves what one researcher called *'interactions with unidentified others'*.

The issue, then, is how unidentifiable those others will really be. Sometimes people don't mind being identified at all (usually if the topic of the research is non-controversial, e.g. the technical aspects of mixing a CD; or if the person is shown in a very positive light), but when the topic is controversial or the individual is shown in a negative light, that person's response may well be quite different ...

Attached is a very useful document created by Ryerson University, in which some of the critical issues for autoethnographers are highlighted in yellow. The ethical issues of this type of research relate essentially to two questions:

1. How will the researcher ensure the anonymity of those people whose involvement is included in the study's reflections?
2. Assuming the researcher cannot ensure this (which is often the case), how will the researcher obtain these people's consent?

The other issue to consider is just the usual one of consent which would apply in a 'normal' ethnographic research project. Researchers, even for low risk projects, generally need to submit at least a standard minimal risk application – including the consent of those who will be commented on – unless they are able to convince the ethics committee reviewing their application they can make the 'others' truly unidentifiable. This is often very difficult, especially given that autoethnography by its very nature tends to be extremely subjective.

**Note:** The following pages consist of a guideline that has been borrowed from Toronto Metropolitan University (Canada) (formerly Ryerson University). While this is an international university, the document provides some further information that you may find useful for your autoethnography.

## RYERSON UNIVERSITY Research Ethics Board Guideline

### Autoethnography

#### Definitions

Autoethnography (AE) differs from traditional ethnography as it connects the researcher's personal and often subjective experiences to wider socio-cultural and political contexts and meanings. In ethnographic research, typically, the culture of a group is explored and better understood through long-term engagement of a researcher, participant observations and interviews. Autoethnography instead presents the subjective of the researcher in relation to others and to broader social or cultural meanings and understandings, rather than the experiences of others.

Protecting the privacy of others in autoethnographic research may be more difficult than in other kinds of research. Additionally, there are few clear guidelines for researchers conducting AE studies that directly address the ethical concerns in this type of research method (Chang, 2003; Tolich, 2010). While the method may be quite different from other kinds of qualitative research, it remains that others mentioned in the text of an AE have the same rights as any human participant in any research project.

In light of this, AE raises two specific and related ethical concerns, namely (a) informed consent and (b) protecting confidentiality while respecting the privacy of others.

#### (a) Informed consent

The doctrine of informed consent is grounded in the respect for the autonomy of others. Researchers must respect that persons have the right to exercise autonomous decisions over what happens to them in a variety of contexts, including participation in research. Informed consent involves two key elements: being fully informed and being freely able to make a clear choice to take part or not take part without negative sequelae.

**While AE emphasizes the perspective and subjective experience of the researcher, those who are also involved, while they may not be categorized as traditional participants, should be provided with an opportunity to provide full and informed consent.**

*The Position Statement on Qualitative Research and IRBs* (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007) is a set of ethical guidelines for qualitative research, which has, in many jurisdictions, been accepted over documents such as the Common Rule in the USA as it outlines, in a clear and accessible manner, straightforward ethical considerations for those employing methods that are "evocative, emotionally engaging, and more subjective". (Tolich, 2010, p. 4).

While it is an American-based guideline, the ethical considerations are those that are relevant across borders.

The following are two elements in the *Position Statement* relevant to obtaining informed consent:

“Respect participants’ autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation, and document the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry.

Provide for and encourage communication with participants and respond to respondents’ requests for information, withdrawal, or modifications to consent agreements in a timely and appropriate manner.”

Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (2007)

Furthermore, Ellis (2007) as cited in Tolich (2010) note that researchers conducting autoethnographic research should practice what they refer to as “process consent,” checking in with those who have provided consent, at each stage of the research, to make sure participants still wish to take part, as the project evolves. In any research project, consent is considered to be a dynamic process and researchers must take special care to ensure that informed consent, provided prior to participation, continues throughout the life of the project.

Assumed or presumed consent is, usually, not enough in order to meet the requirements of fully informed consent. Nor is retrospective consent acceptable, as it can create undue pressure on persons who researchers approach to seek consent, after already collecting data. Informed consent process must be rigorous and must ensure that the participant has reasonable information about participation (including the purpose of the study, what it means to take part, potential risks and benefits, how their privacy will be protected, details regarding the voluntary nature of participation including how to withdraw from participating, and full information about the rights and responsibilities of a participant).

(b) Respecting the privacy of others

One risk in taking part in research is the potential social risk of being exposed, or having one’s opinions or words presented in a way that is embarrassing, or that presents an element of potential risk to participants.

In many small groups and communities, it may be quite easy to identify or feel that someone is identifiable by details or information about a person provided that may serve as a unique identifier, even without a name (e.g. role, title, position, gender, age, etc.). This is a particular concern in smaller communities or groups in which the potential for identification is increased, thus placing an obligation on the researcher to ensure two things.

First, the researcher must ensure that persons who may be involved in an autoethnographic project have a clear opportunity, before research begins, to provide informed consent to be included in such a project. Second, the researcher must take measures, in publishing or presenting their research, that they protect the confidentiality of persons who might be mentioned in publications or presentations. Details regarding how confidentiality will be protected should be part of an informed consent process. Persons, who may be mentioned or included in the publication or presentation of an autoethnographic project, should have the opportunity to provide consent and, therefore, agree to the provisions provided to protect confidentiality throughout the life of a project.

It is always recommended that you consult with others, including the Research Ethics Board, when anticipating ethical issues in conducting an autoethnography.

**Additional Resources:**

Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (2007). *The Position Statement on Qualitative Research and IRBs*.

Chang (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 3-29. doi:10.1177/1077800406294947

Tolich, M. (2010). *A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers*. *Qualitative Health Research*. doi: 10.1177/1049732310376076