Conducting Autoethnographic Research

YU RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS GUIDELINES

Preamble:

Autoethnographic research, where the researcher is the "participant" of the research and uses their personal experiences as the source of data, carries its unique ethical considerations and issues. These ethical issues can have greater consequences for the autoethnographic researcher and for other individuals involved the researchers' stories (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Tulis 2022). This guideline is developed to assist researchers in remaining reflective, reflexive, and purposeful in conducting Autoethnographic Research. It serves as a reference point for helping researchers to appraise key ethical considerations and make decisions when using autoethnography as a distinct research method.

Autoethnography as a Research Method:

Autoethnography is a widely used research methodology and practice whereby a researcher "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011: 273). In this method, researchers are likely to draw heavily upon personal memory and experience as the main sources of research data (Adams et al., 2016: 3) Some of the research techniques of data collection associated with autoethnography but are not limited to are listed below:

- To conduct self-observations and jotting on your own observations as field notes;
- To chronologically list major events or experiences from your life that pertain to your research topic, in which you describe these events and how they contributed to your cultural self-discovery, why they are important in your life.
- To develop self-reflective data, in which you journal your reflections about your experience and perceptions related to the topic;
- To ask yourself a series of questions related to certain memories and experience, to record and to transcribe your answers to those questions for later analyses;
- To have access to and use external data, such as photographs, letters, diaries, reports, and other documents or artifacts that are pertinent to your study.

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Is Autoethnographic Research Subject to Ethics Review?

In Autoethnographic Research, the person conducting the research serves as both the researcher, and as one of the human participants. Autoethnographic study when conducted for the purpose of research falls within the scope of TCPS-2 and requires REB review (Panel on Research Ethics (PRE) interpretation #13, 2024). The researcher may be the sole participant, e.g., a researcher writing a self-study of their experience camping alone in the woods. In such applications, the REB will assess the level of risk that the researcher is willing to assume to themself.

Assessing the Risks and Benefits to the Researcher/Participant:

Conducting autoethnographic research can have consequences for the researcher's present and future vulnerability (Ellis, 2007; Tolich, 2010). Before embarking on autoethnographic research, investigators should assess of the potential costs and benefits of their research and address them in their ethics application. While not an exhaustive list, some associated risks are described below for consideration:

- While re-engaging and interrogating past experiences may prove cathartic, it can also generate intense challenging emotions that require attention, even professional therapy (Chatham Carpenter, 2010; Tolich, 2010; Tullis et al., 2009; Tullis 2022: 106). Writing about events in their past can bring researchers back into the pain and hurt experienced at that time as well as the joys.
- Autobiographical work may negatively impact on how the researcher experiences the present and their relationships with others. The researcher may become uncomfortable about what they learn about themselves and others. They may experience feelings of shame, uncertainty and self-loathing. As such, researchers should elaborate on the emotional and physical costs involved in writing about their life (Ellis, 2007).
- Researchers should consider the afterlife of a published narrative and be mindful of the possible negative consequences that may arise because of conducting autoethnographic research (TMU, 2017). Once written, autoethnographic work is subjected to the scrutiny of others in the classroom, at conferences, while undergoing peer review, or when presenting findings to community and organization members (Tullis, 2022).

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- It is important for researchers to think carefully about not disclosing things about themselves that they would not want others to know. This typically includes embarrassing items, intimate information, and stories that may have legal and/or professional implications. In cases where researchers wish to reveal sensitive information about themselves, they should consider implementing safeguards to protect their own confidentiality (e.g., publishing the document using a pseudonym, incorporating pseudonyms for all participants, changing the names of towns, and schools) (TMU 2017).

Involvement of Other 'Participants' in Autoethnographic Research:

Even though autoethnographic research starts with the researcher's personal experiences and memory, the self is always studied and explored in context of relationships and situations with others. Thus, autoethnographic research ultimately implicates others (Tullis, 2022: 103). As Ellis (2007), states "When we write about ourselves, we also write about others" (p. 14). The "others" who appear in autoethnographies may be partners, friends, family, students, colleagues, neighbors, community members etc. Thus, many self-studies may also involve others with whom the researcher interacts. (Ellis, 2007).

Depending on the level of involvement of others in the research, they may be considered research participants as defined in the Policy (Application of Article 2.1). If the REB, York University's REB, determines that the autoethnographic research involves others who may be seen as research participants (i.e., a person whose data plays a role in answering the research question), the researcher should describe how they plan to manage the consent process.

Getting informed Consent:

Getting informed consent from participants is consistent with a commitment to respect participants' autonomy, honors the voluntary nature of participation, and ensures documentation of the informed consent processes.

- Researchers must seek participants' consent to participate in the autoethnography. In general, if the material on which autoethnography is based (e.g., journal entries, recollections) was not originally intended for research, but is later proposed for research purposes, then the consent of the individual(s) and/or communities involved, if any, must be sought (Panel on Research ethics, 2024). Researchers

conducting autoethnographic research must follow all the standard guidelines laid out in Chapter 3 on Consent in the TCPS 2 (TMU 2017).

- Researchers must secure informed consent as early in the process as possible to avoid conflicts of interest or consenting under duress (Tolich, 2010). This means that prior to researchers beginning to write their first draft, researchers must obtain initial consent from their participants.
- At the time of initial consent, researchers will typically only have a working idea regarding the way in which participants will feature in their autobiographical reflections, thus researchers should provide participants with opportunities to reaffirm their consent throughout the duration of their project. This entails that the researcher provides:

    (i) their participants with opportunities to reaffirm their consent with respect to any major changes in how participants are being featured in their project,

    (ii) researchers provide their participants with the opportunity to reaffirm their consent once a final draft is completed, and before the research project is disseminated to afford those who appear in autoethnographies an opportunity to comment upon and correct interpretations and observations, as well as rescind their participation completely (Tolich,2010).

- Given that participants' information and data is being used without participants actively disclosing information about themselves, researchers should practice process consent, as described above, to help ensure voluntary participation throughout the project.
- In some cases, during the self-reflective and writing process, individuals conducting autoethnographic research may realize that someone who was not initially considered to be a research participant – i.e., a person whose data plays a role in answering the research question – should be considered a research participant. In such a case, researchers must (I) notify the Office of Ethics (ORE) as soon as possible at ore@yorku.ca and (II) suspend all research related activities immediately. The REB will then advise researchers on how to proceed.

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- In cases where acquiring consent may be impossible or impracticable (such as deceased, or difficult to track participants), the researcher may request an alteration to consent requirements, if they satisfy the REB that all the requirements in Article 5.5A of the TCSP are met. In such cases the researcher must respect relevant privacy laws, regulations and institutional policies and should consider protecting the identity and confidentiality participants (see some strategies in the next section).

Protecting Identity and Confidentiality of Other Participants:

Anonymity and confidentiality are complex issues for all qualitative researchers. This complexity is intensified when it comes to autoethnography because if the author is known (i.e., not anonymous) then the anonymity and confidentiality of the characters/persons in the story can be very difficult to maintain.

- There are several strategies researchers can employ for protecting the identity of those who appear in autoethnographic research, including but not limited to:
    i. Giving individuals pseudonyms or changing a person's demographic information (e.g., age, race, sex)
    ii. Creating composite characters by collapsing several people into one,
    iii. Fictionalizing parts of a narrative to disguise time and place, building some distance between the facts of an event and the researcher (Ellis 2004, Ellis 2007).
- When auto ethnographers tell stories that reveal what knowable others have said or done to them, or to others, in various 'natural' settings such as a family or community gatherings which might have been deemed 'private' at the time, anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed and this should be stated on the Informed Consent Form.
- Researchers should not disclose things about other participants in their autoethnographic project that one would not reasonably want others to know. This includes embarrassing items, revealing/intimate information, and stories that may have legal and/or professional implications (TMU 2017).

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