



## Autoethnography and Research Ethics at OCAD University

### Purpose

To provide Research Ethics Board (REB) guidance on the conduct of autoethnographic research at OCAD University. It is important to note that when pursuing an answer to a research question, any individual (including the researcher) who features or provides data are considered human participants for REB purposes. These individuals should therefore be afforded the same rights as all human participants ([Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 \[2018\]](#)), namely, justice, concern for welfare, and respect for the individual.

### Definitions:

“Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*).” (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).

Furthermore, Richardson (in 2000a) proposes five criteria for evaluating autoethnographic research:

1. Substantive contribution - Application to the understanding of wider cultural/political/social experiences.
2. Aesthetic merit
3. Reflexivity - that is, the research process includes the perspective, reactions, and motivations of the researcher
4. The impact a narrative causes the reader
5. How much the narrative expresses a reality

### Guidelines:

Here are some opening questions for the autoethnographer:

1. Given that every individual is embedded in networks of social relations, how will you protect yourself and other human actors that may feature in the autoethnography?
2. Are there potential conflicts of interest in seeking consent or permissions from incidental or unexpected participants after the research is complete?
3. Must REB approval for research involving human participants include the researchers themselves as participants? If not, why not? If so, how will consent be sought?

In the past, autoethnographic research has generally not required OCAD U REB review. Its growing use as a method in data collection and analysis, however, has raised a number of questions that indicate a

need for ethical oversight to protect both the individuals who appear in the research, and to protect researchers themselves as participants. The following guidelines are derived from (Tolich, 2010), and the TCPS2 (2018).

### **1. Risk** ([ref. TCPS2, Chapter 2B](#))

In developing a research plan using autoethnography, and before any activities are undertaken, the researcher must assess the risk of potential harm to themselves and to persons who may appear in the conduct and presentation of research. The nature of the harm may be social, behavioral, psychological, physical or economic.

Risk is a function of the probability of the occurrence of harm and its relative magnitude to participants. A proper ethical analysis of research should consider both foreseeable risks and available methods for mitigating those risks.

### **2. Vulnerability**

*Autoethnographers should not publish anything they would not show the persons mentioned in the text* (Medford, 2006).

All researchers conducting studies involving humans have a duty to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all their participants. Researchers conducting autoethnographic research must therefore follow guidelines laid out in [Chapter 5 of the TCPS 2](#).

In addition, autoethnographers should be aware of the unique challenges they face in protecting the privacy and confidentiality of both non-active participants and themselves. A researcher's experiential presence in the research design can obscure the location and nature of risk, making an objective or dispassionate stance more difficult.

With respect to future vulnerabilities, for example, it is important for researchers to carefully consider the eventual disclosure of personal information, which may include embarrassing or intimate information, or anecdotes with legal, social, or professional implications. Such data may become irretrievable depending on research dissemination and data retention plans.

In cases where researchers wish to reveal sensitive information (about other participants or themselves), they should consider implementing safeguards to protect confidentiality (e.g., using a pseudonym, incorporating pseudonyms for all participants, changing the names of towns, schools, etc.).

### **3. Confidentiality and Privacy of Non-Active Participants:**

*It is important for researchers to be especially careful in the way participants are represented in their autoethnographic research. Assume all people mentioned in the text will read it one day. (Ellis, 1995a).*

Autoethnographic researchers should not disclose things about any participant in their project that they would not reasonably want others to know, including intimate information or anecdotes with legal, social, or professional implications. In addition, autoethnographic projects centred within small groups or communities must recognize that it can be a simple matter to identify individuals and locations, even if no clearly identifying information is presented.

Researchers conducting autoethnographic research may also realize that someone who was not initially considered to be a research participant (a person whose data plays a role in answering the research question) actually is a participant. In such a case, researchers must suspend all research-related activities immediately, and consult with the REB as soon as possible.

Collecting and analyzing the data of individuals that participate, but were not adequately informed of potential risks, or have not consented to the research is a violation of their rights and may be deemed research misconduct. The REB can advise researchers on how to proceed.

### **4. Consent**

*Researchers must respect participants' autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation and document the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007).*

Researchers must follow the general principles of obtaining consent from human participants laid out in [Chapter 3A of the TCPS2](#), and apply these principles to anyone who appears in their research, whether they play an active role in the research activities or not.

While the conduct of autoethnographic research implies tacit consent from the researcher as both participant and data collector, it is important that the researcher is able to demonstrate to the research community their full knowledge of what participation entails, including the scope of activities, risks and benefits, issues of privacy and confidentiality, and a data management plan ([ref. TCPS2, Article 3.2](#)).

At the time of initial consent, the researcher may have only a rough idea of the ways in which participants will feature in their reflections. Nevertheless, researchers must provide participants with opportunities to reaffirm consent throughout the duration of the project.

Researchers must also provide participants with documented opportunities to reaffirm consent:

1. In case of major changes in how participants are being featured in their project
2. Once a final draft is completed, and before the research project is disseminated.

Retroactive consent is not permitted as it generates undue pressure on participants to agree to participate in research-related activities. The importance of ongoing consent with respect to autoethnographic research therefore cannot be understated.

#### Additional Resources

[Introduction: Decolonizing Autoethnography](#) by Devika Chawla and Ahmet Atay

[The ethics of autoethnography](#) by Elizabeth Dauphinee

[Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography](#) by Judith C. Lapadat

#### References:

Adams, Tony E.; Holman Jones, Stacy; Ellis, Carolyn (2015). Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 101. ISBN 978-0-19-997209-8.

Ellis, Carolyn (2004). The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Holman Jones, Stacy (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp.763-791). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Richardson, L. (2000a). Evaluating ethnography. Qualitative Inquiry, 6, 253-255.

Tolich, Martin (2010). A critique of current practice: ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers. Qualitative Health Research 20(12):1599-610 doi: 10.1177/1049732310376076. Epub 2010 Jul 21.



## Autoethnography Research Ethics Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to help you consider the approach, potential risks and structure of your research study. Please read the accompanying document “Autoethnography and Research Ethics at OCAD University”.

**Research** - *Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).* (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).

1. Does your intended research fall under the definition of “autoethnography”?
2. What is the substantive contribution of your intended research? In other words, how does it apply to the understanding of wider cultural/political/social experiences?

**Risk** - Risk is a function of the probability of the occurrence of harm and its relative magnitude to participants. A proper ethical analysis of research should consider both foreseeable risks and available methods for mitigating those risks. The nature of the harm may be social, behavioral, psychological, physical or economic. ([ref. TCPS2, Chapter 2B](#))

1. Are you able to objectively assess the potential risks and harms that may arise in the conduct and presentation of the research?
  - a) What might the potential harms be to you, the researcher?
  - b) What might the potential harms be to incidental participants – i.e. persons who may appear in the conduct and presentation of research?
  - c) How might you protect them from potential risk or harm?
  - d) How might you communicate the possible risks and risk management plans to incidental participants?

**Vulnerability** - *Autoethnographers should not publish anything they would not show the persons mentioned in the text* (Medford, 2006). ([ref. TCPS2, Article 4.7](#))

1. Who are the incidental participants in the intended research? In other words, are there persons who are not the focus of the research but may be involved in the conduct and presentation of the research?
  - a) Have you considered whether or not incidental participants have the capacity to understand what it means to be included in your research (e.g. exposure to potential harm, loss of privacy, etc.)?
  - b) Have you considered how your relationship with incidental participants impacts the sharing of information between you (the researcher) and them (incidental participants)?

- c) Have you considered the possible repercussions of the eventual disclosure of personal information, which may include embarrassing or intimate information, or anecdotes with potential legal, social, or professional implications?

**Confidentiality and Privacy of Non-Active Participants** - *It is important for researchers to be especially careful in the way participants are represented in their autoethnographic research. Assume all people mentioned in the text will read it one day.* (Ellis, 1995a). ([ref. TCPS2, Chapter 5](#))

1. What measures will you take to protect the privacy and confidentiality of persons who may appear in the conduct and presentation of research?
2. What is your data management plan? (ref. [OCADU Libguide Research Data Management](#))

**Consent** - *Researchers must respect participants' autonomy and the voluntary nature of participation and document the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry* (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007). ([ref. TCPS2, Chapter 3A](#))

1. Have you considered who you might need to obtain consent from?
2. How will consent be obtained, documented, and reaffirmed through the duration of the project?