



Chapter 11

Self and Others

Ethics in Autoethnographic Research

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I'll just write an autoethnography. Maybe you've heard your graduate school peers or faculty colleagues utter these words when faced with the frustrations of trying to gain access to a research site, when filling out Institutional Review Board (IRB; also sometimes called Human Subjects Committee) applications or when trying to recruit seemingly elusive study participants. Doing autoethnography sounds like an easy solution to the myriad bureaucratic, social, political, and regulatory hoops through which scholars must jump to conduct human subjects research. And on its face, it may also appear an easy way to side-step the ethics review process to recruit and engage with others. Deciding, however, to write about or perform your own experiences as a way to understand certain aspects of culture does not eliminate or resolve ethical issues. Nor does it erase the need to engage with others. In fact, using the Self as the primary focus of research—as researcher, informant, and author (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Tolich, 2010)—may actually lead to more and more complex ethical dilemmas, some of which may or may not undergo the scrutiny and supervision of an IRB review. Many researchers can collect their data and never return to the field or face their participants again. Scholars who decide to perform or write about culture using their personal experiences will find those performances and manuscripts become permanent records of once private feelings and thoughts that, once set in motion, cannot be revised (Adams, 2008). This dynamic research environment, which uniquely

rethens researchers to their texts, requires a type of ethical engagement that is highly contextual, contingent, and primarily relational.

A Bit about Me

To begin this discussion about ethics and autoethnography, I should start by explaining my own relationship to this method. In 2009, I completed my doctoral studies in Communication at the University of South Florida, known for its specialization in qualitative research methods, especially autoethnography, narrative, and performance. For full disclosure, I think it's also important for readers of this chapter to know that Dr. Carolyn Ellis, a professor of Communication and Sociology, whom many consider foundational to the proliferation of autoethnography, chaired my dissertation committee. I also took four classes with her, including a doctoral seminar in Autoethnography, and more important than any of these facts, I consider her a mentor and a friend.

I'd like to think I was one of Carolyn's favorite students despite the A- grades I regularly earned in her classes—I promise I'm not bitter—but I can say with certainty that any student of Carolyn's understands her commitment to doing all research, but especially autoethnography, *ethically*. I know the readings and class discussions that focused on ethics left an indelible mark on me because I can hear myself channeling Carolyn when advising my own students. In fact, just days ago, one of my advisees came to me to discuss the possibility of changing the topic of her Master's thesis to an autoethnography about a fifteen-year-old family trauma. My primary questions to this student focused on how she would broach the idea of studying this topic with her family, the ethics of turning this experience into research, and her plans for navigating the IRB application process.

My experiences at the University of South Florida, as expected, shaped my understanding of what constitutes autoethnography. Having explored a wide range of autoethnographic texts and performances, I believe autoethnography exists on a continuum from highly fluid and artistic to formulaic and highly analytic. I find I'm most drawn to autoethnographies that explicitly link personal stories to the broader cultural and scholarly literature. I prefer to let the questions I have about a topic drive my methods, but I recognize that most of the questions I have aren't answered using surveys or statistical analysis, so I conduct primarily ethnographic and narrative research. When hard pressed to define my work, I frequently describe myself as a reflexive ethnographer (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000), which for me involves using my thoughts and feelings to inform my analysis and interpretation of interview and observational data. For some, the explicit role of my experiences on a text makes me an autoethnographer, but because my research goals center on the experiences of those I come in contact with and less on self-narration, I don't ascribe to the label of autoethnographer.

The positionality of the researcher is just one of many important issues to consider when doing autoethnography ethically. Autoethnography, as a method, can lead to emotionally and intellectually powerful texts that extend out beyond the page or the stage to affect audiences and communities. Autoethnographers must, therefore, consider the personal, social, political, and ethical consequences of using their experiences as the primary source of research data.

Preview of What's To Come

In order to explore the ethical issues and dilemmas of autoethnography, it is necessary to map the terrain already traversed. Tolich (2010; see also Adams, 2006; Chang, 2008; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Ellis, 1995a, 2004, 2007, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Kiesinger, 2002; Rambo, 2007; Snyder-Young, 2011; Tamas, 2011; Trujillo, 2004; Wall, 2008) offers an excellent exploration of these issues, some of which I will also address here. In discussing the ethical dilemmas of autoethnography for this Handbook, I will discuss the ethics of writing about personal, sometimes traumatic, and potentially stigmatizing topics. Next, I will describe the ethical issues autoethnographers have tackled and those that continue to perplex them. I will close with several guidelines for ethical autoethnography. But first, I will offer some context for understanding ethics in scholarship.

Ethical Foundations and Institutional Review Boards

According to Christians (2005), there are four guidelines that comprise the Code of Ethics for research: 1) informed consent, 2) the prohibition of deception, 3) privacy and confidentiality, and 4) accuracy. In other words, participants should know that the details of a study and their participation is voluntary, researchers should not deceive participants without justification, and researchers must take measures to protect participants' identities and personal information. Finally, ethical research should avoid fabricating, omitting or contriving data ("Protection of Human Subjects, 45 C. F. R. pt. 46," 2009). These guidelines raise several questions for autoethnographers about how personal experience or data are collected and reported and how to protect participants' identities and their confidentiality. Yet, questions arise, especially in an academic setting, about whether or not autoethnography is research.

In the United States, the Belmont Report specifically establishes 1) what practices or methods constitute research, as well as any medical/psychological interventions in a research protocol; 2) the basic ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice; and 3) applications which include informed consent, risk/benefit assessment, and selection of research participants. Together, the Code of Ethics and the Belmont Report establish the guidelines IRBs and other similar ethics committees at universities and hospitals use to review and approve research studies involving human participants.

Because these guidelines were developed in response to unethical medical and psychological experiments (particularly during WWII), many qualitative researchers, but especially autoethnographers, will find many parts of an IRB application do not apply to their endeavors. However, while some IRBs may not define certain autoethnographic methods and data—such as field notes, interviews, stories, memories, constructed dialogue and arts-based works (e.g., dance, performances, music)—as research, this does not mean that autoethnography is exempt from undergoing at least an initial IRB review.

Most IRBs expect to review projects to determine if they constitute research or scholarship and whether they are exempt from further oversight. Researchers cannot make a determination about what is or is not subject to review independent of the IRB without running the risk of sanctions. It is useful, then, for autoethnographers to familiarize themselves with their institution's or organization's guidelines as a starting place to enact ethical research because the questions posed in IRB applications prompt thinking about research practices and also how to successfully navigate an IRB review.

The ethics review process is not impossible—if I can conduct IRB-approved research with hospice patients (considered a vulnerable population) in their homes, anyone with diligence and patience can see their study approved—but IRB approval is potentially more complex for researchers whose projects do not fit neatly into prescribed ethical containers. To illuminate this point, consider an autoethnographer who may choose to write about past relationships using memories or emotional recall (Ellis, 1999) as the basis for narrating experiences. Some IRBs, for example, do not grant retrospective review and approval of previously collected data. If an IRB applicant fails to articulate how she intends to use her memories, or describes them as “previously collected data,” the IRB may question this practice and return the application for revisions or reject the project. It is also useful to state in an IRB application what the data are *not*. For example, it is worth stating (if appropriate) that the data do not come from personal journals or existing field notes from a class, which an ethics review committee may interpret as previously collected data.

Whether subject to IRB review or not, or drawing upon memory or engaging field notes or interview data autoethnographically, “writing about yourself always involves writing about others” (Ellis, 2009, p. 13). It is not always clear to autoethnographers or the IRBs responsible for reviewing and approving their research when the persons autoethnographers write about must consent to participate. In the next section, I will address this topic along with common ethical dilemmas that emerge when doing autoethnography. In doing this, I will touch upon the ethical foundations (e.g., autonomy, beneficence, justice) and the issues of risk and benefit.

Who's a Participant? Issues of Consent and Autonomy

Autoethnographers may claim the stories they write or perform are their own (see Tolich, 2010), but they ultimately cannot avoid implicating others (Ellis, 2007) in their writings or performances. The "others" who appear in autoethnographies are partners (Ellis, 1995b, 2001, 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 1992), friends (Richardson, 2007), family (Adams, 2006; Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 2001; Tamas, 2011; Trujillo, 2004; Wyatt, 2006), students (Ellis, 2004, 2009; Rambo, 2007), colleagues (Berry, 2006; Boylorn, 2006), neighbors (Ellis, 2009), clients (Etherington, 2007), community members (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009), and sometimes strangers (Snyder-Young, 2011). The goal of securing informed consent is to ensure that participants are making an informed, voluntary, and autonomous decision to participate or appear in a text or performance. It also helps ensure that participants are not deceived about the purpose of a scholarly endeavor. Some maintain that individuals who appear in a text are participants who must voluntarily consent prior to the start of a research project or scholarly activity. Conversely, Rambo (2007), for example, attempted to argue her autoethnography did not constitute research, as defined by the Belmont Report and her university's IRB, because an individual who appeared in a manuscript she wrote did not participate in a systematic research protocol designed to lead to generalized findings—and thus consent was unnecessary. Rambo's retrospective request for IRB approval was ultimately denied to protect the interests of the participant featured in the text, and she was unable to publish the manuscript, which was already accepted for publication. This example makes a case for the effort and time it takes to seek and obtain IRB approval.

Tolich (2010) asserts that retrospective consent like that described above is anything other than coercive because "it creates a natural conflict of interest between an author's publication and the rights of persons mentioned, with the author's interest unfairly favored over another" (p. 1602). Tolich not only questions the judgment of authors who pursue consent in this way, but also journal editors who agree to publish under these circumstances. While retrospective consent is less than ideal, I think calling this practice coercive lacks nuance. The prescriptive nature of informed consent as frequently carried out now is impractical for many research settings. Consider, for example, when I was conducting research with hospice patients, a vulnerable population that requires extra protections by IRBs. There were times when the setting was laden with sadness as family members surrounded their loved one's bed praying or saying their final goodbyes. I found this the least appropriate time to explain my study and ask for consent. When possible, I waited for more suitable opportunities to engage in this process or opted to not do it at all. These individuals were not included as participants in the larger project, but these experiences did inform my analysis. What this example illuminates is that the inductive nature of qualitative research makes it difficult to consistently predict how and when researchers will need to seek permission

from those individuals they may want to include in their projects. I believe not pursuing publication on the part of a scholar or editor because an author did not receive informed consent prior to beginning the project is shortsighted, particularly if we understand writing or performing as an emergent method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) and accept that autoethnography frequently involves investigating past experiences and related memories.

Decisions about how to approach obtaining consent from the others autoethnographers choose to include in their narratives are not easily resolved by employing a single or universal procedure. Researchers and ethics review boards should consider the timing of an autoethnographic project (e.g., writing about the past vs. the present), its content (e.g., is the topic potentially stigmatizing or controversial and for whom?), and how prevalent are others in the text (e.g., is a family member, friend, or community member mentioned just once or does he or she appear frequently in a text and become, therefore, a major character in the narrative?). Most IRB applications will ask autoethnographers to articulate how they will secure consent. Best practices allow participants to consent as early in the process as possible. In some instances, this will occur during the planning phase; for others consent may occur after a text is drafted. This will ensure ethical research and minimize harm to participants while considering the context and the researcher/participant relationship. Seeking consent early in the process is preferred, but researchers who find themselves seeking consent retrospectively (if allowed by their IRBs) should make clear their commitment to follow through only with the permission of those who appear in their texts.

First, Do No Harm

Informed consent may seem cumbersome and a bureaucratic formality, but this is frequently the first opportunity researchers have to discuss the risks and benefits of the study or project. Therefore, autoethnographers should take into account what Etherington (2007) calls the ethics of consequences as well as the beneficence of the project and ensuring justice. In autoethnography, the ethics of consequence include the positive and negative costs of participating in a research study. This practice mirrors what Ellis (2007) calls “process consent” where the scholar checks in with participants during each stage of the project to ensure their continued willingness to take part. Beneficence, or non-maleficence, is the edict to do no harm and calls upon scholars to consider if and how the research or interventions (if there are any) may cause harm to participants. It is important to note that the absence of harm is not necessarily a requirement—emotional responses, which are not by definition harmful, are difficult to predict or prevent in some settings—but researchers should make every effort to minimize harm and maximize the benefits for participants. It is here where researchers should enact the ethical principle of justice, which involves ensuring the distribution of risks and benefits equally among all participants. If an autoethnography only

involves a researcher and two participants, for example, a researcher should not expose one participant to more risk than the other. The same standards apply to organizations or community groups.

To draw a sharper distinction between these two related concepts, autoethnographers should understand beneficence as those actions they can take from the conceptualization phase and beyond to minimize harm and maximize benefits (if any should exist) to the others whom they engage. Whereas the ethics of consequences involves conversations between a researcher and participant(s), including communities, to consider the pros and cons of their inclusion in a project, throughout its evolution. It is during this dialogue that researchers, while acknowledging, and in some cases minimizing, the power differentials that exist in research relationships (Etherington, 2007), can help participants make informed choices and prevent deception.

Just as when working with intimate others, autoethnographers should work to enact the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice as well with the communities they work with and perform or write about. A major challenge when working with communities frequently involves attempting to appease many individuals with diverging goals and meshing those demands with the scholar's own research plan. Much like conducting research with individuals, it is wise to use these differences as an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with community members and stakeholders. These interactions are often necessary to gain access, but are useful for developing a trusting research relationship that fosters a depth of understanding about a community's experience (Toyosaki et al., 2009). Community members, IRBs, and individuals may pose questions about the risks, costs, and benefits of the end product, the performance, art, or manuscript; this is an excellent time to discuss the possibility and consequences of being identified by readers or audiences and how confidentiality will be protected, which is the focus of the following section.

Protecting Identity and Confidentiality

Protecting participants' identities and keeping their private information confidential is an essential component of ethical research. There are several strategies for protecting the identity and keeping confidential those who appear in autoethnographic research and performances. Often this involves keeping records secure by doing such things as de-identifying data. Giving individuals pseudonyms or changing a person's demographic information (e.g., age, race, sex) is common. Creating composite characters by collapsing several people into one is another technique (Ellis, 2007). Others choose to fictionalize parts of a narrative to disguise time and place, building some distance between the facts of an event and the researcher (Ellis, 2004). Robin Boylorn (2006), Stacy Holman Jones (2005), and Christopher Poulos (2008), all professors of Communication Studies, use a variety of abstract, perhaps postmodern, writing techniques and modes of performance,

including poetry and spoken word, that are particularly effective at obscuring and de-identifying the others in their work. Wyatt (2006) discusses the use of the third-person over the first-person to give the reader psychic distance and grant the protagonists respect. According to Wyatt, by not getting *too close* the third person gives space to the unknown and accomplishes writing without power, which involves writing tentatively and with less certainty than found in most scholarship so that readers can come to their own conclusions. Even these efforts may not do enough to protect all who appear in autoethnographic narratives.

There are some instances when there is no way to avoid revealing a person's or community's identity and confidentiality while accomplishing the objectives of the project. This is especially true if an autoethnography is about a family member, partner, or even a professional colleague (see Adams, 2006, 2008; Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 1995b, 2001; Poulos, 2006, 2008; Tamas, 2011; Trujillo, 2004). The techniques designed to obscure a person's identity do almost nothing to keep confidential or private certain information from other family members or from friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who already know the make up of a family or organization or community group (Etherington, 2007; Tolich, 2010). The potential for exposure requires careful deliberation about its consequences. In some cases (see Etherington, 2007), not appearing in a text or performance is the best solution. Sometimes, revealing the contents of a project to others not directly related to but implicated in the scholarship helps mitigate shock, embarrassment, or harm. Potential autoethnographers need to consider the risks of conducting this type of research not only for others, but also for themselves.

Protecting the Self

IRBs are rightly concerned with minimizing risks and protecting research participants from harm, but they are far less concerned with the effects the research process can have on the researcher. The texts and performances produced from autoethnographic methods not only expose others, but can also make autoethnographers themselves vulnerable. Chatham-Carpenter (2010) explores this issue in a meta-autoethnography focusing on her decision to write about her compulsive eating disorder, which reemerged as compulsive writing behavior during the project (see also Tolich, 2010). Her story brings up questions about what harm, if any, autoethnography can have on the writer/performer.¹ The writing process itself can be considered therapeutic (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), but tapping into past experiences also involves recalling and in essence reliving them. While reengaging and interrogating past experiences may prove cathartic, it can also generate emotions that require attention, even professional therapy (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Tolich, 2010). 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. Making autoethnography public in this way can be exhilarating and gratifying when

others affirm the value of personal experiences and interpretations. Alternatively, having a personal story critiqued, especially publicly, can hurt emotionally, personally, and professionally. The very thought that it could hurt is troubling for some (Wall, 2008). In some cases these critiques feel harsher because the method is so readily challenged. I offer these words of caution to potential autoethnographers, and I repeat them often. I also encourage scholars to anticipate questions and critiques, not only about the choice of method, but also the content, just as any other scholar would. Preparation, however, doesn't always work; I've seen emotions emerge in response to challenges or a well-meaning and valid question from audience members. Emotional reactions are not inherently problematic, but if self-presentation is important, it is worth considering if these risks outweigh the benefits of this method.

While I believe the potential pitfalls of disseminating autoethnographic texts exist for veteran and novice researchers alike, I believe students who write personal narratives require specific direction. As a graduate student I frequently questioned, with the guidance of my professors, if I had the skills and credibility to write effective autoethnography. I also considered what barriers autoethnography might pose to employment and tenure. I contemplated how making certain private details about my life public would alter the way others viewed me and those who might appear in my stories. I was aware that certain disclosures, especially about stigmatizing topics, could perpetuate stigma and prejudice towards me even if my goal was to combat these attitudes. Despite the successes of several of my former professors and three peers who all became successful and gainfully employed autoethnographers, I made choices during graduate school about autoethnography based upon my comfort with making myself personally and professionally vulnerable (see Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnographers may knowingly take on some personal and professional risks to write, perform and present their research. But I think it is wise to consider the ethics, for example, of requiring students to pursue autoethnographic writing in class assignments as well as their research, due to the professional and emotional risks. Rather than avoid autoethnography all together, I make it one option among several others in my classes. If students choose this approach to scholarship, I counsel them about the advantages and disadvantages of making their personal stories public, particularly if those stories involve emotionally or politically charged topics such as abortion. Because I also require peer reviews and public speeches in my classes, I offer strategies for students to modify their papers and presentations so they can maintain their privacy. I also ask students to consider whether or not they can accomplish the same research and writing goals using a different method because autoethnography is rewarding but ethically challenging.

The discussion thus far suggests that writing or appearing in an autoethnography is not inherently problematic. However, doing no harm and knowing when this standard is met is a bit more difficult to discern. With other methods, the research design and data collection techniques are said to mitigate harm. But

as I have written elsewhere (Tullis, 2012), even the most sound research protocol vetted and approved by an IRB—autoethnography or not—can raise ethical dilemmas. For autoethnographers doing no harm is sometimes an imagined state rather than a known reality, particularly if the researcher has no direct contact with the intimate others who appear in a text. With that said, doing no harm in the context of autoethnography rests on the notion that every effort was made to protect a person's identity, portray him or her as accurately and with as much nuance as possible, and when feasible and practical, engaging in informed consent and member checks, which I will discuss in the next section. The potential for harm may remain, however, when intimate others or community/organization members disagree with interpretations or are hurt by the ways we depict them, even if those depictions are accurate.

Member Checking, Memories and Interpretations

Some autoethnographers may choose to engage in a process akin to a member check (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) where individuals are given a chance to read and comment on stories in which they appear to check accuracy and interpretations (Ellis, 1999; Tamas, 2011). Still others will choose not to engage this process out of concern that sharing will do more harm than good to their relationships (Adams, 2006; Kiesinger, 2002). I understand why some authors may choose this approach, but I'm reluctant to recommend pursuing scholarship under these circumstances without careful consideration. If I feel I am unable to share my work, I use this sentiment to engage in additional reflexivity and reevaluate my depictions or interpretations. If I have engaged this process and still cannot reconcile my feelings, I've committed to not present or publish any work I feel uncomfortable showing to those I've written about. Some will disagree with this stance and contend that there are times when the benefits to self and others and related contribution to our knowledge outweigh this hazard. Whether or not intimate others have a chance to respond to what is written about them or discover these texts, autoethnographers run the risk of hurting a person they love or care about (Ellis, 1995a; Tamas, 2011) or damaging a research relationship with a community group or organization.

Issues also arise if the others we write about disagree with our interpretations or recall the details of an experience differently (see Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams & Vitale, 2009). I've experienced challenges to my interpretations and my memories in response to conducting member checks and seeking permission to include others in my work. In a study of a hospice team, I simply made changes based upon a participant's feedback. The revisions did not fundamentally change the point of the narrative, but did improve the accuracy of my recollections. But in another case, a friend and graduate school colleague disagreed with my depiction and interpretations of her. We engaged in a dialogue about how and why I made certain authorial choices, and she ultimately allowed my version to stand—even though she initially found the description of her emotions less than flattering. Her training

as a qualitative researcher and autoethnographer may have influenced her decision to let my rendition stand, yet others less familiar with the conventions and goals of research may respond differently or not at all. I worry about how participants (whether they see or hear about findings or not) will receive my interpretations and depictions, and I find the time between sending the manuscripts to participants for review and receiving their responses nerve-wracking. Despite striving for accuracy and offering the most generous, albeit sometimes messy, descriptions of participants (Adams, 2006), I'm aware of the awkwardness others may feel when reading what is written about them. The experience, however, creates space for dialogue, which can lead not only to more accurate descriptions and details, but also to deeper and more nuanced interpretations. Ethics in autoethnography do not stop after considering the risks to self and others and minimizing or preventing harm; scholars must also consider the audiences who come in contact with their work.

Ethically Engaging Audiences

During a performance in 1971, artist Chris Burden was shot in his left arm by an assistant with a rifle from fifteen feet (Schjeldahl, 2007). Thirty-four years later, I learned of Burden during a course co-taught by Stacy Holman Jones and Art Bochner. Stacy's reference to Burden's performance, *Shoot*, haunted me. She challenged us to think of how we leave the audiences we engage and implicate in our performances and presentations. Interestingly, that same year while I sat in my first courses as a doctoral student, Burden and Nancy Rubins, his wife (also an artist), resigned from their professorships at UCLA because they felt administrators were too slow to sanction a student who used a gun during a performance to simulate Russian roulette (Boehm, 2005). While these performance artists were not engaged in autoethnography, the performances were certainly personal since each artist put his body at risk in the presence of audiences. It is not clear if either considered his act ethically responsible to his audience, yet Burden's work took place in an arts context where the audience members placed themselves in a situation in which the "shoot" of the advertised performance would occur. The performance at UCLA was a surprise for classroom audience members and generated a good deal of fear. Both performances illustrate the importance of ethically engaging audiences in context.

Berry (2006) notes that the impact of autoethnography on audiences is under explored and calls upon researchers to consider the "less-planned ways in which audiences are implicated by autoethnography" (p. 96). I want to take this observation a bit further and discuss the ethical issues relevant to presenting or performing autoethnography to audiences.

Researchers present their scholarship for a range of reasons and types of audiences, including academic peers or the very communities previously under investigation. Performance/presentation goals consist of promoting thinking and learning, fostering understanding, and disseminating knowledge (Berry, 2006). Audience analysis—determining what audiences know, need and expect—is key

to a successful presentation, yet autoethnographers may also have certain specific objectives for audiences. Ellis and Bochner (2000), for example, call for an evocative form of autoethnography that prompts an emotional response in audiences (including readers). Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) questions this aim and observes that to “compel a response is to compel an experience” (p. 308). Compelling an experience may prove ethically precarious, especially because audiences’ reactions can exist on a rather long continuum, even when encountering the same text at the same time.

IRBs and other ethics committees responsible for reviewing and monitoring research rarely consider what happens after data collection ceases and reports or scripts are written and presented. This means that scholars are usually solely responsible for making ethical choices when interacting with audience members. Is it ethical, for instance, to perform or present in a way that fosters tears among audience members, or that encourages them to engage in violent behavior or re-live past traumas? The answers to these questions are not universal and frequently depend upon how audiences come to a text (see Tullis Owen et al., 2009).

While I’ve not heard of such overtly violent or traumatic performances of autoethnographic texts as the performance art examples just referenced, I do know of performances and presentations that involved profanity, nudity, fake weapons, allusions to suicide attempts, simulated masturbation, and displays of pornography. In these cases, it is worth considering the makeup of audiences and offering an advisory or warning prior to the start of a public presentation with explicit content. Some presenters also offer opportunities for audience members to process what they’ve witnessed during talk backs, debriefs, or question and answer sessions illustrating an ethic of care. Those who do not engage in these practices should have a justification for leaving audiences to process their experiences on their own. If scholars are compelling a particular response or experience, the goals of an autoethnography must be ethical, especially since we can never fully know audiences and how they will react to performances or print texts.

Existing in (and Answering) the Questions

Exploring ethical autoethnographic practices reveals how much control, power, and responsibility scholars of this method have. This *narrative privilege*, as Adams (2008) calls it, means that life writers (which include autoethnographers) “must consider who is able to tell a story and who has the ability to listen” (p. 180). Adams goes on to say, “Acknowledgment of narrative privilege motivates us to discern who we might hurt or silence in telling stories as well as those stories we do not (and may not ever) hear” (p. 183). Autoethnographers frequently acknowledge these concerns in their writing (see Etherington, 2007), but this is just the first step. Here are several questions autoethnographers should consider and answer before and during the writing process (paraphrased from Ellis, 2009), many of which will not appear in an IRB application:

- Do you have the right to write about others without their consent?
- What effect do these stories have on individuals and your relationship with them?
- How much detail and which difficulties, traumas, or challenges are necessary to include to successfully articulate the story's moral or goal?
- Are you making a case to write (or not to write) because it is more or less convenient for you?
- Should you and will you allow participants to read and approve all of the stories about them? Or just those stories that you think are problematic or potentially hurtful?

Ellis (2009) takes "solace in believing that continuing to be mindful about ethics in research and to ask ethical questions are crucial parts of ethical decision making" (p. 22). These questions and contemplations create ambiguity and can thus lead to endless questioning (Adams, 2008). Not all research, however, can subsist in the questions alone, especially since we frequently look to published literature for answers. Contemplating ethics in research is important, but theories and values should match praxis (Tolich, 2010). Autoethnographers are not only the instruments of data collection, but also the data, as well as the authors of texts, and this makes some audiences leery about the ethos of the method and therefore the knowledge generated from this approach. This skepticism can enable and constrain, but it ultimately creates additional pressures for autoethnographers to explain the sources of their data as well as the way they address ethical issues. If an autoethnography consists of emotional recall, triggers, or critical incidents (Ellis, 1999), it is worth describing this process to readers. Descriptions of what stories were selected over others and how they were crafted (that is, by fictionalizing) can lend credibility to an essay or a performance and, by extension, a scholar's analysis and interpretations. Laying bare a scholar's answers enables ethical practice.

Ethical Guidelines for Autoethnographers

Others before me have created guidelines for conducting ethical autoethnography (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Tolich, 2010; Wyatt, 2006), so what I intend to do here is link them together, if possible, and recount many of them while including some strategies to accomplish ethical life writing. The guidelines are as follows:

1. *Do no harm to self and others.* It is important that autoethnographers do not ignore the potential for personal and professional self-harm while minimizing risk and maximizing benefits to others.
2. *Consult your IRB.* While IRBs appear an enemy of the autoethnographer, ask because it is safer to ask for permission than seek forgiveness. IRBs can offer helpful advice about how to proceed with conducting research that protects not only the institution's interests, but also those of researchers and their

participants. The consequences for failing to consult the IRB are great and can result in banning a researcher from conducting any research.

3. *Get informed consent.* This practice is consistent with a commitment to respect participants' autonomy, honors the voluntary nature of participation, and ensures documentation of the informed consent processes that are foundational to qualitative inquiry (*Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2006). Secure informed consent as early in the process as possible to avoid conflicts of interest or consenting under duress (Tolich, 2010). This may occur when contemplating a project, while in the field, during the writing process, or after the project is complete. Remember that it is easier and more ethical to obtain consent and later choose to not include a person in a narrative than it is to ask permission later. Consider from whom, how, and when to obtain consent before starting the project.
4. *Practice process consent* and explore the *ethics of consequence* (Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007). This affords others the opportunity to remain autonomous and helps ensure voluntary participation in a project throughout the project.
5. *Do a member check.* A member check is the final stage of process consent procedures and affords those who appear in autoethnographies an opportunity to comment upon and correct interpretations and observations, as well as rescind their participation completely.
6. *Do not present publicly or publish anything you would not show the persons mentioned in the text* (Ellis, 2004; Tolich, 2010). Prudent autoethnographers will use this guideline even if they are reasonably certain those persons will never gain access to or ever see what was written about them (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 1995a). This rule should apply to the living as well as the dead because it will encourage thoughtful consideration of how others are portrayed, even if they never see or hear what is written.
7. *Do not underestimate the afterlife of a published narrative* (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 1995a). While a published narrative may remain static, audiences' responses to it do not. It's worth considering how to write to multiple audiences while considering ways to protect the others who appear in texts.

These seven guidelines are a starting place for creating ethical autoethnography, and those who choose to take up autoethnography may find other ways to ensure autonomy, beneficence and justice for themselves and those they include in their texts. I would encourage autoethnographers to give more consideration to the latter two principles of the Belmont Report—beneficence and justice—as these considerations are often neglected by all types of researchers, qualitative and quantitative. Doing autoethnography well means taking ethics seriously. As Carolyn Ellis (2009) observes:

It is easier to talk abstractly about ethics than it is to put an ethical stance into practice; it is easier doing a "mea culpa" about what one should have done in former studies than figuring out the right way to proceed in current ones; it's

easier to instruct others who must make ethical decisions in their research than to follow one's own advice; it's easier to embrace relational ethics than it is to figure out whom we owe relational loyalty when our readers and participants differ in values, our hearts and minds are in conflict. (p. 23)

I agree that our hearts and minds will disagree from time to time—the opportunity to publish, for example, is enticing and central to our work as scholars—but to detour from these guiding principles when it solely benefits autoethnographers is risky. At the same time, I recognize that these guidelines are only guidelines, and I encourage autoethnographers to engage in contextual, yet relational, ethics, which take into consideration the personal and professional connection between researcher and participants, to protect themselves and others. And always to keep their eyes trained on the ethical and moral foundations that guide their research agendas in the first place.

The issues described here illustrate the complexities of applying ethical research practices, because what constitutes research, who are participants, and the very techniques used to create autoethnography are fluid. Autoethnographers must consider how they will navigate and address each of these issues before, during, and after the writing process. The edict *do no harm* should serve as an ever-present guiding principle for protecting others while considering if and how doing autoethnography can cause harm to the researcher as well. The flexibility and ambiguity inherent in this method serves as a keen reminder that ethical research is not accomplished by checking boxes, completing forms, creating pseudonyms or drafting an ironclad informed consent form. In fact, autoethnographers should regard ethics as a process that is frequently relational (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2007, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographers should use, rather than resist, the Code of Ethics (e.g., informed consent, accuracy, deception, confidentiality, and privacy) and the moral standards for research involving human subjects as established by the Belmont Report (e.g., autonomy, beneficence, and justice; see Christians, 2005) to establish and enact practices that focus on and respect the interests of others as well as themselves.

Closing Thoughts

Autoethnographers sometimes receive less oversight from IRBs than other researchers because scholars don't consult them and sometimes because IRBs don't consider autoethnography research, but this does not discharge autoethnographers of their ethical responsibilities. I have suggested here that because of the authorial power autoethnographers have over those individuals who appear in their texts, and in light of the fact that these individuals are frequently intimate others, means that the responsibility to do no harm is even greater (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2007). I would like to call on all autoethnographers to lay bare and make vulnerable their ethical process. Ethical considerations are frequently addressed

at the end of an autoethnography, with authors relegating their ethical concerns and considerations to the last few pages of a manuscript. Readers should not assume that ethics are an afterthought; it behooves writers, performers and artists to address these issues throughout their work when possible. These pages, however, should not only include the ethical questions raised by the writing, but the answers to those questions. There is much to gain from making an autoethnography's ethics more visible. Not only does it boost the ethos of life writing, but makes autoethnography less daunting for those who may want to attempt this scholarship. Moreover, by ethically shoring up autoethnography, it also makes visible the ethical concerns of other methods. In writing this chapter, for example, I've come to question how any researcher could ever know that her or his work has met the standard of doing no harm. For decades, many of us have worked under the assumption that the method and its application, coupled with informed consent, protect against harm. By considering the issues raised by autoethnography and turning them back onto other methods, what constitutes ethical research praxis may require development. While I am confident that ethics are not an afterthought, at least not among the autoethnographers I know, this should be clear to readers and theory should match practice. Most autoethnographers have considered the ethical pitfalls of life writing from the beginning, during, and well after completing their manuscripts. And many of them write their narratives despite the risks to themselves in the interest of challenging canonical narratives that render so many experiences voiceless. If autoethnographers don't take up this charge, especially in the academy, I'm not sure who will. For many scholars this call to self-narration *is* the ethics of autoethnography.

Note

1. In extreme cases where the safety of the writer is at stake or potentially compromised, an editor could require the author to assume a nom de plume, as was the case for one survivor of domestic violence (Morse, 2002).

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