

# GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this guideline is to provide researchers with information on the ethical implications and requirements related to autoethnographic research.

## 2. Background

**Autoethnography** is a type of qualitative research where the person conducting the research serves as both the researcher, and as one of the human participants. In autoethnographic research, researchers seek to extend human knowledge by reflecting on their own autobiographical experiences, and extrapolating from them to inform our understanding of the world.

As laid out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2), all research involving human participants requires ethics review (p.13). \*<sup>i</sup> This includes autoethnographic research, even if the researcher is the only human participant.

It is important to note that individuals who (1) feature in the researcher's autobiographical experiences, and (2) provide data required for the researcher to address the research question are to be considered human participants for Research Ethics Board (REB) purposes. As such, these individuals should be afforded the same rights laid out in the TCPS 2 as all human participants. This means that these individuals (i) have their rights as participants respected, (ii) be treated fairly and equitably, and (iii) have their welfare and concerns taken seriously.

## 3. Privacy and Confidentiality

All researchers conducting studies involving humans have a duty to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all of their participants. Researchers conducting autoethnographic research must thereby follow all of the standard guidelines laid out in Chapter 5 of the TCPS 2 on protecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants.

In addition to these guidelines, individuals should be aware of the two unique challenges that researchers conducting autoethnographic research face: (I) protecting one's own privacy and confidentiality, and (II) protecting the confidentiality and privacy of non-active participants.

### (I) Protecting One's Own Privacy and Confidentiality

Given that in autoethnographic projects, researchers are also participants, researchers must take special care to ensure that they are aware of all of the potential risks related to their own participation. Often, individuals find it more difficult to objectively assess the risks involved in their own participation when compared to assessing risks involved in others' participation. For many, this is because the dual nature of the researcher's participation as both researcher and

participant blurs the line, and makes it difficult to fully appreciate the risks involved in their own participation.

Researchers should be mindful of the possible negative consequences that may arise as a result of conducting autoethnographic research. For example, once researchers reveal their autobiographical experiences, their data may become irretrievable depending on their dissemination and data retention plans. Thus, 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, schools, and so on).

#### (II) Protecting the Confidentiality and Privacy of Non-Active Participants

Due to the fact that participants (other than the researcher) may feature in an autoethnographic project without the researcher actively engaging with participants – e.g., by conducting interviews, focus groups, etc. – it is important for researchers to be especially careful of the way participants are represented in their research. The same precautions that researchers take toward protecting their own privacy and confidentiality typically applies to protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those participants that feature in the story/study. 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.

**N.B.** Researchers conducting autoethnographic projects in small groups or communities need to be mindful of the fact that it may be especially easy to identify individuals in their projects, even if no identifying information is presented about the individuals. In such cases, special safeguards must be implemented by the researcher.

## 4. Ongoing Consent

All individuals conducting autoethnographic research must obtain consent from all of their participants (minus the exception noted below), including those who feature in the researcher's autobiographical experiences/self-reflections, but play no active role with respect to research-related activities. Researchers conducting autoethnographic research must follow all of the standard guidelines laid out in Chapter 3 on Consent in the TCPS 2.

The process for obtaining consent from participants to collect and use their data for autoethnographic research can be a bit trickier than the process for obtaining consent from

participants in standard data collection methods, such as interviews, observational studies, interventions, and so on. Obtaining consent from participants in autoethnographic research typically involves two steps.

**Step 1:** Individuals conducting autoethnographic research must seek and obtain initial consent from all participants involved in their study before any data collection can begin. This means that prior to researchers beginning to write their first draft, researchers must obtain initial consent from their participants. (Retroactive consent is unacceptable as it can create undue pressure on participants to agree to partake in research-related activities.)

**Step 2:** Given that 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, researchers should provide participants with opportunities to reaffirm their consent throughout the duration of their project. This entails that (i) researchers provide their participants with opportunities to reaffirm their consent with respect to any major changes in how participants are being featured in their project, and that (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. Both of these steps are necessary in order to respect the autonomy of individuals who voluntarily decide to feature in autoethnographic research projects.

**N.B.** The importance of ongoing consent with respect to autoethnographic research cannot be understated, given that participants' information and data is being used without participants actively disclosing information about themselves.

## 5. Unforeseen Participants

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 – actually should be considered a research participant. In such a case, researchers must (I) notify the REB as soon as possible at [rebchair@torontomu.ca](mailto:rebchair@torontomu.ca) and (II) suspend all research-related activities immediately. The REB will then advise researchers on how to proceed.

**N.B.** In the event that researchers find themselves unable to consent individuals whose data they would like to use in their autoethnographic research projects, they may not use those individuals' data. Collecting and analyzing the data of individuals that have not consented to participate in research-related activities violates the rights of human participants, and is an example of research misconduct.

## 6. Tacit Consent

Given the dual roles that researchers play with respect to autoethnographic research – i.e., as both researcher and participant – they do not need to obtain explicit consent for their own participation. In virtue of researchers voluntarily deciding to conduct autoethnographic research projects, their consent to participate in research-related activities is tacitly implied. However, researchers must convey to the REB that they are aware and appreciate what their participation in their project involves. This includes all of the necessary information required for fully informed consent, such as the potential benefits of the research, the dissemination plan, the privacy and confidentiality safeguards in place, the potential risks involved in their participation, and so on.

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<sup>i</sup> \*All page number references refer to the online version of the TCPS 2 (2014).

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2014*.