Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Autoethnographic research positions the researcher, and her/his experiences, as a/the central subject of the research. In October 2009, Associate Professor Martin Tolich, Otago University, New Zealand gave a seminar on autoethnographic research ethics that was jointly hosted by the University of Sheffield’s University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) and the Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences (ICOSS). That talk, and the ensuing, discussion was influential in the development of his article ‘A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers’, *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 20 no. 12 (2010), pp. 1599–1610.

His article begins with a question, in the process of answering which he offers ten guidelines for those who begin to write about themselves:

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) challenge all self-narrative writers with a poignant question: Do they own a story because they tell it? As you play a multi-faceted role as researcher, informant, and author, you should be reminded that your story is never made in a vacuum and others are always visible or invisible participants in your story (Chang, 2008, p. 69).

Any research is potentially compromised when researchers address ethical issues retrospectively rather than by anticipating these issues. In this regard, creative analytical practices (CAP) autoethnography has endemic problems. In the first part of his article, Tolich offers a case study of an autoethnography in which journal reviewers insisted that an author should gain retrospective informed consent from the twenty-three persons documented in the study. He observes that the journal reviewers’ insistence on high ethical standards failed to go one necessary step further, to acknowledge that a conflict of interest develops when gaining consent retrospectively. In the second part of the article, Tolich contrasts three leading autoethnographers’ justifications for not gaining informed consent with the *Position Statement on Qualitative Research* developed by successive Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry. In the third part he identifies resources available for autoethnographers, focusing not least on the ethical issues raised when researchers use autoethnography to ‘heal themselves’, in the process violating the internal confidentiality of relational others. Finally, in the fourth part of the article, Tolich questions whether autoethnography is, in fact, research, and asks if, like journalism, it should be exempt from formal ethics review. In the course of the article, ten foundational ethical considerations for autoethnographers are developed, in an attempt to take autoethnographers beyond ‘box ticking’ procedural ethics and provide tools for their research ethics in practice. These ten guidelines coalesce around three core ethical considerations: consent, consultation and vulnerability.

**Consent**

- 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*).
- Practice ‘process consent’ checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of the project (*Ellis, 2007*).
- Recognise the conflict of interest or coercive influence when seeking informed consent after writing the manuscript (*Jago, 2002; Rambo, 2007*).
Consultation

- Consult with others, such as your institutional ethics committee (Chang, 2008; Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007).
- Do not publish anything you would not show the persons mentioned in the text (Medford, 2006).

Vulnerability

- Beware of internal confidentiality: the relational risk is not that the researcher will expose confidences to outsiders, but that confidences will be exposed to other participants or members of their family, friendship or acquaintainceship networks (Tolich, 2004)
- Treat any autoethnography as a permanent ‘inked tattoo’ and attempt to anticipate your own, and others’, future vulnerabilities.
- Audio-visual anticipatory research ethics claims that no photograph is worth harming others. In a similar way, no story should harm others, and if harm is unavoidable, take steps to minimize that harm.
- If you are unable to minimize risk to self or others, the default position should be that you should use a nom de plume (Morse, 2002).
- Assume that all people mentioned in the text will read it one day (see Ellis, 1995a).