Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Researching, writing about and re-presenting lives carries a heavy ethical burden regardless of whatever methodology, specific data collection methods, or presentational styles are adopted. For those who use autoethnographic approaches, ethical issues and questions around truth and truths are often more obvious and challenging than they are for those using other strategies. This is because telling our own stories usually implicates other people as there is very little, if anything, that we do in total isolation. If autoethnographic accounts really are autoethnographic, everyone else who appears in the narrative is potentially, if not explicitly, identified. This is inevitable if the account is published under the author’s known by name, even if pseudonyms or fictional alterations and disguising strategies are employed. As a result the consequences of unethical research and writing practices on the part of autoethnographers can be more immediate and personal and indeed ultimately may be more damaging.

Autoethnographies primarily (although not exclusively) take the form of written narratives and, as Laurel Richardson reminds us, ‘narrativising, like all intentional behaviour... is a site of moral responsibility’ (1990: 131). It is never neutral or innocent because it is interpretational and hence social and political activity with consequences for people’s lives. That this is so is thrown in to stark relief around autoethnography where personal stories are told and lives depicted. As Jerome Bruner has noted, even where the aim is to be realistic and accurate, lives as told are not, and never can be, lives as lived (see Bruner 1993: 38 – 39). This is so whether the author is writing about their own life or the lives of those who come into their stories. Skilful writers craft evocative accounts, drawing the reader in, sometimes using fiction and other literary conceits too. That they may do this raises ethical questions around authorial honesty. Authors tell the story as they see it, from their perspective and/or as they want to re-present it. They, therefore, possess narrative power that is not usually available to those they write about even if those people are asked to review and respond or even add to the final product (see Riessmann, 2008, p. 198). Writers need to be aware of how they use that power since depictions can be personally and even socially damaging to individuals and to their family members, friends and colleagues. Here it has to be noted that some autoethnographies do seem to have at least an element of revenge embodied and embedded within them. This is clearly unethical.

Once out there in the public domain, described and enshrined in print, people in narratives become fixed. If someone was once alcoholic for instance, it doesn’t mean that 5 or 10 years later they are still drinking. Yet if this is how they were depicted in a piece of autoethnographic writing which by its very nature identifies them, readers who are not aware of changed behaviours are likely to continue to believe that so and so is still a ‘soak’. Carrying such an identity can have serious and far reaching consequences which autoethnographers need to fully consider if their work is to be ethical, and especially if they are intending to publish or in other ways put their writing out into the public domain under their own, rather than a pseudonymous, name. Having said this, being identified takes on a whole new set of ethical issues if someone who has definitely committed offences and/or who has harmed people is involved. Carol Rambo Ronai (1995), for example, writes about being sexually abused by her mother and father, thereby identifying them. Whether all individuals always deserve anonymity in autoethnographic writing is a question that may become pertinent, especially if their name is already out in the public arena.
Autoethnographers and those who use other auto/biographical approaches do need to think very carefully about the potential for harm when writing lives. The following guidelines (adapted from Tolich, 2010; Sikes, 2010 and 2013) are offered as prompts when considering the ethical implications of autoethnographic research and writing:

- protect the people whose lives are the focus and substance of the research;
- respectfully depict those people;
- be alert to the potential misuse of interpretational and authorial power;
- be aware of tricky and slippery questions and issues around truth/s (or ‘truth/s’) (cf Medford, 2006 p.853);
- avoid what Sabi Redwood (2008) and John Bergin and Robert Westwood (2003), call ‘violent’ textual practices which shape and tame the lives that we use as ‘data’ in order to present and privilege a version that serves our purposes;
- 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);
- 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);
- 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, 1995).

References


Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. (2007). *Position statement on qualitative research on IRBs*


Sikes, P. (Ed) *Autoethnography* Sage Benchmarks in Social Science Series, Volume 1, London, Sage
