I’ll just write an autoethnography. Perhaps 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 multi-page 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 research about people. And on its face, it may also appear a clever way to side-step the ethics review process. Deciding to write about or perform your own experiences as a way to understand certain aspects of culture does not eliminate or resolve ethical issues. 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 complex ethical dilemmas. Many scholars can and do 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 feelings and thoughts that, once made public and set in motion, cannot be revised (Adams, 2008; Bolen & Adams, 2017). This dynamic research environment, which uniquely tethers researchers to their texts and those who appear in those texts, requires a type of ethical engagement that is embodied, highly contextual, contingent, and relational.

I should start by explaining my own relationship to this method. I completed my doctoral studies in communication at the University of South Florida, known at the time for its specialization in qualitative research methods, especially autoethnography, narrative, and performance. For full disclosure, readers should 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 importantly, I consider her a mentor and a friend.

I learned much about qualitative research from Carolyn, and some of the most lasting of those lessons were about research ethics. When I write personal or reflexive scholarship, it is her voice that is my ethical compass and I can hear myself channeling Carolyn when I advise my own students. 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 highly formulaic and analytic (Ellingson, 2017; Ellis, 2004). I find I’m most drawn to autoethnographies that explicitly link personal stories to the broader cultural and scholarly literature. I prefer, when making choices about how to do a project, 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

Chapter seven

Self and Others

Ethics in Autoethnographic Research

Jillian A. Tullis
label of autoethnographer. That said, I have used autoethnography after the death of my ex-husband. How his death was communicated to me and the silences that followed emerged as the perfect case study for understanding disenfranchised grief from the inside out (Tullis, 2017).

Whether doing autoethnography or not, the positionality of the researcher, which is frequently one of power and authority (Adams, 2008; Bolen & Adams, 2017; Ellingson, 2017; Madison, 2012), is just one of many important issues to consider when doing autoethnography ethically. Autoethnographers have the power to shape a narrative. And 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. Therefore, those who find this method best for addressing their questions should consider the personal, social, political, and ethical consequences of using their experiences as the primary source of scholarship.

In order to explore the ethical issues and dilemmas of autoethnography, it is necessary to map the terrain already traversed. Several scholars offer an excellent exploration of these issues, some of which I will also address here (see Adams, 2006, 2008; Andrew, 2017; Bolen & Adams, 2017; Chang, 2008, 2016; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Ellingson, 2017; Ellis, 1995a, 2004, 2007, 2009; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Kiesinger, 2002; Rambo, 2007; Snyder-Young, 2011; Tamas, 2011; Tolich, 2010; Trujillo, 2004; Wall, 2008). In discussing the ethical dilemmas of autoethnography for this handbook, I discuss the ethics of writing about personal, sometimes traumatic, and potentially stigmatizing topics. Next, I describe the ethical issues autoethnographers have tackled and those that continue to perplex. I close with that guidelines for ethical autoethnography. But first, I offer some context for understanding ethics in scholarship involving humans and summarize that recent modifications to U.S. federal regulations and constitute guidelines for ethical research practice.

**ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS AND IRBS**

The basis for ethical research involving human subjects in the United States came about in response to horrendous and unethical medical and psychological experiments (particularly during World War II (WWII)). *The Belmont Report* (1979) 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 that include informed consent, risk/benefit assessment, and selection of research participants. In addition, there are four guidelines that comprise the *Code of Ethics* for research involving human subjects, which include (1) informed consent, (2) the prohibition of deception, (3) privacy and confidentiality, and (4) accuracy (Christians, 2005; “Protection of Human Subjects, 45 C. F. R. pt. 46,” 2019). 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. While these documents focus on biomedical and behavioral research and interventions, they raise several helpful questions for autoethnographers to consider including how personal experience or data are collected and reported, and how to protect participants’ identities and their confidentiality. They also call into question, especially in an academic setting, whether or not some qualitative methods, including autoethnography, are research.

Without straying too far away from ethics, it is important to touch upon the question of whether or notautoethnography counts as research in philosophy and in practice. The unsatisfying answer is, it depends. The U.S. federal regulations for protecting human subjects, known as the *Common Rule*, were recently revised and went into effect in January 2019, which modified definitions of human subject and what constitutes research in certain circumstance (“Companion Q&As”). For example:

> “Research that only includes observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) . . . that is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects” is now exempt.  
> (“Protection of Human Subjects,” 2019)

This particular guideline speaks to not only how a researcher proposes to collect data but also how the *Common Rule* delineates a human subject. Since institutions frequently vary in how they interpret these regulations, it is worth consulting your IRB or ethics committee, even if you have previously consulted them about autoethnography. In addition to the federal regulations, it is also worth uncovering how your department or institution defines research. If it must be systematic and make generalizable claims, then most (maybe all) autoethnographies will not meet this standard. Yet, if you work or study at an institution
that views the production of knowledge in broader terms, then, yes. Since some IRBs, especially in light of changes to the Common Rule, 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 the ethical principles and guidelines that inform IRBs. These differences across institutions, programs, departments, even journals can be frustrating since some scholars must navigate several of these entities concurrently to see a project through from conception to performance or publication.

Because IRBs were designed for medical and behavioral research, many qualitative researchers, including autoethnographers, will find many parts of an IRB application do not apply to their endeavors. And yet, most IRBs will expect to review projects to determine if they constitute research or scholarship and whether these projects are exempt from further oversight. In many places, researchers cannot make their own determination about what is or is not subject to review independent of the IRB without the possible risk of sanctions. It is useful, then, for autoethnographers to familiarize themselves with the guidelines of the institution or organization. If after all of the consultation and paperwork an IRB doesn’t define autoethnography as a scholarship that falls under their purview, do not feel discouraged; this is not representative of autoethnography’s value (Forber-Pratt, 2015). The application can serve as a tool to prompt thinking about ethical research practices.

Completing an IRB application is not what I would call a good time, but my advice is to feel undaunted by the review process. It is possible—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. IRB approval, however, 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), which is a common technique. In these cases, the researcher had no plans to use these experiences as scholarship, and therefore an ethics review is situational, prompted by an event or realization in the present. Some IRBs, unfortunately, 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, which an ethics review committee may interpret as previously collected data.

It is not always apparent to autoethnographers or the IRBs responsible for reviewing and approving their research when the people autoethnographers write about must consent to participate. Whether subject to IRB review or not, especially in light of the Common Rule revisions, “writing about yourself always involves writing about others” (Ellis, 2009, p. 13). 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, 2007, 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). Whether any of these others rises to the level of participant is an issue autoethnographers must grapple with, since the answer dictates whether or not informed consent is required. Much like the question about whether or not autoethnography constitutes human subjects research, who counts as a participant also falls under the purview of the IRB.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) has a series of charts and decision trees that can help a researcher determine who constitutes a participant. Factors such as whether or not the potential participant is living or dead, if there is an intervention or interaction (e.g., an interview), and if the person can be identified will dictate who has the expectation to consent. The goal of securing informed consent is to ensure that participants are making an informed, voluntary, and autonomous decision to participate in a research study. 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 in advance, if possible.

Tolich (2010) asserts that retrospective consent like that described here is 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 questions the judgment of not only authors who pursue consent in this way but also journal editors who agree to publish under these circumstances. While retrospective consent is considered less than ideal, I think calling this practice coercive lacks nuance because it doesn’t attend to the realities of conducting inductive research or a scholar’s development over the course of a life. The prescriptive nature of informed consent can be impractical for autoethnography as a method and 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 pull out my forms, explain my study, and then 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. How could they not? They were powerful, and in some cases spoke more to the knowledge we most need about the dying experience than the experiences that unfolded after the strict application of the informed consent procedure. What this example illuminates is the inductive nature of qualitative research that makes it difficult to consistently predict how and when researchers will need to seek permission from those individuals they may want to discuss and analyze in their projects. I believe not pursuing scholarship (be it as a scholar or an editor) because informed consent was not strictly adhered to 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 versus the present), its content (e.g., is the topic potentially stigmatizing or controversial, and for whom?), and how prevalent are others in the text. I am not convinced, for example, that a family member, friend, patient, or community member mentioned just once rises to the level of a participant, but this is a question worth contemplating and grappling with. 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, consent may be necessary while a text is being drafted, when the scholar recognizes the value of an observation during the writing (as inquiry) process. This will ensure ethical research and minimize harm to participants while considering the context and the participant–researcher 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 carry on research activities only with the permission of those who appear in their texts when possible.

FIRST, DO NO HARM

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. 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. It is also not necessarily a one-time event, but ongoing and continuous (Madison, 2012). Therefore, autoethnographers should ponder what Etherington (2007) calls the ethics of consequences, which include the positive and negative costs of participating in a research study. This practice complements what Ellis (2007) calls “process consent,” where
the scholar checks in with participants throughout the project to ensure their continued willingness to take part. 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), autoethnographers should 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 with the communities they work with and perform or write about. A major challenge when working with communities frequently involves attempting to address the concerns of 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 not only often necessary to gain access but also useful for developing a trustworthy 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 keep confidential the identities of 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; Tullis, 2017). 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 makeup of a family or organization or community group (Etherington, 2007; Tolich, 2010). Social media and search engines such as Google have made it even easier to identify individuals and associations. 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 that could accompany stumbling onto a publication with an internet search. Autoethnographers are encouraged to consider the risks of 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 less concerned with the effects the research process can have on the researcher. This is not an argument for IRBs to focus on the scholar but a call for scholars to think of their well-being when engaging in personal narrative work. The texts and performances produced from autoethnographic methods not only expose others but can also make autoethnographers themselves vulnerable. Autoethnography is an embodied way of knowing (Ellingson, 2017) that begins with the self and reaches out, and back, and out again. Chatham-Carpenter (2010) explored the consequences of the presence of the self 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 therapeutic (Ellis et al., 2011), but this should not serve as the sole or primary reason for doing autoethnography because tapping into past experiences also involves recalling and in essence reliving them (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009). 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. The very thought that it could hurt is troubling for some (Wall, 2008) and has certainly given me pause over the years, especially when advising students. In some cases, these critiques feel harsher because the method is so readily challenged. I offer these words of caution to potential autoethnographers. I also encourage scholars to anticipate questions and critiques, not only about the choice of method, but also about the content, just as any other scholar would. Anticipating these challenges doesn’t always work. Preparation is sometimes incomplete. Putting our work out there is an inherently vulnerable experience, perhaps especially so in front of a live audience because their feedback is immediate and felt.² I’ve seen emotions emerge during a presentation, in response to a challenge, or a well-meaning and valid question from audience members. Emotional reactions are not inherently problematic, but if self-presentation is important, if a scholar is vulnerable emotionally or professionally, it is worth considering if these risks outweigh the benefits. Autoethnographers should not only prepare to address questions about their method, process, and content but also be attuned to what feelings arise while writing and rehearsing for a presentation. These moments offer clues to unresolved issues or topics for deeper exploration and should not be dismissed. When contemplating the veracity of a narrative, it is worth asking questions about the morals of our stories and who the heroes and villains are. The answers can help pinpoint who owns the narrative, who has privilege in the storytelling context, and offer insights into how the narrative might be read by audiences (Bolen & Adams, 2017). While we might want to be the hero of our own stories, exploring the content of our stories and considering how an imagined audience might interpret the narrative can reveal problems or discrepancies with ethical, emotional, and relational consequences.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS GOOD PEDAGOGY

While I believe the potential pitfalls of disseminating autoethnographic texts exist for veteran and novice researchers alike, I believe students who write personal narratives benefit from guidance and mentorship. 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 my employment and tenure. I contemplated how making certain private details about my life public would alter the way others viewed me and those who appear in my stories. I was aware that certain disclosures, especially about stigmatizing topics, could perpetuate stigma and prejudice toward me even if my goals were to combat these attitudes. Despite
the success we might observe others have with autoethnography, it is valuable for aspiring autoethnographers to take stock of their willingness to make themselves 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. This is when I hear the voice of my late mentor, Nick Trujillo, in my ear. Am I equipped to encourage, much less require, my students to open an emotional Pandora’s box for a grade? Rather than avoid autoethnography all together, because it can have pedagogical value, 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. Because I often 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 ethically challenging. These are good questions for non-student scholars to ask themselves as well.

The discussion thus far suggests that writing or appearing in an autoethnography is not inherently problematic. However, the edict do no harm and knowing when this standard is met are 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, 2013), 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. 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, engage in informed consent, portray others as accurately and with as much nuance as possible, and when feasible and practical, conduct member checks, which I will discuss in the next section. The potential for damage 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**

Issues of representation exist across all types of research, and as such, 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. Andrew (2017) states the goal is to do no harm to participants who appear in narratives. Scholars, however, use this practice not as a means of protection but for feedback on accuracy and interpretations (Ellis, 1999; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Tamas, 2011). This practice can be helpful when working with communities different from our own or writing about topics outside of our expertise. 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; Bolen & Adams, 2017; Kiesinger, 2002). I understand why some authors choose this approach: it is self-protective. But I’m reluctant to make a general recommendation about the pursuit of scholarship under these circumstances without careful consideration of the consequences. If I feel I am unable to share my work, I use this sentiment to engage in additional reflexive analysis and reevaluate my depictions or interpretations. If I have engaged this process and still cannot reconcile my concerns, 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 contributions to our knowledge, outweigh this hazard. Perhaps they are right. Whether or not intimate others have a chance to respond to what is written about them, or discover these texts on their own, autoethnographers can 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 et al., 2009). I’ve experienced challenges to my interpretations and my memories in response to conducting member checks. 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 initial recollections. But in another case, a friend and graduate school colleague disagreed with my depiction and interpretations of her communication. 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, 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 wait during a member check anxiety-provoking. 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. These issues of representation are central to ethical qualitative scholarship (Ellingson, 2017). 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 15 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 the University of California, Los Angeles (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 their bodies at risk in the presence of audiences. It is not clear if either considered these acts ethically responsible to their audiences, yet Burden’s work took place in an arts context where the audience members likely voluntarily placed themselves in a situation in which the “shoot” of the advertised performance would occur. The simulated Russian roulette 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 can prompt 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 performed. This means that scholars are usually solely responsible for making ethical choices about representation after data collection ends. Is it ethical, for instance, to perform or present in a way that fosters tears among audience members, or that may encourage them to engage in violent behavior, or relive 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, presentations, and publications that involved profanity, nudity, sexual trauma, fake weapons, allusions to suicide attempts, simulated masturbation, and displays of pornography. In these cases, it is worth considering the makeup of audiences and whether or not an advisory about explicit content is warranted. 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, autoethnographers must have an audience’s best interests in mind, 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 “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; and see also, Bolen & Adams, 2017). 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 can subsist in the questions alone. 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 (sometimes one-sided) expectations for autoethnographers to justify their choices, explain the sources of their data, as well as the way they address ethical issues. Other methods are not held to such scrutiny or equally high standards. 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 (e.g., by fictionalizing) can lend credibility to an essay or a performance and, by extension, a scholar’s analysis, representations, and interpretations. Laying bare a scholar’s process and decision-making enables ethical practice.

ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHERS

Others before me have created guidelines for conducting ethical autoethnography and embodied scholarship (Adams, 2008; Chang, 2016; Ellingson, 2017; 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, at least consult with the IRB; 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. Carefully consider representations of others and self. Consider whether it is best to publicly present, perform, 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. Representation matters, and it is powerful (Bolen & Adams, 2017; Ellingson, 2017).

7. Do not underestimate the afterlife of a published narrative (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 1995a). While a published narrative may remain static, audiences’ responses to them are 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 those included 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 effectively 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)

Some days it is easier and less overwhelming to avoid the ethical quandaries autoethnography arouses. And yet, the insights generated from personal life writing and performance are significant. Chances are, we will feel this conflict acutely. To detour from these guiding principles when it solely benefits autoethnographers is risky. At the same time, I recognize that these guidelines are only recommendations, and I encourage autoethnographers to engage in contextual yet relational and embodied ethics, which take into consideration the personal, professional, and embodied connections between researcher and participants, to protect others and self. And always to keep their eyes trained on the ethical and moral foundations that so often are the inspiration for their research agendas in the first place.

The issues described here illustrate the complexities of engaging ethical research practices, because what constitutes research, who counts as participants, narrative privilege, 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 document. In fact, autoethnographers should regard ethics as a process that is frequently relational (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2007, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011) and always embodied (Ellingson, 2017). Autoethnographers should use, rather than resist, the Common Rule, 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 to establish and
enact practices that focus on and respect the interests of others as well as themselves (e.g., autonomy, beneficence, and justice; see Christians, 2005).

**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. This does not discharge scholars of their ethical responsibilities, nor does approval from an IRB automatically ensure research in practice is ethical. 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, the responsibility to do no harm is great (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Ellingson, 2017). I would like to call on all autoethnographers to lay bare and make vulnerable their ethical standards and process. Ethical considerations are frequently addressed at the end of a text, with authors relegating their ethical concerns and considerations to the last few pages of a manuscript. Sometimes these sections read as apologia, rather than as an essential component of scholarship. 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 include not only the ethical questions raised by the writing but also 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 it 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. I’ve come to question how any researcher could ever know their work 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 methodological commitments 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 narratives that render so many marginalized and stigmatized identities and 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.

**NOTES**

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).

2. Many thanks to Dr. Robin M. Boylorn for sharing your experiences and informing my thinking about this topic.

**REFERENCES**


