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Autoethnography as an ethically contested terrain: some thinking points for consideration

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I select items from various lists of published ethical guidelines for autoethnographers and use them as starting points prior to subjecting each to interrogation. This interrogation takes place via the following six thinking points: The (im) possibility of anonymity and confidentiality, the ownership of stories, informed consent, member checking, do no harm to others, and do no harm to self. Each of these reveals a contested and messy terrain as opposed to the neatness implied in the recommendations of ethical guidelines about how such research should be conducted. Throughout, I seek to demonstrate that autoethnography, like any other qualitative research approach, poses difficult, but not insurmountable ethical challenges. These need to be addressed in a principled and informed manner that necessarily rejects rigid assertions of 'should do' in favour of a more fluid notion of 'it depends' on time, context, culture and purpose.

KEYWORDS

Anonymity and confidentiality; autoethnography; do no harm to others and self; ethics; informed consent; member checking; ownership of stories

Introduction

In recent years, as evidenced by contributions to this journal, psychologists have been drawn to autoethnography as a form of qualitative research (see, Bridger 2014; Carless 2010; Clarke 2018; Deo and Gouzouasis 2020; McIlveen 2007; Renzi-Callaghan 2018; Ronkainen, Harrison, and Ryba 2014). Despite the merits of such work, it is interesting to note that ethical issues were not considered by these scholars in their articles. Whilst this is not unusual, it is problematic since it may suggest to newcomers that autoethnography is an ethics free zone when, in fact, it is an ethically contested terrain. For example, Delamont (2009, 59) stated that, 'Autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically.' Likewise, Morse (2002, 1159), in her role as editor of the journal *Qualitative Health Research* pointed out that she usually discouraged students from writing about their own experiences for the following reasons.

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First, the narrative is rarely entirely one's own. It includes information about others who are, by association, recognizable, even if their names have been changed. As such, writing about others violates anonymity. If these 'others' do not know about the article, it still violates their rights, for they have not given their permission and they do not have the right of withdrawal or refusal the informed consent provides.

Such views are not unusual. Indeed, some colleagues at my own institution actively discourage students from undertaking autoethnographic dissertations due to what they consider to be the ethical 'baggage' that goes with it. It is not therefore surprising that, as Forber-Pratt (2015) pointed out, many university ethics committees and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are highly suspicious of non-traditional approaches like autoethnography because they are not used to dealing with them on a regular basis and lack an understanding of their purposes and procedures. This leads to many students having negative experiences when they seek ethical approval for their autoethnographic projects. As an example, Wessner (2021) described how her autoethnographic PhD research was brought to a grinding halt after two years when the ethics committee at her university abruptly rescinded her ethics approval, listing a litany of concerns that mainly focused on relational ethics as they applied to her immediate family and the perceived potential relationships among participants. Wessner's reactions were as follows.

I was mortified. I had committed no infractions and wondered how the ethics committee could imagine that it would be in my interest to harm my children or my community. The Chair's email stated he would never approve my project. *Never*. This word jumped out of the letter at me. I felt breathless . . . I was bereft and disconsolate.

Having spent three months putting together a twenty-page document dealing with the ethical concerns raised by the ethics committee and presenting this in person to them as part of her appeal to overturn the earlier decision, the end result was that Wessner (2021) was not granted ethical approval to proceed with her study. Significantly, she was advised by a member of staff to repack-age her study as a 'traditional ethnography' as this would be more acceptable to the ethics committee. On hearing this, Wessner recalled, 'I felt utterly defeated – his comment belied his pretence that he had no prejudices against AE. I was crestfallen' (p. 357).

It could be argued that the situation described by Wessner (2021) is an unusual or extreme case. This said, it does signal that, for some, ethics remains a contentious issue when it comes to autoethnography. In view of this, it is important that psychologists thinking about using an autoethnographic approach are made aware of the ethical landscape they are moving into when making this choice and what support is available to them when traversing the terrain. Here, a useful starting place are the ethical guidelines, in the form of lists, that various scholars have provided for autoethnographers as they go about their work.

For Ellis (2007), relational ethics acknowledges our interpersonal bonds to others in ways that recognise and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between the researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work. Accordingly, Ellis stated that central to relational ethics is the question ‘What should I do now?’ rather than the statement ‘this is what you should do now.’ With this in mind, Ellis then provided a list of points that she discusses with her students about autoethnography. Drawing on such principles, Bochner and Ellis (2016) undertook a similar task when they discussed with a group of students the various ethical challenges they might encounter when doing autoethnography. In contrast, Tolich (2010) presented ten foundational guidelines for autoethnographers to follow that grouped around the key themes of consent, vulnerability and consultation. Detailed guidelines were also offered by Andrew (2017) in the form of ethical grids that can be applied to autoethnographic texts. More recently, in order to map the terrain that has already been traversed and to provide a foundation on which to build, Tullis (2022, 109–110) synthesised the work of Tolich, Ellis, Andrew and others to develop seven ethical guidelines with a view to making the ethics of autoethnography more visible, and so less daunting, for those who may want to attempt this form of scholarship. These guidelines are as follows.

- Do no harm to self and others
- Consult your IRB
- Get informed consent
- Practice process consent and explore the ethics of consequence
- Do a member check
- Carefully consider representations of others and self.
- Do not underestimate the afterlife of a published narrative

Lists like those provided above, when used creatively, have pedagogical value in raising the awareness of newcomers to autoethnography regarding the ethical issues involved and helping them to reflect on how these might be addressed. Without such lists to provide guidance, as Dilger (2017), Gibbs (2018) and Lee (2018) suggested, the ethics of autoethnography can expose a dangerous minefield that has to be muddled through unaided. This said, as Sparkes (2020, 2022) pointed out, the creation and use of lists can have a dark side. They can, for example become *the* list that gets used as a rigid and unquestioned quality appraisal ‘checklist’ to set standards of ‘quality control’ on ethical behaviour for autoethnography regardless of purpose or context. In such circumstances, Sparkes argued, the illusion is created that any list is ahistorical, apolitical, bounded, fixed and non-contestable. This is not the case. For example, Gibbs (2018) sees the work of Tolich (2010) as an ‘excellent’ text on ethical autoethnography and draws heavily on his guidelines in her

own inquiries. In contrast, Grant and Young (2022, 106) provide a withering critique of the guidelines proposed by Tolich and see them as a form of normative ethics where foundational black-and-white rules that take no account of time, space, or context are substituted for moral and ethical struggles.

For Grant and Young (2022) the recommendations made by Tolich (2010) are at odds with their lived experience of crafting autoethnography and their inabilities to fully resolve their ethical struggles or engage in neat binary decision making about them. This mismatch and tension between the lived experience of *doing* autoethnography and the various lists of ethical guidelines available to inform practice are echoed in the reflections of others (e.g., see Bochner and Ellis 2016; Edwards 2021; Forber-Pratt 2015; Gibbs 2018; Howard 2022; Pelias 2019; Tamas 2011; Turner 2013, Wall 2006, 2008; Wenham 2022; Winkler 2018). Their reflections provide important insights into the messiness of ethics in autoethnographic practice and the contested nature of the items included on any list. In view of this situation, rather than just passively accepting any list of ethical guidelines or recommendations made by others about autoethnography, Grant and Young (2022) argued that each needs to be subjected to interrogation. In what follows, therefore, I seek to make a contribution to the literature by interrogating the tensions not only within and between various lists of ethical guidelines proposed for autoethnography but also within and between various reviews that have reflected on these guidelines. Accordingly, I offer six thinking points for consideration that work the spaces between the lived experiences of doing autoethnography in all its messiness and the neatness implied in the recommendations of various ethical guidelines about how such inquiry should be conducted. These thinking points derive from my experiences of teaching qualitative research over a number of years to undergraduate and postgraduate students and the level of volatility, 'heat' and confusion generated in relation to our discussions of ethical issues in general and autoethnography in particular.

Like Winkler (2018), I hope to de-dramatise autoethnography by demonstrating that this qualitative research approach, like many others, poses difficult, but not insurmountable ethical challenges. This view is echoed by Iphofen and Tolich (2018a, 5) who pointed out that whilst qualitative researchers in general, and ethnographers in particular, find ethical issues much harder to set out in advance of a study this does not mean that such issues cannot be addressed appropriately in a variety of ways. Furthermore, for qualitative researchers, as Pelias (2019, 132) pointed out, 'writing about others, particularly those who have shared experiences with you, is always an ethical test.' In this regard, Bochner and Ellis (2016) noted that the ethical complications associated with the genre of inquiry known as autoethnography are not as different from those in ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research as many people might think. They recognised, however, that 'ethical issues in

autoethnography can have greater consequences for our personal lives and for other individuals in our stories too' (p. 141). This point is reinforced by Lapadat (2017, 589) who argued that 'as a qualitative research approach, autoethnography itself can be ethically fraught, particularly in the area of relational ethics.' This said, despite such intensification and sharpening associated with autoethnography, as with any kind of ethical issue, they need to be addressed in a principled and informed manner that necessarily rejects rigid assertions of 'should do' or 'thou shalt not do' in favour of a more fluid notion of 'it depends' on time, context, culture, purpose and possible consequences.

Thinking point 1: whose story is it anyway?

Newcomers to autoethnography often naively think that because the story is 'just about me' that there are no ethical issues involved. This is not the case. Whilst autoethnographers might claim the stories they write or perform are their own, they are never made in a social or psychological vacuum and so are relationship dependent. Every story of the self, therefore, is a story of relations with others which means that autoethnographers cannot avoid implicating others in their writings or other kinds of performance (e.g., an ethnodrama). These others, often woven intricately and deeply into the stories, can be family members, friends, work colleagues, community members or even strangers met along the way. Accordingly, autoethnographers are faced with the following question: *Who owns the story?* For example, throughout the process of writing about a critical incident in her life as an academic endeavour, Lee (2019, 7) was concerned about the ethical implications of telling this story for the following reason: 'As the narrative took shape on the page and inevitably included reference to others, I have asked myself time and again, do I own this story simply because it happened to me?' One response to this by Ellis (2007) is as follows.

You do not own your story. Your story is also other people's stories. You have no inalienable right to tell the stories of others. Intimate, identifiable others deserve at least as much consideration as strangers and probably more. You have to live in the world of those you write about and those you write for and to.

The comment by Ellis (2007) implies that all those involved in the story told can lay some claim, however partial, to the story's ownership. In contrast, as part of a discussion with their students about ethics and autoethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2016, 147) stated, 'It's *your* story, and you get to decide how to tell it and what to tell, but along with that privilege comes additional responsibilities' (my italics). In relation to this, Poulos (2012, 200) offered the following response to those who inquire about the ownership of his stories: 'I could simply claim that what I am doing is writing my own story, and that

others should, if so moved, write their versions.’ The implication here is that, like him, the others would also own the stories they tell just like he owns his.

Reflecting on the issues of authorship and ownership, Andrew (2017) pointed to an important distinction that can be made between what might be called the unfolding life story and the story created out of those lived experiences. For him, the first of these stories is a *shared creation*, owned by the family, friends, culture and society, as well as the autoethnographer. In contrast, the second type of story is usually assembled, fashioned, edited, abridged, expanded, played with and typed into a computer, by a *single individual*. Accordingly, Andrew regards this story as belonging to the autoethnographer. This said, he offered the following observation on the instability and plural paradoxes of story authorship and ownership.

What I write as an autoethnographer is my story, and it is not my story, in the same way that waves are particles and particles are waves, and that the earth is flat (to the eye) *and* spherical (to the mind) *and* round (as we language its shape). The question of ‘whose-story-is-it?’ must always have a contested answer, thus meaning that wherever one chooses to stand has some legitimacy. (Andrew 2017, 29)

Answers about story ownership are further complicated when one considers the view of Winterson (2012, 54) that ‘there are two kinds of writing; the one you write and the one that writes you.’ Poulos (2012, 199) alluded to this with regard to writing about his family when he says that ‘I determined long ago that I simply had no choice. I am *called* to write these stories into being.’ Likewise, reflecting on not being able to produce an autoethnographic piece on time for a promised book chapter, Sparkes (2013) challenged the view that the story being told about a life is under the direct and rational control of the author. For him, the stories he tells are often at the will of the body and so are unpredictable and not under his direct control. Accordingly, he could not produce on time because he did not, and could not, own the unbeknown yet-to-be-told story that remained circulating within his body at the pre-objective, multi-sensory and carnal level. It was simply not yet ready to release itself from the flesh so that language could take its hold and the story then crafted into written form.

Given the issues raised above, in reflecting on who owns the story and who has the final word, Winkler (2018) suggested that one of the solutions might be for autoethnographers to make their accounts more polyphonic. This could involve seeking feedback from those who are involved or affected by the stories, engaging in collaborative autoethnographic research, and asking colleagues or other persons for comments about the unfolding story. For Winkler, ‘introducing multiple perspectives may make texts more authentic, thereby constituting a closer (i.e., more realistic) representation of the “I” and the culture under study’ (p. 242). This said, he noted that recent poststructuralist discussions on voice in qualitative research has problematised the tenet

that adding more voices produces texts that are more real and therefore truer. A plurality of voices, therefore, according to Winkler, does not guarantee more evidence, as the participants' voices do not carry the true meaning of experience as they are, in part, an effect of discursive and material conditions that influence and contribute to the performative constitution of self and other.

Clearly, as Andrew (2017) noted, the ownership of story is complex and contested. Whatever position one takes with regard to autoethnographic stories, the person who writes the story and puts *their* name to it insinuates that it is their story. In doing so, they use their interpretive authority to reframe and analyse the experiences of participants by choosing how the story is crafted, who is included and excluded, what information it provides about them, and just as importantly, *how* they are represented (e.g., hero or villain, saint or sinner). As Ellis (2007) and Winkler (2018) therefore emphasised, if the autoethnographer does not want to give others the power to determine what gets included in the story, then the ethical burden and responsibilities of interpretation and representation, as well as the consequences of decisions made along the way, belong to the author and should not be deflected onto those who inhabit the stories told.

Thinking point 2: the (im)possibility of anonymity and confidentiality

In seeking to convince people to participate in their studies, qualitative researchers often offer the promise of anonymity. Whilst anonymity is taken to be a desirable standard it needs to be recognised that it is a contested concept and has been the source of much academic discussion. As part of this discussion, Wolcott (2002, 147) argued that whilst we should not be opposed to keeping confidences and respecting the rights and privacy of those involved in our studies, it is important for qualitative researchers to understand that they cannot 'think that such declarations can be made in absolute terms.' Likewise, Morse (2007) also advised against promising absolute confidentiality in the process of gaining consent as this can be very difficult to achieve in certain forms of qualitative inquiry. More recently, Liu (2020) and Walford (2018) argued that whilst it was never actually fully possible to offer anonymity in ethnography, with the growth of social media and other forms of digital communication that allow the determined reader to unearth the true identities of the characters in a study, it has become impossible for ethnographers to offer anonymity to research sites or to those significant people involved in them.

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is especially difficult for ethnographers who engage in fieldwork that involves participant observation and a long-term engagement with others that can often result in close, even intimate relationships being developed over time. Such an approach, Delamont and Atkinson (2018) suggested, seems to pose particular issues for

what are now conventional approaches to ethical approval and regulation. For them, given the nature of field work, issues of confidentiality are raised and the 'normal undertakings of anonymity do not readily cover the contingencies of ethnographic fieldwork' (p. 120). In this regard, Sparkes and Smith (2014) noted the gulf between the 'promise' of anonymity and the 'reality' of practice. This is particularly so given the need for 'good' qualitative studies to provide rich description and contextual data of events, individuals, and the practices of groups so that the reader can engage with the world through the senses of the participants as if they were there with them in their social world. They argued that providing such rich description, especially in relation to small connected communities that are geographically bound and tightly knit, means that the participants in the study necessarily become recognisable to themselves and to others. Indeed, if this were not the case then Sparkes and Smith argued that a 'good' ethnography had not been achieved.

The points noted above are included to signal that anonymity is a complex issue for *all* qualitative researchers. This complexity is intensified when it comes to autoethnography because autoethnographers cannot avoid implicating others in the stories they tell about events in their life. For Andrew (2017) if the author is known (i.e., not anonymous) then the anonymity of the characters in the story cannot be maintained. This is so, according to Tullis (2022) even when characters are given pseudonyms, place names are not named or changed, composite characters are created, or parts of the narrative are fictionalised to disguise time and place. For Howard (2022, 96) such measures contribute to the 'doing' of autoethnography as an ethical practice, but 'when the life writing is about a family member or intimate partner, it is *impossible* to obscure the identity of some individuals to friends, family, and colleagues' (my italics).

Given the situation described above, Morse (2002) suggested that in order to protect the anonymity of those involved, autoethnographers should publish under a nom de plume. This said, Morse acknowledged there were disadvantages associated with this strategy. For example, the author will not receive due credit for their article in the process of tenure review and promotion nor the acclamation usually due when publishing an article. Equally, academics currently operate in the neoliberal university infused by a metrics driven audit culture in which named publications in peer reviewed journals are deemed to be essential measurable outputs for submission to various national research assessment exercises (Sparkes 2021; Spooner 2018; Tourish 2019). Given that depending on the results of such exercises, subjects and universities get ranked based on the quality of their research and receive financial reward accordingly, for an individual to invest time and effort in a publication that cannot be used for such purposes is unlikely to be viewed favourably by senior management and departmental colleagues (also see Thinking Point 5 for further issues relating to the use of a nom de plume).

Linked with anonymity and the strategies used to achieve it, is the equally problematic issue of *confidentiality*. Whilst, as Toy-Cronon (2018) pointed out, all forms of ‘insider’ research create significant risks to confidentiality, this is especially so for autoethnographers. As Tullis (2022, 105) stated, 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 the family or organization or community group.’ Accordingly, any promise of confidentiality is clearly suspect when autoethnographers tell stories that reveal what knowable others have said or done to them, or to others, in various ‘natural’ settings such as a family gathering which might have been deemed ‘private’ at the time. This is not to say that what was said and done did not actually happen, but rather the people involved did not know that how they acted would be used as data and included in a story made available at a later date for public consumption. Here, on being written about, they might claim that a ‘confidence has been broken.’ Likewise, they might claim that their right to ‘privacy’ has been infringed given their desire to limit access to themselves in ways that may or may not involve information gained by another. Quite simply, protecting the privacy of others in autoethnographic stories is much more difficult than in other kinds of inquiry using human subjects.

Despite the problems, indeed impossibility, of maintaining anonymity or confidentiality in autoethnography it does not mean that this form of inquiry should not proceed or be banned. Rather it means that autoethnographers, like *any* qualitative researcher, should not make naïve promises and try to be open with those involved in the stories told about the possible consequences for them once they are released into the public domain given that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Thinking point 3: informed consent

Informed consent is a problematic issue for qualitative researchers in general. As Iphofen and Tolich (2018a, 10) pointed out, a difficulty with gathering qualitative data is that while the participants might not fully know what they are agreeing to when emergent research designs are used, ‘the researchers may know only a little more since the research can be allowed, or even encouraged, to move in directions that only become appropriate when the research is under way.’ In view of this, they argued that informed consent can never simply be given or ‘gained’ at the outset of a project but needs to be managed and negotiated in a continuous fashion throughout the course of the research project, whatever the research design. This view is echoed by Tullis (2022, 104) who noted 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 discuss and analyze in their projects.’

With regard to autoethnography specifically, Ellis (2007, 24) proposed a process approach toward consent seeking that involved ‘checking at each stage to make sure participants still want to be part of the project.’ Tolich (2010) also proposed process consent but argued that qualitative researchers must anticipate ethical issues *before* commencing their research and that informed consent should be sought from participants at the *start* of a project. He is strongly against seeking informed consent *after* the story has been written and sees such retrospective consent as potentially *coercive* in nature because it ‘creates a natural conflict of interest between the author’s publication and the rights of the persons mentioned, with the author’s interests unfairly favored over another’ (p. 1602). On this issue, Tullis (2022) felt that while retrospective consent should be considered as less than ideal, calling this practice ‘coercive’ lacks nuance because it does not attend to the realities of conducting inductive research or a scholar’s development over the life course. Her advice for autoethnographers on gaining informed consent is that they secure this as early in the process as possible to avoid conflicts of interest or consenting under duress. For her, ‘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 not to include a person in a narrative than it is to ask permission later’ (p. 110).

All the above provide good advice regarding informed consent. This said, given that such advice is haunted by the notion of anticipatory ethics where researchers are expected to have clairvoyant powers then, for Grant and Young (2022), they are fraught with epistemic and methodological difficulties. As an example, they pointed out that autoethnographers who attempt to accurately anticipate people’s responses will experience frustration because responses are often nuanced, variable, and unpredictable. A further problem, they noted, is that the consent sought is to that which is less than informed because narratives are indeterminate.

Indeterminacy is evident in stories that are constantly in development by writers, thus subject to sometimes radical change, and in future-reader responses that writers and in-text others can’t mandate against. Reader response theory holds that consumers of stories always re-author them. Moreover, narratives are indeterminate to the extent they always contain back stories, some of which even authors themselves aren’t aware of. This leaves neither writer nor consent-sought after other in a position to join the epistemic dots . . . It seems reasonable to assert that process consent-seeking is always, simultaneously, a worthy and failed project, and retrospective consent-seeking a necessary but deferred event. (Grant and Young 2022, 108)

Besides the issues raised above, the advice to seek informed consent in ethical guidelines often tells us little about the complexities involved in the process of

doing so. Here, case studies by autoethnographers themselves generate important insights. For example, Wenham (2022) reflects on her experiences as a mother and grandmother of finding an ethical way to write her personal story for an audience given that it involved her daughter, husband and grandchild who previously had a serious illness. In so doing, she takes us into the precarious emotional dynamics of seeking consent that, for her, when discussing the inclusion of intimate others in one's own personal story, can often lead to a 'great big ethical thump in the chest' (p. 19). In such discussions, as Wenham noted, consent is never simple and is always wrapped up in power relationships that need to be acknowledged and addressed. For Wenham, this meant continued conversations with her daughter who became her co-researcher in the process in order to 'open up further reflections on my writing and be ready to make amendments or withdraw material at her request' (p. 23).

In contrast, even though they had been together throughout the experience of their grandchild's illness experience, at his request, Wenham's (2022) husband is scarcely mentioned and is only referred to as 'we' or as 'grandad' in the text. Finally, with regard to the exclusion of the grandchild from the story, Wenham explained that this came about because she realised that 'sometimes the person whose well-being is deepest in your heart and who has been at the centre of everybody's thoughts for so long cannot be in the piece because it's not your story to tell. And he may one day want to write his own story' (p. 24). Such reflections remind us that with regard to relational ethics, seeking informed consent is a time-consuming, emotional and complex process that should not be underestimated.

Seeking informed consent also raises the question of how, when, and from whom should it be sought? As Turner (2013, 213) asked herself: 'In order to behave in an ethical way as an autoethnographer, should I seek permission from all those involved in my stories, or perhaps just some of them?' It could be argued that *everybody* mentioned in the story is a 'participant' in some way and therefore their informed consent is required if they are to be included in the published version. Against this, Tullis (2022) questions whether all of the 'others' included in a story told by an autoethnographer actually rise to the level of a participant from whom consent is required. A similar point is made by Andrew (2017, 29) who pointed out that even within the limits of conventional psychological or sociological research the role of participant can vary enormously with people 'inhabiting continuums of active-passive, central-peripheral, known-unknown and even conscious-unconscious participation.' For him, this situation is similar to the differing levels of presence and importance played by characters in fiction of whom some are central whilst others are minor players.

The challenge of how to define those depicted in the stories told is further complicated by Howard (2022, 96) who stated that because her

autoethnography was about the past and her past experiences, then the individuals in it were not recruited by her. As such, she stated, ‘they are not participants – they are characters from memory’ (p. 96). Drawing on the work of Bochner and Ellis (2016) who differentiated between ‘characters’ who are part of our personal stories and participants who have consented to be part of our studies and whom may be formally and informally observed, Howard developed the notion of ‘character-participant.’ She defined this as follows, ‘a character in my autobiographical writing based on something the true-life individual said or did’ (p. 96). Those she defined as character-participants were offered a copy of the extract of her writing that was anonymously linked to the real-life individual, and their consent was sought to use this statement in the story told or to discuss a mutually agreed alternative.

Just who is central or peripheral, or a character-participant in the story told requires a judgement call by the author that may not be accepted by all involved. Accordingly, Gibbs (2018) warned against assuming that only those in the person’s immediate social network are likely to be affected and, therefore, concerned. As she pointed out, ‘it is impossible to anticipate which individuals connected with the autoethnographer, even to the slightest degree, might consider that they had a “right” to be consented’ (p. 152).

As with any form of qualitative research, there may also be situations when seeking informed consent is neither possible nor desirable. As Ellis (2007) noted, whilst she tells her students they should inform people they write about and get their consent, they often bring her projects where this is an unreasonable goal and might even be irresponsible.

Sometimes getting consent and informing characters would put them in harm’s way (such as from an abusive parent or partner). Sometimes my requirement that they get consent means they cannot do a project that would help them heal and get on with life. Then I ask myself, ‘Is the well-being of the researcher always less important than the well-being of the other, even others who have behaved badly?’ I answer, ‘No, not always’.
(Ellis 2007, 24)

In terms of desirability there are many reasons therefore why informed consent might not be sought. For example, in reflecting on her involvement in a research project involving hospice patients (a vulnerable population), Tullis (2022) noted that in a setting laden with sadness as family members surrounded their loved one’s bed, she found this the least appropriate time to ask for consent and so waited for more suitable moments to engage in the process or opted not to do it at all with some.

Seeking informed consent may also not be desirable when abusive relationships are involved because, as Ellis (2007) and Grant and Young (2022) argued, to do so might precipitate further abuse or harm. Thus, in her autoethnography of how her health and identity was impacted by homophobia and heteronormativity Lee (2019, 8) noted that, ‘Although I have protected the

identities of the perpetrator(s) in the critical incident, I did not seek their consent when writing about them.’ Likewise, reflecting on her evocative autoethnography that explored her personal experiences of being subjected to narcissistic abuse, Howard (2022) stated the following.

Although member checking and consent was sought from the character-participants mentioned in my writing, I did not approach the identified abusive character-participants because of the risks this may incur regarding further abuse for myself and family. The consideration of safety of the participant-researcher should be primary for ethical consideration. In addition, requesting consent from abusers does not align with the feminist underpinnings of this research where asking abusers to read and agree with autobiographical accounts would not assist with addressing power imbalances and giving a voice to my autobiographical experiences as part of ‘the marginalized.’ (Howard 2022, 960)

There will, therefore, be times when, after due consideration, the decision is made not to seek informed consent. This does not mean that the work should not be published. As Morse (2002, 1160) stated, ‘If we were to develop a principle or adopt a policy to restrict qualitative research data to only those who have given consent, we would virtually halt inquiry.’ Likewise, Tullis (2022, 104) noted how the prescriptive nature of informed consent can be impractical for autoethnography and many research settings given 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 discuss and analyze in their projects.’ For her, not pursuing scholarship, either as a scholar or an editor, because informed consent was not strictly adhered to would be shortsighted, particularly if we understand writing (or performing) as an ‘emergent method of inquiry and accept that autoethnography frequently involves investigating past experiences and related memories’ (p. 104).

Given the points raised above, whether or not informed consent should be sought, when and from whom, for *any* form of qualitative research, depends on the time, context, the setting, the culture, and the relational circumstances of those involved in the stories told. As Winkler (2018, 236) argued, therefore, recommendations to seek consent, either in advance or retrospectively, or to decide on process consent ‘constitute options, which should in fact be further discussed in terms of their relevance and feasibility.’ And, of course, one of these options could be not to seek informed consent at all.

Thinking point 4: member checking

The process of member checking, or respondent validation as it is sometimes known, involves the researcher taking their findings back to the participants in their study to seek feedback on whether or not they feel the researcher’s interpretations of their lives and events are accurate, reasonable and fair.

Such member checking, as Birt et al. (2016), Schwandt (2015), Smith and McGannon (2018), and Thomas (2017) pointed out, is often recommended in research guides and texts on qualitative research as an important procedure for corroborating, or verifying, findings with a view to enhancing the overall 'trustworthiness' of the study by meeting the criterion of 'confirmability' as originally conceptualised by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1989). These same scholars, however, also questioned whether member checking actually can achieve these aims and caution against its uncritical use for this purpose. Likewise, Sparkes and Smith (2014) argued that member checking as a method of verification is suspect for a number of reasons and so cannot be taken as a direct validation or refutation of the researcher's inferences and interpretations. One such reason is as follows.

It suggests that in the midst of multiple realities (i.e., the researcher's and the participants'), that those being studied are the 'real knowers' and, therefore, the possessors of truth. However, there is no reason to assume that participants have privileged status as commentators on their actions or motivations Participant feedback should not be granted an unquestioned authority in answering the question, 'who can know?'. (Sparkes and Smith 2014, 191)

The point raised above about 'who can know' is particularly relevant should autoethnographers decide to member-check by giving the stories they have written back to the participant-characters involved in them for their comment and feedback. Engaging in this act touches on questions that have been explored earlier in Thinking Point 1 with regard to whose story is it, or eventually should be, following a process of negotiation. Equally, the notion of member checking also links to issues raised in Thinking Point 3 regarding the indeterminacy of stories, and the dilemmas associated with choosing just who informed consent should be sought from amongst all those involved. Most importantly, whilst power differentials between the author and the character-participants weave their way both within and between Thinking Points 1 and 3, when it comes to member checking such concerns are intensified and made raw. This is particularly so with regard to the possible outcomes of this process that include the direct silencing or censoring of the author by one or more of the character-participants because they do not agree with the interpretation of events described in the story told and object to it entering the public domain. Clearly, this is problematic for a number of reasons.

In the first instance, there is no reason to expect agreement between those involved in a story about events that have happened. This is vividly illustrated by Herrmann, Barnhill, and Poole (2013) who, as three ethnographers from different generations and different political worldviews, came together for the purposes of research to examine the same academic conference they attended as an organisational event. Reflecting on this project they were reminded that

there is never one story, one interpretation, one truth of – or response to – experience, but many. Likewise, their involvement in this project reinforced the postmodern conception that there is no one way to experience the ‘truth’ of an experience given that there are multiple interpretations, multiple viewpoints or multi-verses of the same organisation or organisational event. In support of this, Andrew (2017, 26) argued, ‘My experience may also be different to your experience, even if we are encountering the same thing in the world, suggesting something individual in the experience.’ Pelias (2019, 23) made a similar point when he stated that ‘having complete confidence in a story I tell is no guarantee my memory is serving me correctly. I have told stories only to learn that others who were part of the experiences had differing accounts.’ If this is so, then as Poulos (2012, 200) pointed out with regard to his own autoethnography that explored family secrets.

So, it is very likely that almost *nobody* in my family would confirm any given characterization, portrait, attribution, or narrative line I would give to any given circumstance that arose. *My* story of my father beating me with his belt in a fit of rage may well be *his* story of an unruly child getting his proper comeuppance. That, of course, is the nature of narrative— and possibly even its *point*—a story is *always* told from a particular point of view.

If any story about the past is always told and read by participant-characters, from a particular point of view, then ‘hindsight bias’ as described by Freeman (2010) will come into play. This process involves, amongst other things, cognitive distortions of what really happened in the past and why it happened. For Freeman, this can result in ‘bad history’ whereby portraits of the past confer illusory significance or prominence on certain events that can operate as a self-serving and self-protecting source of illusion that yields up consoling fictions for those in need. Against this complex backdrop, the ethical dilemma identified by Birt et al. (2016) is raised of anticipating and assimilating the disconfirming voices and deciding who has ultimate responsibility for the overall interpretation. That is, in a world of multiple contested realities, does the author maintain control over what they have written, or can those written about in the stories request or demand changes in the text? In short, who has the final word and whose interpretation or version of reality counts?

In terms of who might have the final say, Tullis (2022, 109) argued that 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’ (my italics). Her notion of a ‘correct interpretation’ would seem at odds with the view expressed earlier by Sparkes and Smith (2014) about granting unquestioned authority to character-participants, and would also seem to imply that it is they who have the final say about which version of the story counts. In reflecting upon her experiences, however, Tullis makes it

clear that this is not the case. For example, when a friend and graduate school colleague disagreed with Tullis's depiction and interpretations of her communication the following happened: '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.' In this instance, member checking and the dialogue that ensued led to a 'happy ending' in which Tullis had the final say.

The happy ending described by Tullis (2022) might not always be possible given the very differential power resources available to those involved in the 'dialogue' about the interpretations of an autoethnographic story. What if the participant-character in Tullis's story who disagreed with her interpretation of events or her claims about 'truth' was not a friend/colleague but a hostile and bullying head of faculty who could influence her work conditions and promotion prospects? How might this have influenced the outcome of their dialogue about whose interpretation counted and 'allowed' to stand in the end or be silenced? As Andrew (2017, 24) reminded us, 'Silencing is a powerful, debilitating force, and people within relationships where power is not equal are particularly at risk of silencing.' This point is echoed by Thomas (2017) for whom the power dynamics of member-checking is particularly problematic when 'researching up.' This is because those holding high status positions and who have direct authority over others, perhaps including the author, are well placed to censor the findings of a study should it cast them in a less than favourable light. In situations characterised by significant power differentials, therefore, the autoethnographer might choose not to engage in member checks for fear of being silenced. In such circumstances, as Andrew pointed out, 'Not telling my story . . . particularly if I am discouraged or prohibited from doing so, has the potential to silence and deny my humanity, as the histories of many minority groups will attest' (p. 24).

As noted earlier by Howard (2022), the fear of the marginalised and vulnerable being silenced is an important reason why autoethnographers who write about abuse choose not to conduct member-checks with their abusers or seek their informed consent (also see Lee 2019). As Grant and Young (2022) pointed out, this is entirely justified given that abusers, when confronted, tend to deflect responsibility onto their victims in the attempt to gaslight/discredit them. In view of this, they argued that the ethical imperative to challenge this destructive silencing overrides the rights of abusers to be respected or indulged.

At the very least, victims should have the right to speak freely of their experiences, without committing libel of course, but crucially without needing to ask permission from those who have abused them. I suggest that in cases where victims cannot access justice through the courts, it is essential to have an outlet where they can tell their truth, and I see no reason why autoethnography can't fulfil this function. (Grant and Young 2022, 111)

Relational dynamics clearly play a role in any decision to member check. For example, Ellis (2007) pointed out that while she tells her students they should let their participants and those they write about read their work, there are times when doing this could damage the very people and the relationships that they are intent on helping. This tension is acknowledged by Tullis (2022) who noted that some might choose not to engage in member checking out of a concern that this sharing would do more harm than good to their relationships. Thus, having noted that one of the people vulnerable to exposure in an autoethnographic story he had constructed was his ex-wife, Andrew (2017) decided not to enact a member check with her. This was because the quality of their relationship at the time fell into the ‘lots of conflict category.’ He noted, however, that if their relating to each other had been in either a ‘friendly’ or ‘cooperative’ category, then he might have sought a member check with her ‘regardless of what I had written about our relationship’ (p. 85).

The use of member checking by autoethnographers, and qualitative researchers in general, might therefore be appropriate and valuable in some sets of circumstance but not in others. It can create spaces for dialogue and more nuanced interpretations for those involved in the process, but it can also lead to the silencing of the most vulnerable and least powerful in a given situation. As Thomas (2017, 38) therefore noted, while some see member checking as an ethical imperative, others have cautioned against its routine use without ‘considerable thought as to why member checks were being used, what was expected from participants in terms of their involvement in research and avoiding harm to participants during member check procedures.’ It remains a judgment call that for Edwards (2021) and Lee (2018) involves a difficult balancing act between the competing claims of the *right to be heard* and *oppressive silencing*, that can have consequences for all involved. Member checking, as Sparkes and Smith (2014) concluded remains a contested and complex procedure that should be treated with caution and its use assessed carefully on a case-by-case basis in the light of the ethical dilemmas it poses for those in any given study. In this, autoethnography is no different from any other form of qualitative inquiry.

Thinking point 5: do no harm to others

Reflecting on the ethics of how he writes about others as an autoethnographer, Pelias (2019, 141) pointed out that if we claim to work with an ethic of care, then as far as possible, we must protect those we write about and take responsibility for our words because they have the ‘power to break bones.’ That is, they can cause harm. Beneficence, or non-maleficence, according to Tullis (2022, 104) ‘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.’ This said, Tullis went on to say 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’ (p. 105). This point is echoed by others. For example, Bochner and Ellis (2016), Edwards (2021) and Howard (2022) pointed out that it is almost impossible for autoethnographers to predict how their work will be received by others, how they might feel about it (e.g., offended or validated), and how they might in turn respond. These ‘others’ include not only character-participants in the story but the audiences who receive these stories by reading them or seeing them performed. As Turner (2013, 213–214) stated.

My accounts also involve the audience, the readers or recipients of these evocative stories. As an author of evocative autoethnography, I won’t know if my writing upsets, hurts, offends, pleases, delights, causes anxiety or leaves the reader indifferent to my story (unless they tell me), and what if the same piece of writing upsets one person, angers another and comforts a third? Where does this leave us as writers and researchers within the field of autoethnography, trying to research in an ethical way?

The issue of ethically engaging audiences is also raised by Tullis (2022) who pointed out that IRBs and research committees rarely consider what happens after data collection ceases and reports and scripts are written and performed. This means that scholars themselves are usually the ones responsible for making ethical choices about representation after data collection ends. In view of this, Tullis asked if it is ethical, for instance ‘to perform or present in a way that fosters tears amongst audience members, or that may encourage them to engage in violent behavior, or relive past traumas?’ (p. 108). The answers to such questions, she acknowledged, are not universal and frequently depend on how audiences come to the text. Of course, autoethnographers have no way of knowing what audience members bring to the text, and so as Turner (2013) noted, they have no way of knowing just what response will be made. Given such problems in predicting and anticipating, Tamas (2011, 262) concluded that ‘Calculating the harm versus benefit of telling these stories seems equally futile; there are too many variables, and I don’t really know any of them.’

Despite the view expressed by Tamas (2011), many autoethnographers do worry about causing harm to others and this issue often gets discussed during the process of seeking informed consent and/or member checking. Thus, reflecting on her own study in which she did both with some of her character-participants, Howard (2022, 96) stated that, ‘I consider I have involved character-participants according to best practice for weighing risks to individuals and benefits to society.’ In terms of this ‘best practice’ it is interesting to note that Howard also included having discussions with her supervisor about her ‘personal motivations and influences and checked these against meeting ethical standards for respecting persons, beneficence, and justice’ (p. 97). Likewise,

having noted the narrative privilege and power that autoethnographers have when they write about others, and if they wish to write with the type of care that Ellis (2009) and Poulos (2008) spoke of, then for Andrew (2017) they need to be aware of their motives and become actively conscious about why they are choosing to tell their story in the way they do. As he stated, 'If I am unclear about my motives for writing autoethnographically, I am at greater risk of hurting others' (p. 31).

According to Andrew (2017), as they craft and edit their work, autoethnographers would do well to engage in an ongoing process of motivational review that requires a deep and constant search into their motives. This could begin, he suggested, by asking themselves the following questions: Do I have a score to settle? Do I have a feeling of revenge? Do I have a desire to 'set the record straight'? Do I need to be 'Right'? What unconscious subtexts might be steering my story? In responding to such questions, if a particular feeling continues to assert itself then for Andrew, the autoethnographer needs to practice a form of bracketing that involves recognising, stating and owning any personal unfinished business and putting it to one side as far as possible while the story is written. For him, this bracketing should go beyond cognitive understanding and seek to embrace emotional and somatic knowledge of one's motives. Importantly, Andrew acknowledged that this process is difficult to undertake and impossible to achieve in full due, in part, to the inevitable presence of unknowable, unconscious motives in all of us. He also pointed out that 'even if I come to my story with a high level of self-knowledge, this does not guarantee that I will not cause pain to those who read my work . . . I cannot always anticipate and therefore cannot take full responsibility for the impact of my writing on others.' (pp. 31–33)

The advice provided by Andrew (2017) about becoming more aware of our motives for writing and how this might shape how we tell the story in one way rather than another is worthy of attention by autoethnographers. There is, however, the danger that in going through the process he recommended, with its continual bracketing, that the emotions of the autoethnographer might be tamed and drained out. This is problematic given that powerful emotions are quite rightly the motivating force behind many autoethnographies. A good example here is the work of Griffin (2012) who offered readers a Black feminist autoethnography written from the position of an 'angry' black woman. Reflecting back on this article twenty years on, writing as a *still* angry Black woman, Griffin (2022) traced the power of this emotion in her life and why she continues to unapologetically, rationally, and rightfully write from this position even though it is not welcomed by all.

Countless times in my life, I have been asked from someone using an exasperated tone, 'Rachel, Why are you so angry?' as if the expression of my anger should come with a warning sign, an apology, and a cleanup crew. On most occasions, my response is to

pose questions in return, 'Look into the world, how can I *not* be angry? How can you *not* be angry?'. (Griffin 2022, 415)

For autoethnographers like Griffin (2012, Griffin 2022) to bracket the emotions that drive her stories would quite literally suck the life out of them and reduce their impact on the reader. Importantly, Griffin is acutely aware of her motivations and skilfully uses her anger to construct and frame her stories for certain purposes. For many, this might not be the case. Furthermore, it needs to be recognised that often, we are unable to grasp our motivations until *after* we have completed the work and stepped back from it having seen its effect on self on others. For example, Wyatt (2005) wrote an autoethnographic short story called *A Gentle Going?* about his childhood, his father dying and the funeral. He shared this story via email with his mother, brother and sister before publication. It was only on reflecting *back* later on this process that Wyatt (2006) began to recognise some of the motivations behind how, and why, he wrote the story as he did.

If I am honest, there was competitiveness involved in my writing 'A Gentle Going?' Whatever laudable reasons I had for writing it, my motivation contained a desire, however small, to demonstrate not only that my father was special to me but that I was special to him. I think that, maybe, I wanted to commandeer my family's collective experience of my father and his death, our story, to make it my own. In other words, my anxiety about how my family would react to my e-mailed story was, at least partially, to do with my projection of my own rivalrous feelings on to them . . . I have decided not to share this paper with my mother and siblings. (Wyatt 2006, 816)

Having reflected on his motivations for writing *A Gentle Going*, Wyatt (2006) asked a number of ethical questions that included the following: How do we, in autoethnographic research, manage our mixed motives and purposes in undertaking it, including those of which we might be ashamed? What do we do with them? His response to such questions was that 'I feel that I can only be mindful of them and find ways to work with, or simply live with, the tensions that they generate.' (p. 816). Part of managing the tensions of mixed motives and purposes might include a recognition that sometimes one has chosen to intentionally harm others.

Even though most autoethnographers do not intentionally cause harm to others, there may be circumstances where this may be inevitable. Having noted that he must manage his motives when he writes, Pelias (2019) went on to state, 'I must do no harm, unless I must.' His notion of 'unless I must' suggests that autoethnographers might sometimes choose to write in a way that knowingly causes harm of various kinds to somebody or something (e.g., an institution) in the stories they tell. This is especially so for those with emancipatory intentions who see autoethnography as a 'method' of resistance that can expose and challenge oppressive social conventions and structures by speaking truth to power and breaking the silence surrounding understudied,

hidden, and/or sensitive topics. Here, creatively written, detailed, local, and evocative first-person accounts are used to intentionally highlight the relationship of an experience to wider cultural practices that demean, diminish, silence, or deny the lived realities of certain people and the stories they tell. In this process, as Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) noted, the author writes through silence to (re)claim the voices of subverted and subjugated experience. Such work, as Grant, Short, and Turner (2013, 5) argued, functions to expose ‘the elephants in the room’ of cultural context by illuminating ‘social and organisational practices which beg robust scrutiny and critique, but which are taken for granted as unquestioned, normative, ”business as usual.”’ In such circumstances one might well write because one wants to ‘set the record straight’ by telling stories that might embarrass, expose, confront, shame, unsettle, challenge, upset, and possibly offend others.

Given the critical intentions of some autoethnographers, as Tamas (2011, 258) pointed out, ‘empathy can be a dangerous liability.’ For her, whilst relational ethics as championed by Ellis (2007, 2009) are to be valued, and whilst she does not think that dehumanising those who have done us harm is helpful, she also stated that ‘it may be unreasonable to expect the wounded to show us the humanity of their abusers . . . *Perhaps I don’t want everyone to deserve to be written up with an ethic of care*’ (p. 262, my italics). In contrast, for Gibbs (2018), even though autoethnographers sometimes do need to critique and challenge in ways that can make the reader squirm, and whilst this level of harm might be acceptable, personal attacks against others using autoethnography, even if they have been abusers, cannot be justified. This said, in reflecting on her own ethics of practice when engaging in autoethnography, Gibbs stated that ‘if there is a story that counters oppression and seeks to bring justice and positive change then sometimes in the telling, the greater good is justified’ (p. 159).

Just how and when critique and challenge become defined as a ‘personal attack,’ an act of ‘revenge,’ or a ‘betrayal’ justified in pursuit of the ‘greater good,’ is a contentious issue and very much depends on the positioning of the reader. As Grant, Short, and Turner (2013, 11) pointed out, ‘undertaking and publishing autoethnography necessitates a high level of risk taking in relation to personal disclosure and reader reception.’ Given these properties, autoethnographers, especially those that display vulnerability have the potential to place the author at risk of harm. This harm can come in two forms, harm to self from others and harm to self by self.

Thinking point 6: do no harm to self

According to Jago (2022), when we publish our stories, we hope they are used and used well. But, she added, ‘we have no control over the meanings others bring to our accounts. Once the stories appear in print, they lie out of our interpretive control’ (p. 383). Likewise, Frank (2010, 35) pointed out that once

a story is released, ‘those who have received it have it as theirs and will use it as they will, with the story lending itself to each of these uses but also shaping each use.’ All of which, Edwards (2021) suggested, means that it is almost impossible to know how one’s autoethnographic work will be received once it is made public. Given this uncontrollability, as Frank (2010) reminded us, stories have the capacity not only to deal with human troubles, but also the capacity to *make trouble* for humans.

With its etymological roots in the Latin for wound (*vulnus*), Steadman (2023) noted how this has inspired definitions of vulnerability as the capacity to be physically or emotionally wounded. Having rejected static views of vulnerability as a fixed position into which a person may be boxed, Steadman draws upon her own experiences to highlight vulnerability as a fluid phenomenon that can fluctuate over time, shift between and through spaces, and vary depending upon context. In this regard, it is interesting to note that a key characteristic of autoethnographic work, according to Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013), is that it presents an intentionally vulnerable subject and embraces vulnerability with a purpose in the public domain.

For Liu (2020, 422), autoethnography inevitably entails some vulnerability when we write truthfully about our lives and ‘we cannot re-conceal what we have chosen to share.’ This is especially so, Pelias (2019) suggested, when we write as a ‘confessional self’ that involves disclosing a private aspect of oneself in the communicative act of telling what is often hidden and forbidden by others. Such writing according to Forber-Pratt (2015) is scary because it involves exposing one’s strengths, weaknesses, innermost thoughts, darkest moments and opening it up for others to criticise. For her it constitutes a ‘voluntarily standing up naked in front of your peers, colleagues, family, and the academy, which is a very bold decision’ (p. 1). Such boldness, as Tullis (2022) recognised, can be exhilarating and rewarding when others affirm the value of the personal story told. Alternatively, she warned that ‘having a personal story critiqued, especially publicly, can hurt’ (p. 106).

The dynamic nature of vulnerability and the potential for autoethnographers to be wounded or hurt by *others* post-publication is recognised in several of the ethical guidelines noted earlier. For example, Tullis (2022) warned against underestimating the afterlife of a published narrative, Tolich (2010) suggested that any autoethnography should be treated as an inked tattoo that can have consequences for the author’s present and future vulnerability, and Ellis (2007) advised that autoethnographers try to anticipate and feel the consequences of how they write their stories in case this negatively affects relationships in their life which leads to them being hurt. Whilst the advice offered by these scholars is certainly worthy of attention, it remains that just how readers react to an autoethnography is almost impossible to predict and so the harm that might come from this is also difficult to determine in advance.

In terms of negative reactions to autoethnographies that can wound and harm, Campbell (2017) describes her experience of *discovering* (not predicting in advance) the vile, misogynist, and cruel trolling of autoethnographers and their work on the social media platform Twitter. One of the multiple insulting comments was as follows: ‘Just Googled autoethnography. Apparently being a self-absorbed c**t is now academically lauded’ (p. 5). In terms of her reactions to the trolling Campbell stated that ‘The outpouring of venom is exhausting . . . My body is reacting to the toxic nature of the intimidating tweets. The sarcasm, the sneering, the mockery. The public shaming . . . The bile feels never-ending . . . It is utterly unpleasant’ (pp. 5–6). Such reactions suggest that Campbell has been wounded and harmed by anonymous trolls that seek to damage and silence individual autoethnographers and members of this community. Against this backdrop, one is reminded of the advice offered by Grant, Short, and Turner (2013, 11) that autoethnography is not for the faint hearted and that ‘evocative writing by no means guarantees consistent public sympathy or support, and sometimes thick skins, or their speedy growth, are helpful.’

Trolls remain anonymous when inflicting harm on others. In contrast, Sparkes (2018) provided insights into how known colleagues within the same institution can cause harm and wound the autoethnographer when they react negatively to a published story. Speaking of autoethnography as a risky business, Sparkes reflected on an article he published in 2007 that caused him ‘trouble.’ The article in question was entitled ‘Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration.’ It tried to engage with, and draw attention to, the deep affective somatic crisis that many academics were experiencing under the various pressures exerted by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in their neoliberal universities through the embodied struggles of Jim, a fictional Director of Research at the equally fictitious University of Wannabee Academic in the UK. In the abstract, Sparkes stated that the story was based on informal interviews with academics at various universities in England and selected personal experiences along with ‘partial happenings, fragmented memories, echoes of conversations, whispers in corridors, fleeting glimpses of myriad reflections seen through broken glass, and multiple layers of fiction and narrative imaginings’ (p. 521).

In 2007, in its December 7th edition, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* made a feature of the article by Sparkes (2007) that appeared on its front page with the large headline ‘*Bollocks RAE paper assesses the RAE.*’ As part of the commentary on this page (that continued with a large section devoted to it on page 8), which named Sparkes and his university, it said that ‘these words, an extract from a published research paper that is part of one academic’s RAE submission, must surely be among the most challenging of the millions to be examined during next year by RAE panel members as they go about making their judgments about the quality of academics’ research’

(p. 8). Alongside this headline about his article on the front page was a large (half-page) photograph of the vice chancellor of his university with two young female members of his team enjoying themselves at a *Times Higher Education* awards ceremony! Following this, as Sparkes (2018) noted, strange things began to happen.

Part of these 'strange things' included the following. Having never been an external 'grant getter' during his time at the university, this suddenly became a major problem and cause for concern in the eyes of senior management. This cause for concern about his 'lack of grant capture' led eventually to a meeting to discuss this issue with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) with responsibility for overseeing research in the School that Sparkes belonged to.

According to Sparkes (2018) the first ten minutes of the meeting revolved around the views held by senior management regarding his lack of external grant applications and capture. During this time, Sparkes said he suggested that there were other possible interpretations but was informed that the panel's views were based on the objective data presented which were the facts in performative terms. Then the DVC made a strange comment given that the purpose of the meeting was meant to be dealing *specifically* with the 'objective' data and 'facts' regarding his grant applications and awards (or lack of). She uttered the following: 'But, of course, our conversation about you was clouded by another issue.'

This 'issue' was the 2007 article Sparkes had published in *Qualitative Research* which he was then grilled about for the rest of the hour. Several times, according to Sparkes (2018) the DVC informed him that his article had 'Embarrassed the Vice Chancellor.' She also included the following statements a number of times: 'We are not sure which side you are on,' and 'We are not sure if you are for us or against us.' Sparkes was also asked several times 'Who pays your wages?' By the end of the meeting according to Sparkes he realised that, in Bakhtin's terms, he was being finalised by senior management and that his days at the university were numbered after twenty-two years of loyal service. He reported that he was correct in this assumption.

The experiences reported by Campbell (2017) and Sparkes (2018) provide a vivid example of how autoethnographic work, once released into the public domain, can have negative consequences for the author by wounding them and causing harm. Of course, this is not always the case. For example, reflecting on the reactions of others to an autoethnographic piece she published in 2002 entitled *Chronicling an Academic Depression*, Jago (2022) stated that 'people from around the world continue to reach out to thank me and to share their own stories of mental illness' (p. 388). Equally, Winkler (2018) reported that, as far as he was aware, he had not yet experienced any harm as a result of his autoethnographic stories. Clearly the consequences of publishing their stories were very different for Jago, Campbell Sparkes and Winkler. None of them, one suspects, could have predicted the reaction to their stories

or what followed, and will continue to follow in the future, in terms of risk and reward. As Rambo (2022, 410) concluded about her own autoethnographic writing, ‘My words may come back to haunt me or be taken out of context in a sensational manner. And they may have larger implications for myself and others than I could initially foresee.’ At the end of the day, as the experiences of these authors testify, there are no guarantees in relation to harming the self. In view of this, as Bochner and Ellis (2016, 152–153) suggested:

Sometimes we just have to put our story out there and accept the consequences. We have to figure out how important it is to tell it, think about the potential rewards and risks, and determine if the work has something important to offer others by putting meanings into motion. Nobody can make these judgements for you.

Given the unforeseeability and unpredictability of the consequences of writing autoethnographically some (e.g., Morse 2002; Tolich 2010) have suggested that to minimise the risk to the author and others mentioned in the text that *nom de plumes* are used as a default position (see Thinking Point 2). Such advice can of course be useful in some circumstances where risks have been evaluated as real. For example, Gibbs (2018) provided a rationale for why, in exploring some events that occurred to her and other family members as service users/recipients of services in the UK, the most vulnerable events were written under a *nom de plume*. This said, beyond the issues raised earlier about this tactic in Thinking Point 2, Grant and Young (2022, 107) argued that as standard advice the use of *nom de plumes* ‘violates the autonomy of those autoethnographers who want to reveal their identities in their work, and of others with similar traumatic lived-experiences who willingly appear in it.’ They go on to state that the use of *nom de plumes* ‘functions to produce constrained bodies, and thus constitutes epistemic violence’ (p. 110). For them, this flies in the face of what they consider to be the principal purpose of autoethnography which is the refusal of a silenced identity.

Regarding the refusal of a silenced identity, Grant and Young (2022) also expressed concerns about ethical guidelines that might be taken to deter the marginalised or vulnerable from speaking out due to unforeseen consequences. Again, they are not against those with vulnerable or potentially stigmatised identities (e.g., psychiatric disorders, eating disorders, or survivors of abuse) reflecting on what might happen to them in the short and long-term should they wish to tell their stories. Rather, they are wary of how advice such as that offered by Tolich (2010, 1608) to ‘Treat any autoethnography as an inked tattoo by anticipating the author’s future vulnerability’ is received and used. According to Grant and Young, such advice might be taken as an admonition not to parade one’s stigmatising experience in the public domain which constitutes ‘yet another belittling of the powerless by those in power’ (p. 113). This, they suggested, becomes yet another process of ‘othering’ whereby those who entrapped within patriarchy, psychiatry, misogyny,

racism, homophobia, or any other dehumanising or invalidating power structure, are denied the process of restorying themselves through autoethnographic testimony and the right to challenge these oppressive 'master' narratives and prejudices. Thankfully, as evidenced in the literature, in the interests of witnessing and social justice, many autoethnographers refuse to be silenced and have been prepared to take the consequences both negative and positive.

Beyond the risks and rewards available on publishing an autoethnography, authors can also experience harm to their selves in the process of crafting their stories long before anybody else gets to read them. As Richardson (2001, 37) reminded us, 'Writing about your life brings you to strange places; you might be uncomfortable about what you learn about yourself and others.' Likewise, Winterson (2012) suggested that certain forms of writing about oneself can be dangerous because it takes us where we don't want to go and to look where we might not want to look. In this regard, Edwards (2021) spoke of the *ethic of the self* which she believes is foundational to autoethnography. For her, whilst the researcher has an obligation to describe and investigate their own experience authentically, it can be painful to recall difficult past events. Edwards also pointed to the potential mental health risk 'through unexpected challenges arising from in-depth introspection about experiences which might lead to rumination' (p.4). Such rumination, as Fixsen (2023) noted, in relation to autoethnographies of mental illness, can lead to the author getting stuck and trapped in the sticky web of their story which can act against their healing. That is, revealing does not necessarily lead to redemption.

In writing stories about ourselves we may experience feelings of shame, uncertainty and self-loathing as we come to realise that we might not be the wonderful person we thought we were, and that there are aspects of ourselves that we don't like, find deeply troubling or perhaps offensive. Equally, writing about events in our past can take us back into the pain and hurt experienced at that time as well as the joys. That is, old wounds that we thought had healed can be reopened which can impact negatively on how we experience the present and our relationships with others. In view of this, Chatham-Carpenter (2010) reminded us that there is always a degree of anguish in mining the pain of our lives for autoethnographic storytelling which means there is always the potential of writing oneself into harm's way.

Using a meta-autoethnographic format as described by Ellis (2009), Chatham-Carpenter (2010) took the reader through the choices she made in an attempt to protect herself as a researcher in the process of writing and publishing an autoethnography about her experiences of anorexia, as an ongoing disorder, that had the potential to trigger in her previously disengaged unhealthy thinking and behaviours (see Chatham-Carpenter 2009). As she stated, 'In the story-writing process, I felt a strong pull to go back into anorexia, as I immersed myself in my research on this topic' (p. 2). This

'pull' exerted itself even though, with the help of her therapist, Chatham-Carpenter thought that she had 'recovered,' was in 'control' now, and was no longer affected by the thoughts and obsessions she had experienced a few years earlier. This was not so. Having reflected on how the compulsion of her anorexia became intertwined with her compulsion to publish an article about her experiences of living with this disorder, Chatham-Carpenter realised just how wrong she was in her initial assessment of herself and that there were emotional and physical costs involved in writing about her life. Accordingly, she stated that 'the ethics of doing autoethnography is not just about protecting those implicated in our stories, but also ourselves' (p. 1). In view of this, more meta-autoethnographies like that of Chatham-Carpenter are required that take us into the dynamics of the story-writing process itself so that autoethnographers can get a sense of the potential costs and benefits for their sense of self should they embark on this venture.

Closing thoughts

In this article, I have drawn on various lists of ethical guidelines provided by leaders in the field regarding the process and practice of autoethnography to offer an interrogation of selected items in the form of six 'thinking points.' Using this tactic, I have tried to de-dramatise the ethical dilemmas associated with autoethnography by suggesting that such dilemmas are common to many forms of qualitative research and that even though they may be intensified when doing autoethnography, they can still be dealt with accordingly. As Winkler (2018, 244) argued, the numerous practical and ethical issues, problems, obstacles, or pitfalls that are raised in the literature 'should not be regarded as reflecting negatively on autoethnography but simply as necessary aspects that autoethnographers have to address during their journey.'

As part of my de-dramatisation of autoethnography, I have also tried to illustrate that any list of ethical guidelines, from whatever source is necessarily contested, messy, and open to multiple interpretations depending on time, context, culture and purpose. In saying this, I am not proposing the abandonment of such lists. For all qualitative researchers, given the ethical complexities and challenges associated with their work, along with the diverse ways that these might be responded to, then lists of ethical guidelines can be taken as gifts from their authors. This is because they provide an important starting point from which to generate discussion about the dilemmas associated with different forms of inquiry that exist within the qualitative domain which includes autoethnography.

When I introduce students to ethical issues in autoethnography I actually begin by presenting them with some of the lists named earlier in order to signal to them that, contrary to the views held by many, ethics are central to the practice of autoethnography and cannot be side-stepped by claiming 'it's

just about me.’ Once again, however, as a pedagogical resource, I use these lists as starting points and cues for perception to generate dialogue about what ethics might mean to my students at an individual level should they wish to undertake an autoethnographic dissertation or project. This approach is supported by Tullis (2022) who noted that her own seven guidelines are a *starting place* for creating ethical autoethnography and that those who choose to use this genre of inquiry will find various ways of addressing the issues contained in each of her guidelines.

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. (Tullis 2022, 110)

By drawing the attention of my students to the view held by Tullis (2022) a space is opened up to accept her invitation to interrogate her guidelines and those of others. As part of this interrogation, various lists of ethical guidelines can be framed as open-ended, flexible (i.e., can be added to or subtracted from) and useful for describing what one *might* do but not what one *must* do across all contexts and on all occasions prior to any research being conducted. Importantly, as Smith and Hodkinson (2005) reminded us, the creation and reworking of lists derive less from theoretical labour and more from the ways in which they are worked and reworked within the context of actual practices or applications in the *doing* of research. An excellent example of this process in action is provided by Gibbs (2018) in her reflections of how she grappled with various ethical issues when undertaking autoethnographic research with families.

According to Gibbs (2018, 158) ‘ethical practices are often situated, contingent, dynamic and biographical.’ The implications of this are made evident in her description of how she drew upon various sets of ethical guidelines provided by others to develop what she called a ‘Gibb’s ethics in practice.’ For Gibbs, in addressing some tough questions, this ethics of practice in action says as much about her as it does about ethics procedures, policies or guidelines, or review board edicts. In view of this, she concluded that, ‘Each autoethnographer must weigh up the pros and cons of their work and apply core ethical practices to each unique autoethnography (p.159). Likewise, Winkler (2018, 243) stated that ‘doing autoethnography involves the sometimes-painstaking effort to continuously face up to ethical considerations and to make critical choices for oneself and others.’ This facing up involves a delicate balancing act in an attempt to get it ‘right’ whilst always knowing that what might be advisable in one situation might not be

appropriate in another depending on time, context, and culture. According to Winkler, therefore, ‘whatever autoethnographers do in terms of addressing ethical concerns within their research, there is no simple solution, no one best way, and definitely no holy grail available’ (p. 242).

For some of my students, and indeed many work colleagues, the conclusion drawn above by Winkler (2018) induces a sense of despair. I warn them against this and point out that one could change ‘autoethnographers’ to ‘qualitative researchers’ in his comment and the conclusion would remain the same. Support for this claim can be found in the reflections provided by Iphofen and Tolich (2018b) on the ways in which contributors to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics* dealt differently with the many ethical issues that regularly confronted them. For Iphofen and Tolich this heterogeneity of responses is to be expected given that each research engagement we encounter, each site we enter, and each person we meet, is unique. They warn that routinised ethical practices, no matter how ‘good’ they seem, are unable to deal with this heterogeneity and so qualitative researchers need to be able to ‘think things through afresh in an ever-changing world of unique research experiences’ (p. 541). All of which, as I have tried to indicate in this article, can be said about autoethnography.

In the end, doing autoethnography, is not easy. Those who do undertake it and share their experiences of what happened along the way do a valuable service in making autoethnography’s ethics more visible and understandable to others. Such sharing, for Tullis (2022), not only boosts the ethos of life writing but it also makes autoethnography less daunting for those who want to attempt this form of inquiry.

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. (Tullis 2022, 111)

Given the vitriol often directed at autoethnography for being ethically ‘suspect’ and the intense scrutiny it gets subjected to, the notion that this genre of inquiry might actually be used to assist qualitative researchers of various kinds reflect critically on the contested nature of their own ethical practices is rather appealing. How this might be enacted in my own teaching practices and the doing of autoethnography is something I will have to think about in the coming years, and I encourage others to do likewise.

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