



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Arts Humanities and Cultures Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Notes for Applicants and Reviewers: Research ethics for autoethnographic research

Introduction

A growing number of researchers based in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures at the University of Leeds are using autoethnographic methods. As with our recent work on practice-led, action-led and participatory research (add link), the Faculty's ethics committee (FREC) are seeking to develop the ethical review processes so it becomes – and feels like – a process through which researchers' own ethical practice is cultivated and supported.

FREC are interested in an ongoing dialogue with researchers using autoethnographic methods so that we can develop ethical review processes which respond to the epistemic basis of these methods at the same time as ensuring the legality of research and that all ethical issues have been considered and addressed.

Context

In 2021 workshops and discussions were conducted with researchers – in collaboration with LARHI and CePRA – to explore autoethnography and ethics from the perspective of current practice and what this might mean for ethical governance at Leeds. Arising from the wider literature, the workshops and discussion at AHC FREC below are notes for Applicants and Reviewers.

Ethical practice: academically contextualised and situated in existing practices and debates

As part of the ethical review process, it is useful to be clear about the epistemic and ontological commitments of autoethnography through locating your research in the wider literature. You will then be in a position to show how the ethical approach you set out in the ethical review application relates to the underpinning philosophies of your methodological choices as well as current ethical debates in autoethnography as a field. Key issues to situate in the literature might include taking experience as a means of knowing; using an expanded epistemology and/or ontology; experimental and expressive approach to writing and actively moving between insider and outsider positions

In the application: Use the ethical review process to set out the academic rationale for your approach.

Relational self, relational ethics: Speaking about, with, alongside others

The committee recognises that autoethnography makes possible a movement between insider and outsider positions. Therefore, it might be that while you are using your own experience you also draw on other people's experiences or give an account of other people. When you write about other people then issues of consent become relevant. This means

that you do have to address consent in your ethical review application. However, it does not mean that there needs to be informed consent from everyone you speak about. There might be a good reason why you can't or don't want to seek consent (e.g. if you are giving an account of an abuse of power). However, the rationale and justification for your approach to consent does need to be set out.

Where you do decide to seek consent, it is worth exploring the many different ways of gaining and documenting consent (both written and verbal). While there are key principles of informed consent that need to be taken into consideration, how this is documented is open for researchers and their collaborators to determine.

In the application: Use the application form to set out your rationale for approaching consent. If you can't or don't want to get consent from people you write about then set out why – and link to any precedents that have informed your approach from the academic literature. If you do want to seek consent, then consider the different ways in which consent can be secured. AHC FREC already welcomes verbal consent process if appropriately justified. Consent forms can also be collaboratively designed with those that will sign them. Reviewers will be looking for an active engagement with the principles of informed consent rather than any set idea of what consent is or needs to be.

Considering impact on researcher: Personal and Institutional Responsibility

We like to invite you to use the ethical review process to consider what the personal impact on you might be of doing this research – short term and longer term. What will the effect be on your life of having certain experiences – or reflections on experiences – in the public domain? As part of this consider what kind of responsibility you think the University of Leeds has to you in your decision-making process – what do you want or need from the University to enable you to do this work? Reflecting on this – and setting out your perspective in the application – will enable the committee to understand if the University can adequately support your work.

In the application: In the ethical review process show that you have considered how the work will impact on you. Set out your support networks and what role you'd like the University to play in supporting your work.

**Helen Graham, January 2022
AHC FREC**

