

# Autoethnographic Research Guidance

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## Introduction

An autoethnography, or self-study, is a form of inquiry in which an individual self-reflects and analyzes their personal experiences and perspectives to better understand a cultural, social, psychological, or political phenomenon.

At its core, autoethnography is about the self, and typically involves only analysis or study of self-generated documentation. In this form of narrative reporting, the investigator is not considered a research subject, and IRB approval is not required as IRB's purview is over systematic investigations involving human subjects and/or their data. However, there are some cases in which the investigator might still need to submit their protocol for HRPP determination.

## Use in theses / dissertations

The most common instance when an investigator should submit their autoethnography to the HRPP for determination is when an autoethnography is planned as part of their thesis or dissertation. The UIW Office of Research and Graduate Studies requires that an IRB determination letter be included along with a completed dissertation proposal. Thus, any graduate student planning to conduct an autoethnography as part of their degree requirements must submit a proposal for determination. If the study only involves autoethnography, applicants can select "Not Human Subjects Research" as the review category. The IRB application should still be completed with the following refinements:

- In any section that asks about human subjects' participation or recruitment, indicate "not applicable".
- A description of how the data will be presented should be provided (e.g., stating that the data are only personal narrative with no one else identified).

## Examples not requiring submission

A professor looking to systematically analyze the evolution of their instructional techniques through a review of past curricula and teaching methods.

A person reflecting on and documenting her language acquisition and how she taught her own children to speak and read.

## Example requiring submission

An autoethnographic study involving the use of documents, data, or recorded materials that contain information about other individuals should be submitted. For example, when transcripts of interviews with locals are examined alongside the ethnographer's personal notes, the transcripts are considered human subjects data, and the project should be submitted to the IRB for review. While personal observations and notes that are autobiographical in nature are not considered human subjects research data, the inclusion of other participants' data alongside these materials qualifies the study for HRPP oversight.

## Ethical considerations

Obtaining a determination can be complex, particularly when the method extends beyond personal notes to include identifying others or including narratives from underrepresented, marginalized, or oppressed communities. When others are involved, protecting their rights and welfare is key.

## Summary

Developing autoethnographic research requires critical self-examination, reflection on relationships, and investigation of personal networks. Constant re-evaluation of who may be identified in the data and how context may impact the privacy of others is necessary. The investigator often lives and maintains relationships in the community they describe, since the work is embedded in that context. As such, researchers should reflect on the possible consequences of data exposure or identification for the people in that community. Inherent risks also exist when the study team identifies personal or community characteristics in their publications (e.g., private conversations, relationship challenges, places, or appearances).