



University of
Southern
Queensland

Frequently Asked Questions: Autoethnographic Research and Ethics Approval

Autoethnography presents unique ethical challenges because it blends personal narrative with cultural analysis, often involving others directly or indirectly. Here are some frequently asked questions associated with autoethnographic research:

1. Do I need ethics approval for autoethnographic research at UniSQ?

Yes. All autoethnographic research must be submitted to the UniSQ Ethics Office, via RISE – Ethics Monitor for review and approval, regardless of whether the research appears to focus solely on the researcher. In certain cases, a project may be granted exemption if it satisfies the criteria outlined in Section 5.1.17 of the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2025\)](#). Refer to point 7 for more detail.

2. Why is ethics approval required if I'm only writing about my own experiences?

All research involving humans must undergo ethics review. Autoethnographic research is a form of human research. By its nature, it often includes personal reflections influenced by interactions with others or references to events and organisations, even when not explicitly named. These elements can introduce ethical risks and therefore require appropriate oversight. Refer to point 4 for a detailed consideration of associated risks.

3. What's the difference between autoethnography and autobiography in this context?

Autobiography is a personal narrative, while autoethnography is a research method that situates personal experience within a broader cultural, social, or institutional context. Autoethnography typically involves ethnographic elements that may implicate others, even if unintentionally.

4. What are the ethical considerations and risks involved in autoethnographic research?

Ethical considerations and risks may include:

- **Inadvertent Disclosure of Others** - Even if others are not named, readers may infer their identities based on context, relationships, or events described. This can:
 - Violate others' privacy
 - Cause reputational harm
 - Lead to unintended emotional consequences
- **Emotional and Psychological Risk** - Reflecting deeply on personal experiences, especially trauma, grief, or conflict—can:
 - Re-traumatize the researcher
 - Affect mental health
 - Require support mechanisms (e.g., counselling, debriefing)

- **Power Dynamics and Social Risk** - When writing about family, colleagues, or communities:

- There may be unequal power relationships
- Obtaining informed consent can be complex or impractical
- People may feel coerced or unable to say no

- **Retrospective Consent and Memory Bias**

- Events may be remembered differently by others
- Consent may not have been obtained at the time of the event
- Recounting shared experiences can lead to disputes over accuracy or interpretation

- **Legal and Reputational Risks** - Mentioning workplaces, schools, or organizations—even anonymously—can:

- Breach confidentiality agreements
- Lead to legal action or disciplinary consequences
- Cause reputational harm to individuals or organisations indirectly referenced.

- **Long-Term Impact and Public Dissemination:**

- Once published, autoethnographies are public and permanent
- Others may be affected long after the research is completed
- Ethical approval ensures that risks are considered before dissemination

5. What happens if I don't get ethics approval before starting my research?

Ethics approval cannot be granted retrospectively. Without ethics approval, your research may be ineligible for publication or presentation, and you may be in breach of [UniSQ's Research Integrity policies](#).

6. What if my course or supervisor says I don't need ethics approval?

All researchers, including students, must comply with the National Statement and [UniSQ's Human Research Ethics Procedure](#). If in doubt, contact the Ethics Office for clarification before proceeding.

7. Can I seek an exemption to this requirement?

Exemptions are rare and assessed on a case-by-case basis. You must still submit an application within [RISE – Ethics Monitor](#) to determine whether your project qualifies for exemption. Research must not commence until an official exemption has been granted by the UniSQ HREC.

8. Where can I get help with my ethics application?

You can contact the [UniSQ Ethics Office](#) directly or attend one of our weekly [HRE drop-in sessions](#). Additional resources and templates are available on the [Human Ethics webpage](#).