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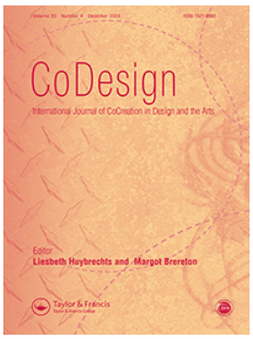
DOI
10.1080/15710882.2025.2456609

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
CoDesign

Citation (APA)
Xue, H., van Kooten, K., & Desmet, P. M. A. (2025). A consent for myself/ourselves: Designing for responsible use of autoethnography. *CoDesign*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2456609



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CoDesign
International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ncdn20

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To cite this article: Haian Xue, Katelijn van Kooten & Pieter M. A. Desmet (21 Jan 2025): A consent for myself/ourselves: designing for responsible use of autoethnography, CoDesign, DOI: 10.1080/15710882.2025.2456609

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2456609

Published online: 21 Jan 2025.

CODESIGN
https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2025.2456609

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A consent for myself/ourselves: designing for responsible use of autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ethical complexities of using introspective methods, particularly autoethnography, in design research. Drawing from relevant literature, we identify six significant ethical risks – psychological or emotional, physical, privacy, social, career and economic, and integrity risks – that may be experienced by the researcher, individuals represented in autoethnographic accounts, and the readership at different phases of autoethnographic research. These unique risks stem from the dual role of 'researcher as subject' and highlight the inadequacy of conventional ethical frameworks in addressing them. In response, we developed the Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice, a practical resource designed to guide researchers through a pre-study self-consent ritual and support continuous ethical reflection throughout their research. The toolkit integrates multidimensional ethics, meta-autoethnographies, and critical reflective practices to provide a theoretically sound yet practical, structured yet dynamic approach to managing the ethical complexities of autoethnography. While this toolkit represents a promising step towards more ethically responsible and reflective use of autoethnography in design research, it is intended as a foundational resource, open to iterative refinement based on researcher feedback and evolving ethical challenges.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 August 2024
Accepted 16 January 2025

KEYWORDS
Introspective methods; autoethnography; research ethics; tool development

1. Introduction

'Can I use my own personal experiences as primary data for understanding the social, cultural and experiential aspects of human-design interaction?' As design researchers, many of us have struggled with this question. Indeed, the researcher's introspection often plays a subtle yet significant role in design research centred on human experience, although it is rarely explicitly acknowledged (Xue 2017). However, the systematic and appropriate application of introspective or first-person methods has demonstrated their potential to uncover nuanced inner dimensions of human experience and sociocultural life by adopting the stance of the 'researcher as subject' (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Xue and Desmet 2019; Xue and van Kooten 2023).

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In recent years, design researchers have applied a variety of introspective methods collaboratively as co-researchers (e.g. Xue, Desmet, and Fokkinga 2020) as well as individually as solo introspective investigators (e.g. Lucero 2018). While celebrating the methodological liberation that these methods offer, we also face unique and complex ethical challenges that remain inadequately addressed in our field. Introspective methods are often perceived as free from ethical concerns because of the dual role of the 'researcher as subject'. However, as this paper will discuss, this perception is an over-simplified misconception.

Focusing on autoethnography as the most widely used introspective method, this paper 1) examines its unique ethical complexities and 2) introduces a toolkit designed to help introspective design researchers address these challenges. Accordingly, this paper is structured in two parts. First, we introduce the concepts of introspective methods and autoethnography, address the misconception of their ethical simplicity. We then map the ethical landscape of autoethnography, highlight gaps in conventional ethical guidelines, and present alternative approaches. Second, we present the development of the *Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice*, informed by insights from literature, interviews, and focus groups. This toolkit supports both solo and collaborative introspective researchers by facilitating a pre-study self-consent ritual to anticipate and address potential ethical risks and fostering continuous reflection on the emerging ethical issues throughout the research process. By doing so, we aim to take a step towards the more responsible use of introspective methods in design research.

2. Introspective methods and autoethnography

Introspective methods cover a broad variety of methods, such as autoethnography (Chang 2016a; Ellis and Bochner 2000), self-experimentation (Roberts 2004, 2010), heuristic inquiry (Douglass and Moustakas 1985; Moustakas 1990; Sultan 2019), researcher introspection (Gould 1995, 2013). Despite their varied names, procedures, and disciplinary origins, they share one fundamental commonality, which is the 'researcher as subject' (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Gardner et al. 2017; Xue and van Kooten 2023). This stance represents the ultimate unity in the researcher-participant relationship (Lumma and Weger 2021). Specifically, introspective methods rely on the researcher personally immersing in and living through the phenomenon under investigation, so that the researcher can leverage privileged access to nuanced experiential data from within – data that are richer, more vivid and authentic, and not directly accessible through conventional research methods (Xue and Desmet 2019).

Autoethnography is the most popular form of introspective method in design research (Xue and van Kooten 2023). It is 'a research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno")' (Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones 2017, 1). An autoethnographer thus is a researcher who uses their 'autobiographical experiences as primary data to analyse and interpret the sociocultural meanings of such experiences' (Chang 2016b, 444). Our current study focuses on autoethnography, reflecting its widespread popularity in design research. However, the insights and outcomes derived from this work are

broadly applicable to all forms of introspective methods, as they share the foundational 'researcher as subject' principle.

3. Ethical convenience and complexities of autoethnography

Research ethics refers to a set of principles and guidelines that govern the design, conduct, and reporting of research. It is built on two key pillars: 1) protecting participants' rights and wellbeing and 2) ensuring professional standards for good scientific practice and publicly accountable research (Pietilä et al. 2020). Accordingly, core principles include *respect for persons* (autonomy), *beneficence* (maximising benefits while minimising harm), and *justice* (fair distribution of benefits and burdens) as outlined in the Belmont Report, alongside *integrity* (honesty and transparency) emphasised in broader research ethics literature (Resnik 2018).

Researchers often choose autoethnography for its ethical convenience, particularly when investigating sensitive topics (e.g. anxiety, harassment, and romantic relationships) or when the research process may impose significant risks or burdens on external participants. As Ellis (2007, 21) observes that autoethnography allows researchers 'the freedom to explore emotional trauma without worrying about doing emotional harm to other vulnerable participants'.

In design and HCI research, this ethical convenience is well-recognised and frequently cited as a key reason for adopting introspective methods. For instance, Brueggemann, Thomas, and Wang (2018) conducted collaborative introspective research in which they personally licked tangible objects in urban public spaces to explore the sensory and design implications of taste. They justified their methodological choice by stating that 'it was impractical for us to get ethical approval for any Lickable Cities studies involving other people. We could not guarantee their health and safety; we could only consent to risking our own' (4). Similarly, Chien and Hassenzahl (2020) employed 'autoethnographical research through design' to develop and test interactive technologies for mediating Chien's own long-distance relationship with his girlfriend, arguing that 'messing with other peoples' relationships is sensitive, no matter how 'designerly' it is done' (Chien and Hassenzahl 2020, 278).

Like many other advantages of autoethnography, the perceived ethical convenience also stems from the stance of the 'researcher as subject'. This perspective is often assumed to imply inherent consent, a complete understanding of the risks involved, and the elimination of potential violations of others' rights and wellbeing, thereby simplifying ethical considerations. Consequently, the need to explicitly address ethical dilemmas before the study is frequently disregarded or considered unnecessary. However, this perception is misguided. While autoethnography may appear ethically convenient, it is far from ethically straightforward. The inherent merging of the roles of researcher and participant blurs traditional boundaries of ethical accountability. As observed by Tullis (2013, 244), 'using the Self as the primary focus of research – as researcher, informant, and author – may actually lead to more and more complex ethical dilemmas, some of which may or may not undergo the scrutiny and supervision of an IRB review'. This highlights the need for critical reflection on conventional ethical guidelines and the ethical landscape of autoethnography, particularly for novice researchers navigating

their early careers (Lee 2018). As autoethnography continues to gain popularity in design research, fostering a discussion on its responsible use has become increasingly urgent within our field.

4. Mapping an ethical landscape of autoethnography

Many ethical dilemmas and challenges associated with autoethnography have been explored in fields where the method has a longer history (e.g. Chatham-Carpenter 2010; Dauphinee 2010; Edwards 2021; Ellis 2007; Lapadat 2017; Le Roux 2017; Tolich 2010; Tullis 2013). Building on this foundation, we first extended our focus beyond design research to map the ethical landscape of autoethnography through a literature review. While our review was not exhaustive, and we acknowledge that new ethical risks may emerge as autoethnography continues to evolve, this step allowed us to identify the most significant challenges and dilemmas of autoethnography.

Generally, there are six categories of ethical risks in autoethnography. First, *psychological or emotional risks* refer to the potential for re-traumatisation or emotional distress affecting the researcher, individuals mentioned in the narrative, and the readers or viewers of an autoethnographic work. Such harms typically derive from reliving painful memories or being exposed to sensitive issues. Second, *physical risks* involve harms that could occur during the research process or autoethnographic performances, where the researcher may engage in physically dangerous activities. Third, *privacy risks* are related to the unconsented disclosure of personal information of others involved in the autoethnographic accounts. Fourth, *social risks* refer to the potential damages to the relationships between the researcher and their close others (e.g. family members, friends) who may feel betrayed or exploited when realising that their identities, intimate details, sensitive personal histories or characteristics are revealed to the public. Fifth, *career and economic risks* involve the negative reputational and professional consequences that the researcher may face (e.g. professional stigmatisation, loss of employment opportunities) resulting from the public disclosure of their own controversial personal histories. Finally, autoethnography also creates *integrity risks*, such as the potential for misrepresentation, selective disclosure or altering details for narrative coherence. These risks challenge the researcher's commitment to accuracy and authenticity, as they navigate the tension between presenting a compelling story, protecting themselves and others, and maintaining the integrity of their research. These ethical risks are complex and unconventional because they affect not only the researcher but also others who are not formal research participants. Moreover, these risks can arise both during and after the research process. In the following sections, we elaborate on these risks in detail, examining them in relation to the affected parties and the phases in which they occur.

4.1. The vulnerable researcher

Qualitative researchers may face a variety of risks, not only when using autoethnography (emerald and Carpenter 2015). However, autoethnography places the researcher's vulnerability directly under the spotlight. To use autoethnography appropriately, the researcher first needs to be, or become, a member of the group being studied, personally experience the group's everyday realities. This is a prerequisite for using all introspective

methods (Xue and Desmet 2019) and it is called by Anderson (2006, 379) as the 'Complete Member Researcher (CMR)'. A researcher may take two strategies to achieve their CMR status: 1) *opportunistic* strategy – wisely choosing the topic according to their existing sociocultural role and experiences, and 2) *converting* strategy – transforming themselves into a new sociocultural role and deeply immersing into new experiences for the sake of the research project (Adler and Adler 1987; Anderson 2006). While the CMR status enhances the value and legitimacy of autoethnography, it simultaneously places the researcher in a vulnerable position.

During the research process, opportunistic CMRs may necessarily revisit and analyse certain negative personal experiences, which can lead to significant emotional distress and self-harm. For example, Chatham-Carpenter (2010) described the potential self-harm she faced when she was using autoethnography to explore the experience of living with anorexia. Recalling those memories brought back some already disengaged unhealthy thoughts and behaviours in her, and nearly made her relapse the eating disorder. Likewise, the converting strategy may also present risks to the researcher. The researcher may walk into unfamiliar environments and naively engage in unsafe activities, which can lead to both emotional and physical challenges. Highly risky cases, for example, could be when the researcher tried to engage in criminal actions for understanding criminal life (Ferrell 1997), or to engage in dangerous sexual practices for exploring sextual deviance (Philaretou and Allen 2006). Less risky cases, such as becoming a street style blogger (Luvaas 2019) or a fashion model (Mears 2011), may not be physically dangerous, but the becoming processes have profound and long-lingering effects in the researcher's personal life and identity after the study, which could potentially present emotional and existential risks to the researcher (Luvaas 2019).

The reporting phase of autoethnographic research introduces ethical dilemmas particularly around the research integrity and the researcher's self-protection. Unlike most other research methods, in which data collection, analysis and reporting are clearly separate stages, autoethnography often has these activities occur simultaneously. As Wallendorf and Brucks (1993, 347) observed that autoethnograhers tend to rely on 'essentially a series of undocumented recollections employed while writing a manuscript rather than a systematic recording of experiences that was separately analysed'. A key risk during the reporting phase is the potential for misrepresentation or selective disclosure, where the researcher may unintentionally or deliberately modify details to enhance narrative coherence or impact. At the same time, selective disclosure is often necessary for the researcher's self-protection. Unlike personal autobiographical writing, autoethnographic accounts are intended for publication as scholarly work. Such blurred line between the private and the public requires careful decisions to balance authentic disclosure and self-protection.

When making difficult calculated decisions on what to reveal and what not to, researchers typically need to anticipate risks of self-harm that may occur after the work is published. For example, Lee (2018), when writing about her experience as a lesbian teacher in a rural school who endured harassment and intimidation from a neighbour, expressed concern that 'sharing such a weak and broken version of myself will have consequences for present and future key relationships. Colleagues in my current workplace know nothing of my experiences during this time. I worry that in presenting myself so vulnerably, I risk losing the respect of those I work alongside' (315).

Finally, published autoethnographic work can continue to affect the researcher's reputation, career, and social relationships in their personal lives, long after the research has been completed and published. For example, Rambo (2016) reflected on the significant professional consequences she faced, due to disclosing her personal history in her autoethnographic publications, as an exotic dancer in her late teens and early twenties. Her autoethnographies caused barriers to her career advancement and prevented her promotion to full professor. This association also caused reputational damage, as she was viewed as a professional risk within the academia. Colleagues and administrators even advised her on her appearance and conduct to reduce the stigma surrounding her past.

4.2. The vulnerable others involved in the researcher's autoethnographic narratives

While using autoethnography, the primary data are the autobiographies of the researcher. Such data are seen as owned by the researcher, and as a result, it is often assumed that the researcher has the autonomy to publish these data as they see fit. However, the interconnected nature of human relationships determines that autoethnographic reports inevitably involve others, who may be the researcher's partners, friends, family members, colleagues, students, neighbours, clients, or strangers, for example (Tullis 2013). Published autoethnographic research can thus inadvertently expose the identity of and sensitive information about others, which can further lead to many ethical risks. Ellis (2007, 14) reflects on the unique ethical complexity: 'When we write about ourselves, we also write about others. In so doing, we run the risk that other characters may become increasingly recognisable to our readers, though they may not have consented to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity; or, if they did consent, they might not understand exactly to what they had consented'.

For others featured in autoethnographic accounts, the publication can lead to feelings of being berated, exploited, or unfairly or wrongly represented. For example, Edwards (2021, 2) shared a negative experience when she noticed that she was described in another researcher's published autoethnographic narrative without her permission: 'I am somehow a vulnerable person hurt by the accusations made ... some of the claims were exaggerated, and some untrue. I felt silenced and judged. I had no way to offer a counter-narrative or further context'. In addition, published autoethnography can also potentially damage the relationship between the researcher and others. For one study, Ellis (2007) embedded herself deeply in two isolated fishing communities and made friends with the residents. After publishing her study, many community members felt exposed and misrepresented, despite Ellis's efforts to disguise their identities. The intimate details she shared about their personal lives, habits, and community dynamics led to feelings of betrayal, as the individuals believed their trust had been violated.

4.3. The vulnerable or emotionally unprepared audience

Autoethnographic work may significantly affect readers, although the impact of research publications on the audience is rarely considered in conventional research methods. Being evocative or triggering emotional and intellectual responses in the readership is

a curial quality of autoethnographies, because they are intended to communicate knowledge that can be felt (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Moreover, Bochner and Ellis (2006, 111) consider that autoethnography also creates a more intimate, inclusive and collaborative relationship between the researcher and the audience: 'Researchers, including the persons who experience autoethnography as audience members, are not externally situated on the sidelines of their inquiries. Rather, we are immersed as implicated beings who make possible and, in turn, are affected by the cultural accounts being represented'. Despite such great and unique value, this evocative power and inclusive researcher-reader relationship can also lead to ethical risks.

'Compelling an experience may prove ethically precarious, especially because audiences' reactions can exist on a rather long continuum, even when encountering the same text at the same time' (Tullis 2013, 255). The evocative nature of autoethnography can sometimes unintentionally provoke emotional distress or re-traumatisation, especially if the audience members are mentally unprepared for the material. Themes such as grief, terminal illness, or domestic violence can leave them feeling emotionally raw as they process both the narrative and its implications for their own lives. Thus, researcher's ethical responsibility in autoethnography should also include anticipating how the work will be received and interpreted by the audience, as well as preparing them for the potential intensity of emotions that may arise during their engagement with the narrative (Berry 2006; Tullis 2013).

5. When conventional ethical guidelines fall short

When using conventional research methods that involve collecting data from external participants, Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) or Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) require researchers to follow a clear set of protocols designed to safeguard participants' rights and wellbeing. Consequently, due to the researcher's dual role as both subject and investigator, autoethnographic studies are not always required to undergo traditional ethical approval processes. Even when required, such one-size-fits-all ethical guidelines often fail to adequately support researchers in practising autoethnography responsibly.

These conventional guidelines were originally developed with a focus on procedural ethics to guide medical and psychological research involving human subjects (Christians 2011). They were built upon several taken-for-granted assumptions: 1) there is a clear separation between the researcher and participants, 2) the research process has minimal impact on the researcher, 3) the primary focus is protecting the wellbeing of participants, 4) participants are strangers with no prior relationship to the researcher, 5) ethical practices can be standardised across diverse research contexts, 6) informed consent is a one-time effort, 7) research processes are predictable and can be controlled through predefined guidelines, and 8) it is unnecessary to consider what happens after the research publication. As autoethnography blurs the boundaries between art and science, researcher and researched, and private and public, these assumptions collapse, which necessitates a flexible and responsive ethical framework to address the unique challenges of autoethnographic research (Berry 2006; Chatham-Carpenter 2010; Ellis 2007; Lapadat 2017; Lee 2018; Luvaas 2019; Rambo 2007; Tolich 2010; Tullis 2013).

6. What can we do to use autoethnography ethically?

While conventional ethical guidelines often fall short, the foundational principles outlined in the Belmont Report – autonomy, beneficence, and justice – remain relevant to autoethnography. Autoethnographers should embrace these principles rather than resist them (Tullis 2013). The real challenge of conducting ethical autoethnography lies in reinterpreting and adapting these principles to address the unique demands and complexities of autoethnographic research. This emphasises the importance to view these principles not as rigid rules but as flexible frameworks that guide researchers in cultivating ethical judgement and navigating the ethical complexities of autoethnography.

Good autoethnography 'must show evidence of the autoethnographers' good efforts at adhering to ethical standards in protecting self and others' (Chang 2016b, 448–449). In this section, we synthesise these foundational ethical principles and share three strategies for ethical practice: 1) going beyond procedural ethics, 2) developing ethical judgement through meta-autoethnographies, and 3) integrating critical questions and principles throughout the autoethnographic process. By doing so, we aim to provide actionable guidance for navigating the ethical complexities inherent in this powerful, yet demanding, research method.

6.1. Going beyond procedural ethics

Research ethics is multidimensional (Ellis 2007). *Procedural ethics* is the one that researchers are most familiar with. It manifests as standardised guidelines commanded by the IRBs (e.g. obtaining informed consent before the study). *Situational ethics* (or *ethics in practice*) involves making ethical decisions in response to specific, often unpredictable and subtle situations that emerge during the research process. The practice of situational ethics relies on the researcher's reflexivity and ability to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics in the field. Ellis (2007, 4) further adds a third dimension that is particularly important to autoethnography – *relational ethics*, which 'recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work', encourages the researcher to 'deal with the reality and practice of changing relationships with our research participants over time', and requires the researcher to act with both their hearts and minds, acknowledge their bonds with involved others and carefully consider the impact of their actions on these relationships. More recently, Edwards (2021) proposes a fourth dimension for autoethnography, *ethics of the self* that focuses on the researcher's awareness and protection of their own emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Among the four dimensions, procedural ethics is the most straightforward, involving extensive paperwork and lengthy planning and approval processes before the study begins. However, Lapadat (2017) critiques IRBs for their narrow focus on procedural ethics and value-neutral and utilitarian orientation, which often prioritises institutional liability over addressing the nuanced ethical complexities of methods like autoethnography. Meanwhile, 'there is little comprehensive assessment of the short- and long-term risks to the researcher' and 'few postgraduate research training programs consider the health and well-being of researchers' (emerald and Carpenter 2015, 743–744).

By contrast, situational, relational, and self-focused ethics are far more critical for autoethnography, even though they are rarely explicitly required by IRBs. Nevertheless, when attempting to engage with these ethical dimensions, the challenge is, according to Ellis (2007, 5), 'that there are no definitive rules or universal principles that can tell you precisely what to do in every situation or relationship you may encounter, other than the vague and generic "do no harm"'. These ethical dimensions rely on the researcher's ability to cultivate refined ethical judgement – anticipating emerging ethical risks and making sound decisions throughout the research process. Developing this judgement requires significantly more time and experience than simply following an ethical planning and approval procedure. Moreover, it is also deeply influenced by cultural norms, interpersonal dynamics, and the ever-evolving nature of research contexts.

6.2. Developing ethical judgement through accumulating meta-autoethnographies

How can we cultivate ethical judgement in autoethnography? During this study, our ethical judgement has evolved through two key processes: 1) engaging with the meta-autoethnographies of other researchers to learn from their critical reflections, and 2) revisiting and analysing our own past experiences with introspective studies.

Our reflection resonates with Ellis's (2007, 5) observation that 'the good news is that we are accumulating more and more stories of research experiences that can help us think through our options'. This insight emphasises the significant value of experienced autoethnographers' autoethnographies of conducting autoethnography (i.e. meta-autoethnographies), particularly those that detail critical moments of ethical decision-making. Such narratives play a key role in shaping and guiding the ethical judgement of novice autoethnographers.

Additionally, novice autoethnographers can cultivate their ethical judgement by regularly reflecting on and writing about their own personal experiences of doing autoethnography, focusing on the crucial ethical moments they encounter during their research processes. As Ellis (2007, 5) explains that '[t]he conflicts I have experienced have taught me a great deal. By repeatedly questioning and reflecting on my ethical decisions, I have gained a greater understanding of the range of my choices and the kind of researcher I want to be with my participants'.

6.3. Guiding questions and principles for ethical autoethnography

Ultimately, we all have to first jump into the 'muddy' ethical space, and then learn to do it ethically through continuous reflection. To support this process, Tullis (2013, 256) provides a set of critical questions that, while unlikely to appear in IRB applications, are essential for researchers to consider before and during their autoethnographic studies.

- *Do you have the right to write about others without their consent?*
- *What effect do these stories have on individuals and your relationship with them?*

- *How much detail and which difficulties, traumas, or challenges are necessary to include to successfully articulate the story's moral or goal?*
- *Are you making a case to write (or not to write) because it is more or less convenient for you?*
- *Should you and will you allow participants to read and approve all of the stories about them? Or just those stories that you think are problematic or potentially hurtful?*

In the same work, Tullis (2013, 256–257) also synthesises previous ethical discussions among experienced autoethnographers into seven guiding principles for ethical autoethnography

(1) *Do no harm to self and others.*
(2) *Consult your IRB.*
(3) *Get informed consent.*
(4) *Practice process consent and explore the ethics of consequence.*
(5) *Do a member check.*
(6) *Do not present publicly or publish anything you would not show the persons mentioned in the text.*
(7) *Do not underestimate the afterlife of a published narrative.*

These questions and principles together can serve as a practical framework to guide novice autoethnographers through the ethical challenges they may encounter, and continuously develop their ethical judgement.

7. The Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice1

The previous sections of this paper mapped the ethical complexities of autoethnography and exposed the inadequacy of conventional ethical frameworks in addressing its unique challenges. Building on this foundation, the second part of this paper transitions from theoretical exploration to practical application. We introduce the *Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice* and its accompanying pre-study self-consent *ritual*. While tailored to support introspective design researchers within our faculty, these tools offer inspiration for broader adaptations. By fostering continuous ethical reflection, they aim to empower introspective researchers to navigate the situational, relational, and self-focused dimensions of research ethics in autoethnography, while avoiding the uncritical expansion of centralised, homogeneous, and bureaucratic ethics review processes.

7.1. Understanding the ethical challenges of autoethnography in our faculty

To better understand the ethical challenges of autoethnography within our faculty, allow diverse perspectives to shape the design, and ensure the outcomes resonate with researchers at various levels of expertise, we engaged with both novice and experienced researchers and an ethics expert through focus groups and interviews. This study received ethical approval from the HREC of TU Delft. All procedures adhered to the guidelines and regulations stipulated by the committee.

First, a focus group with three master's students explored their experiences and the risks and opportunities they faced when using introspective methods. Second, as experienced design researchers, two faculty members participated in semi-structured interviews and shared relevant insights from using introspective methods in projects that led to academic publications. Finally, a semi-structured interview with an ethics expert examined the best practices in research ethics, their applicability to introspective methods, and the limitations of existing guidelines.

Several key insights emerged from these engagements. First, there is a significant gap in the novices' awareness of ethical risks associated with autoethnography, which highlights the need for better educational resources and tools. Second, experienced researchers demonstrated a more nuanced approach, employing strategies like fictionalisation, anonymised collective narratives, and selective reporting to mitigate ethical risks, but also expressed a need for better tailored guidelines that address the dynamic nature of autoethnography. Third, unlike other research methods, strict research ethics preparation and review were not mandatory for introspective methods, though researchers occasionally consult the HERC for guidance. Finally, as discussed in the earlier sections, the standard research ethics review process, which was complex, text-intense, time-consuming, failed to support autoethnographic research. In fact, it often pushed researchers towards introspective methods to avoid these hurdles.

7.2. Iterative and collaborative development of the toolkit and ritual

Building on the insights gained thus far, we designed a toolkit for guiding introspective researchers through a pre-study self-consent ritual. This ritual can be practised alone (e.g. in solo autoethnography) or with others (e.g. in collaborative autoethnography). The term 'ritual' reflects the voluntary, deliberate, and reflective essence of this process. In contrast to the obligatory, impersonal, and bureaucratic nature of procedural ethics, this ritual empowers researchers to approach ethical preparation as a meaningful and personally chosen act of commitment.

The development of this toolkit and ritual was intended to integrate multidimensional ethical considerations, insights from meta-autoethnographies, and the crucial questions and principles for autoethnography. At the same time, we also prioritised making the ethical preparation process both practical and engaging. To ensure practicality, we set three design goals: 1) raising awareness of ethical risks in autoethnography, 2) encouraging anticipation of potential ethical dilemmas, and 3) fostering ongoing risk reflection and mitigation throughout the research process. To enhance engagement and inspiration, we explored interactive and creative approaches to ethical preparation, offering a contrast to conventional text-bound formats, such as lengthy ethical approval forms.

The development process was iterative and multifaceted, divided into three phases: 1) ideation and conceptualisation, 2) prototyping and refinement, and 3) finalisation and implementation. During ideation, we collaborated with two designers in brainstorming, individual ideation, and ChatGPT-assisted sessions, generating diverse concepts such as playful guides, risk-opportunity cards, and role-playing

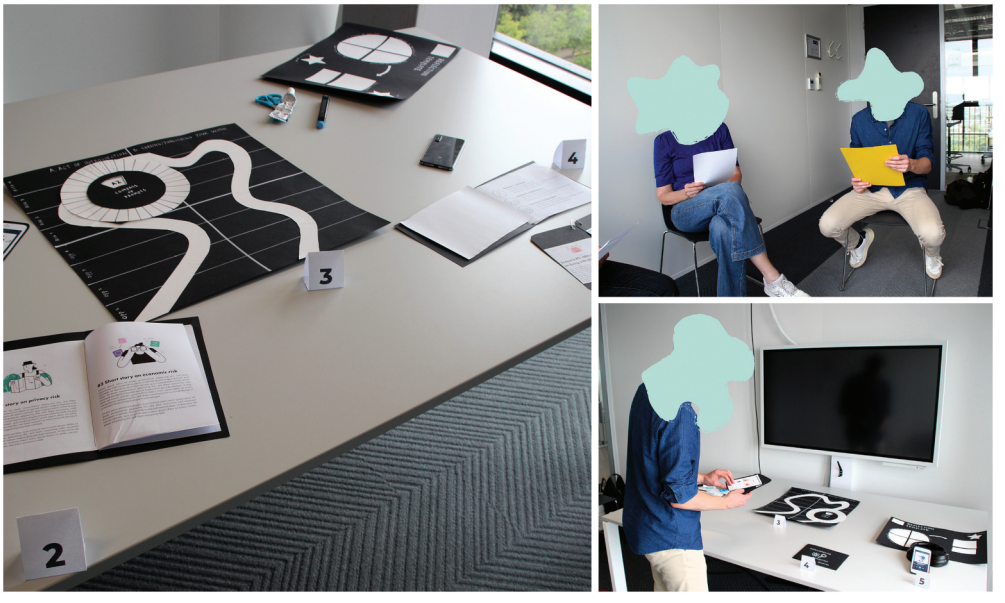

Figure 1. Prototyping and testing of early concepts.

games. Five key concepts (Figure 1) were prototyped and tested in role-playing sessions with researchers, which allowed us to iteratively refine ideas and identify essential components. The final toolkit synthesised these insights by incorporating decision trees, customisable frameworks and collaborative features to support auto-ethnographers. This process ensured the toolkit was both practical and theoretically grounded, supporting novice and experienced researchers in engaging with the self-consent ritual individually or collaboratively.

7.3. Introducing the Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice

The latest version of the toolkit[2] includes ten components, which we specify in Table 1. Together, all these components support researchers in identifying, reflecting on, and managing the ethical risks and opportunities in their autoethnographic research, offer them a practical and engaging approach to ethical use of introspective methods.

Under the guidance of this toolkit, a researcher can practise a self-consent ritual in the following steps. First, the researcher learns to use the toolkit by consulting the one-page manual or the 2-minute explainer video accessible via QR code (Figure 2, 1–3). Next, they explore vignette cards featuring illustrated, relatable stories of ethical dilemmas in introspective research, accompanied by activity cards that structure reflection based on Driscoll's (1994) model: 'what', 'so what', and 'now what' (Figure 2, 4–6). The researcher then documents key insights on the activity worksheet, which includes tables for assessing and prioritising risks by likelihood and impact. This structured record can be revisited and updated as the research evolves. Using the risk and opportunity poster and sticker sheets, the researcher visualises identified risks and opportunities and create

Table 1. Components of Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice.

Component	Description
Card Deck: Vignettes	Six story cards on real-life risks and opportunities in introspective design research.
Card Deck: Activities	Eight cards with structured exercises for identifying and managing ethical risks.
Activity Worksheet	A double-sided A2 sheet for documenting reflections and assessing risks.
Risk & Opportunity Poster	Infographic outlining risks and opportunities (front) and a DIY template for ethical reflection updates (back).
Sticker Sheets	Two sticker sheets for annotating and visualising risk dimensions and opportunity categories on the Risk & Opportunity Poster.
Risk & Opportunity Cards	Double-sided cards defining risk and opportunity categories that serve as quick-reference tools during research.
Manual	A one-page guide introducing the toolkit, its purpose, and a quick start, with a QR code to the explainer video.
Explainer Video	A 2-minute video on the toolkit, its purpose, and usage.
Resources & References Sheet	A sheet with additional materials for exploring ethics of introspective methods.
Packaging	An A4 cardboard box with a sleeve, designed for easy transport and distribution, including a QR code to the explainer video.

Figure 2. How to use the toolkit to facilitate a pre-study self-consent ritual.

a dynamic aid for ongoing ethical reflection. Finally, regular consultation of the toolkit and updates to the poster ensure continuous ethical awareness for emerging dilemmas throughout the project (Figure 2, 7–9). The toolkit can also facilitate shared ethical preparation and reflection among co-researchers. By engaging with the toolkit together, researchers can collaboratively document, discuss, and align their ethical considerations to anticipate and navigate ethical challenges.

8. Limitations and future development

The toolkit and ritual represent a preliminary yet significant step towards fostering the responsible use of autoethnography design research. However, several

limitations remain. While Driscoll's reflective framework offers a practical starting point, it risks oversimplifying the complex and dynamic nature of ethical dilemmas, particularly those arising from diverse cultural or relational contexts. Additionally, although the toolkit encourages both pre-study ethical preparation and ongoing reflection throughout the research process, it overlooks a crucial aspect of cultivating ethical judgement: *retrospective evaluation*. This omission became evident only during the reflective writing of this section.

Future iterations of the toolkit should incorporate mechanisms for retrospective reflection, enabling researchers to assess and learn from the ethical challenges they encounter during and after their studies. Enhancing the toolkit's cultural adaptability and its functionality in collaborative research settings are other important areas for improvement. Furthermore, integrating richer case studies and gathering broader user feedback will be essential for evolving the toolkit into a more comprehensive and inclusive resource. By recognising these limitations, we emphasise the importance of viewing the toolkit as a dynamic, iterative tool that evolves in response to the emerging needs and challenges of introspective design researchers.

9. Conclusion

This study explored the ethical complexities of autoethnography and highlighted the limitations of conventional ethical guidelines in addressing its unique challenges. By mapping ethical risks and proposing a multidimensional ethical approach, it advocates for a more responsible use of autoethnography and introspective methods in design research.

The Introspector's Toolkit for Responsible Practice and the self-consent ritual it facilitates emerged as a key contribution. They offer a structured yet adaptable resource to support design researchers in the ethical application of autoethnography. By encouraging researchers to view ethics as a lived and evolving process, the toolkit bridges the gap between procedural ethics and the realities of introspective research, guides researchers to engage with relational, situational, and self-focused dimensions of ethical responsibility.

Beyond its practical utility, the toolkit invites a broader dialogue on how autoethnography's introspective nature can mitigate sensitive risks in research. This study reframes introspection as an ethical commitment that requires researchers to balance reflexivity with accountability. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing evolution of ethical practices in design research and introspective methodologies more broadly.

Notes

1. Due to word limit, we focus on introducing the toolkit as the outcome, and only provide a concise summary of its development process in this paper. More details can be found in the MSc graduation report of the second author of this paper, available at https://repository.tudelft.nl/record/uuid:be5e23ae-d5e3-44da-be2f-9cf1560784d3.

2. The digital version of the toolkit is available from https://diopd.org/designing-for-responsible-practice-in-introspective-design-studies/, where readers can find more practical risk mitigation techniques.

Acknowledgement

We extend our sincere gratitude to the editors and reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback on the earlier version of this manuscript. This work was supported by the MaGW VICI, grant number 453-16-009, of The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) awarded to Pieter M.A. Desmet.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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