

Editorial

Autoethnography in Social Work

It has been a pleasure to have edited this set of papers for *Social Work & Social Sciences Review*. It comes on the back of a similar Special Issue on Autoethnography in the *British Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, co-edited with Kevin Gournay and Barrie Green. A book on Autoethnography in Psychology and Mental Health, is currently in preparation with Alec Grant. Robert and I are relative newcomers to the field of Autoethnography, and indeed stumbled across it by accident. We had written a paper, 'Why Choose Psychology?', and in the peer review process one of the reviewers said we needed to describe more about our autoethnographic method. This led to us both reading around the topic, and it is fair to say that from then on, we were hooked (Hurst & Carson, 2021). When Professor Marcus Chiu, Professor Peter Huxley and myself became the new editorial team for *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, I suggested doing the Special Issue. Now here we are.

While neither Robert nor myself is a social worker, across 30 years in the British National Health Service I worked with many social work practitioners in the field of mental health. Most of the contributions in the Special Issue are from social workers. It is fitting that the first paper in the Special Issue has been written by Professors Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis. They are two of the leading world authorities in this field and are most associated with evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). They offer an introduction to the field. They comment that 'autoethnographers [...] seek to put their readers in the experience, appealing to their hearts and senses as well as their intellects'. The personal stories offered by autoethnographers invite their readers to both think and feel. Their reflection that 'Autoethnography is not only a research methodology, but also a way of life,' is a further powerful statement. These are inspiring words and a wonderful call to social science researchers to try out this comparatively new approach for themselves.

Professor Stanley Witkin has written *Narrating Social Work through Autoethnography*, (Witkin, 2014), and at the time of writing, this is the only published book on social work and autoethnography. In his contribution, Stanley bemoans the lack of progress in the field. He argues that autoethnography has the potential to highlight important aspects of human experience, as it aligns with the values and aims of social work. He also notes its power to be transformative. He suggests authors use a 'more narrative, literary and reflexive style.' This presents some risks for the author, and might lead to rejection and non-publication of the material. Despite this, Witkin argues that autoethnography can be a very helpful practice resource. As he notes, autoethnography

‘surfaces voices and standpoints lost in aggregations of data.’

The next paper, by Ulrika Hansson Blomkvist and Mats Niklasson, tells the remarkable story of how a Swedish social worker in London developed a caring relationship with a young man who was both street homeless and someone with a drug addiction. The paper describes the early encounters between Ulrika and James, the young man. Ulrika reports that when she met James, she had the thought that she was the person who was going to save him. She believed that James’ survival was her responsibility. She states ‘To me nothing is impossible and never has been. That’s how I was raised, without limitations.’ Ulrika talks about the battles she fought with services to get James the help he needed and how she eventually helped him to settle in Sweden. How often do we walk by on the other side of the street and try to pretend the homeless person is not there? Ulrika was indeed the ‘social worker as Good Samaritan’.

A different application of autoethnography can be witnessed in the paper by Professor Alec Grant, Jamie Barnes, Trude Klevan and Alison Donaldson. The paper describes Alec’s decision to leave the South-East Coast Autoethnography Network. Having helped to co-found the Network, Alec left because he felt it had become, ‘patronising, infantilising and time wasting.’ He put this in an e-mail to the current Network co-ordinators Jamie and Alison. The paper comprises a series of e-mail exchanges between the protagonists. Jamie suggests to Alec that the ‘philosophical autoethnographic approach that you are proposing is just one means of developing autoethnography and not the only one.’ This brings a confession from Alec that he can be ‘harsh, tactless, dismissive, sometimes cruel in effect, rather than intention...’ Alec further confirms, ‘I am an irascible man by disposition, with a way of being in the world that is often combative.’ He counters by saying that he expends considerable effort in helping to develop new autoethnographers. Joining the conversation later, Alison makes the case for ‘different flavours of autoethnographers.’ Trude makes some fascinating concluding remarks to the paper. ‘We learn from those who we may not think we have much to learn from.’ She further states, ‘in moving into the field of autoethnography, a multiplicity of voices need to participate.’ Indeed, ‘a polyphony of voices big and small, new and old, are needed.’ Trude ends by stating, ‘nurturing is best grounded in kindness.’ A polyphony of voices indeed.

I worked with Nick Hervey many years ago. Indeed, we were co-editors on a book, *Collaborative Community Mental Health Care*, (Watkins et al., 1996). In his paper, he talks about his career in mental health social work. He trained at Exeter University in the 1970s and in 1984, he moved to work at the Maudsley Hospital in South London. In his first job he worked with the legendary psychiatrist, Professor Michael Shepherd. Having a similar interest in the history of psychiatry, he got on very well with Professor Shepherd. He went on to work with several other famous psychiatrists, such as Professor Gerald Russell and Professor Janet Treasure in the Eating Disorders Service. Nick was one of the first mental health professionals to be trained in the new Cognitive Analytic Therapy. He felt fortunate to be able to work

in a job that combined ‘practice, research, teaching and further learning.’ He later moved into the community and helped establish new Integrated Community Mental Health Teams. He commented that the unique selling point of the Maudsley was ‘its link to any and all new developments in mental health.’ Nick was best known for his work around user and carer involvement. He helped set up a number of innovative community services such as Creative Routes, Cool Tan Arts and Mental Fight Club. He also helped with anti-stigma approaches such as Time to Change. In a return to his interest in history, he helped develop the ‘Bethlem Museum of the Mind.’ Truly, a remarkable social work career.

Val Gant starts her paper by stating that she is at heart a social work practitioner. Now an academic, she suggests that collaborative autoethnography offers a way of bridging the gap between practice and research. Her own lived experience as a parent-carer to a daughter with a severe learning disability has informed her work. Val highlights the tremendous opportunities offered by collaborative autoethnography. She notes the huge potential to have strong non-academic collaborations. She states that the process of writing is not linear and ‘may involve multiple conversations, meetings, discussions and the sharing of drafts and notes.’ Given the concerns expressed by Professor Witkin about the lack of progress towards embracing autoethnography in social work, as an educator, Val has a key role to play in developing the approach.

The final paper in the Special Issue has been written by Rob Balfour. He starts by telling us about his history of being sexually abused while in local authority care. Some of the boys in care with him went on to take their own lives. He comments, ‘The shadow of my lost childhood lingered, hidden within my consciousness. Shadows are not so easily escaped.’ Rob uses a series of metaphors from the UK television series Doctor Who, to draw parallels between his own life and that of the Doctor. He describes a number of business ventures that preceded his later emergence as an activist for male survivors of sexual abuse. It was the publication of the Waterhouse Report, *Lost in Care*, in 2000, that laid bare the abuses that had taken place in care homes in North Wales. When he read the report Rob notes, ‘I recall sitting in front of my patio doors staring out into the now heaving rain and crying for what seemed hours.’ He then details the difficulties he encountered getting his sexual abuse trauma recognised by professionals. Eventually finding a decent therapist led Rob ‘to embark on what is now a 22-year odyssey of social action and posttraumatic growth’. By any account this is a remarkable story. It shows the potential of autoethnography for capturing lived experience. Rob ends his moving account thus,

I hope I have brought a little hope to those I have supported during the last 22 years. That was always my intention for them and me. Where I stand is where I fall indeed.

This special issue has been a journey. From germinating the idea, to approaching

contributors. We have made new connections. Discovered new perspectives. Each article landing in our inboxes was a moment of joy – a fresh, exciting perspective. We hope that you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed compiling it.

In this editorial, Jerome has provided some wisdom from his long career as a psychologist. A practitioner and a researcher. Robert is at the opposite end of that scale – a newly-qualified counsellor and early-career researcher. Such dichotomies in writing partnerships can make for great perspectives within autoethnography. Robert gives some concluding thoughts.

In the helping professions, listening is a vital skill. The ability to listen to the self is the most important of all. This is what is required for autoethnography, making the two a good fit. I have certainly found this as a counsellor. Throughout my training, it was hammered home to me that in order to be in a position to help others, it is of great importance that one takes care of oneself. As such, self-awareness is not only a good tool to help wellbeing, but a vital part of the job. This is no different for social workers.

Autoethnography is a method by which this reflectivity becomes reflexivity. Experiences and emotions are linked with theories, grounded in social context. Understanding of the self becomes a vehicle for academic discourse. For illustrating otherwise abstract models, putting them into a human, emotional context. Showing how these academic ideas work in practice, in the real world.

Social workers, like many helping professionals, will not necessarily have the time to conduct extensive research. If they notice something within the course of practice, they do not necessarily have time to pause, to gather participants, to get ethical approval. They may not have the resources to write extensive literature reviews, create questionnaires, analyse data. This should not exclude them from academia. Rather, with such a wealth of experience out in the field, they should be fountains of knowledge. This is what autoethnography allows for. For this depth of memory, this wealth of relevant experience to be harnessed, to be put into the context needed for academia, and then shared with peers.

This peer-to-peer sharing is another area in which autoethnography shines. It is something we all do on a daily basis - whether that be through casual chats with colleagues, or in team meetings. But autoethnography is much more considered, takes time, goes deeper. It allows for creativity in how stories are shared, how they are presented, how they are grounded in the literature. It allows for the writer to blend their talents as a professional with their talents as a writer and as an academic. It utilises these strengths, rather than demanding an adherence to rigid research rules. It is a much more even playing field.

This special issue demonstrates these ideas wonderfully. Social workers understand their experiences as helpers through the surrounding literature. This helps the writer better understand their experiences through an academic lens and gives the reader insight into how academia 'bleeds' through to real life. Autoethnography can be a vehicle for understanding relationships. It gives insight into reflections, makes them

a teaching tool. It may also give the reader pause for thought. Those who have been through the care system can do the same, presenting social workers with a different perspective on these theories. Not only should we ask how concepts from the literature play out in the world for us, but how they are felt by the people with whom we work.

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