

Autoethnography and social work: Strange bedfellows or complementary partners?

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Abstract: Despite autoethnography's congruence with social work's values and aims, such as its focus on social justice and marginalized lives, there has been a dearth of publications using autoethnography in social work journals and books. Possible reasons for this situation include the dominance of conventional research, institutional barriers, and the challenges of conducting an autoethnographic study such as writing in a more reflexive, literary, and narrative style. I describe the strengths of autoethnography in relation to social work research, practice, and education, using examples from my early experiences with autoethnography and my later use of autoethnography as an approach to educational enrichment. Although autoethnography has much to offer social work and should assume a more prominent position as an approach to inquiry and professional development, I question whether this will occur without changes to current academic, institutional, and philosophical views. Nevertheless, focusing attention on autoethnography as in this special issue seems like a promising development.

Keywords: autoethnography; social work; social work education; social work research; social work practice; alternative writing

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Date of first (online) publication: 5th December 2022

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Val Gant for her helpful comments on an earlier draft and to Jerome Carson for initiating this special issue on autoethnography and the invitation to contribute a paper.

Introduction

When I first discovered autoethnography, two things piqued my interest: autoethnography's potential for illuminating important aspects of human experience not found in conventional research and its congruence with social work's values and aims. As someone troubled by the lack-of-fit between social work's progressive agenda and its embrace of conventional research with its inherently conservative orientation (e.g., Witkin, 1991), autoethnography seemed a promising alternative that could enrich social work knowledge and practice.

As I saw it, autoethnography was oriented toward revealing cultural and societal contexts of meaning and the relational dynamics that construct and regulate our lives. It provided a potentially valuable window into marginalized lives and unnoticed stigma and amplified silenced voices. In short, it had transformative potential and was a perfect match with social work aims (see, for example, the global agenda of the International Federation of Social Workers, <https://www.ifsw.org/>).

But there was something else. The early autoethnographies I read touched me in meaningful and personal ways that conventional research had never done. I remember tears welling up as I read Carol Ronai's (1996) account of her childhood with a single mother with serious cognitive issues and the abuse she suffered. I thought, who cries when reading a research paper? Similarly, Tillmann-Healy's (1996) moving account of her struggles with bulimia, deepened my understanding of this issue in a way that I had never obtained from a traditional research account. As she accurately stated, it was 'understand[ing] what bulimia *means* to those who live with it every day and what it *says* about our culture' (p. 80).

Having started my professional career as a staunch behaviorist, these were startling revelations that raised important questions. Foremost among them: could research be conducted and written in a way that was informative, accessible, and engaging? After years of coaxing and cajoling social work students to read research articles (understanding them was another matter), this was an intriguing development.

Autoethnography's emphasis on writing and reflexivity also resonated with my belief that scientific writing was not a transparent medium for representing facts, but a literary genre; a rather restrictive one. When I was editor of the journal, *Social Work*, I addressed this topic by having a special issue on alternative writing formats – personal essay, memoir, and autoethnography - and in my opening editorial presented a critique of scientific writing (Witkin, 2000).

Consistent with my early impressions, Ann Donahue's (2000) autoethnography about her struggles with depression and how conflicting therapists' views of its etiology and appropriate treatment exacerbated her difficulties embodied the contextual, lived-experience quality of autoethnography that I believed were so valuable. Incorporating diary entries, she describes her struggle to navigate the different messages she was receiving. 'How can those in the midst of the greatest

emotional crisis of their lives understand and cope with such radically different messages in what they 'should' or 'should not' expect to be feeling, doing for themselves, receiving from others, benefiting from or taking control over?' (p. 435). She concluded with sage advice for practitioners:

... whether medication or talk therapy or both; whether peer intervention and recovery or self-empowerment – all become pointless if not within a context of understanding of the continuum of the mediating intellect and the deeply personal differences of choices and values, and of the lived experience of immobilizing anguish. Otherwise, that confused, battered psyche will be left to meander among treatment theories presented as dichotomies. (Donahue, 2000, p. 437)

I was hooked.

Many years later, I tried to demonstrate the value of autoethnography to social work by editing a book, *Narrating Social Work Through Autoethnography* (2014). Although few autoethnographies had been published in social work journals prior to this publication, the quality of the authors' contributions and positive reviews led me to feel optimistic that the ensuing years would see a substantial increase in autoethnographic studies. This has not been the case. A Google Scholar search (July, 2022) on the words 'autoethnography' and 'social work' in a publication's title, generated about 26 hits of which five were reviews of my book.

Of course, being exposed to autoethnography doesn't mean acceptance. Like most ideas or approaches that differ from normative views, something needs to prime the pump, to make you curious and interested to learn more. This is my goal for the remainder of this article.

Autoethnography in social work¹

While autoethnography is far from mainstream in other fields, relative to social work, its value has been increasingly recognized.² So why hasn't social work been a leader, or even a significant contributor, of autoethnographic inquiry? This is the question I turn to first followed by some reasons why this situation should change, and how we might begin to bring that about.

Why autoethnography retains a marginal position within social work?

There are several interdependent explanations for this situation. Historically, social work's tenuous professional and academic status has led to its privileging of conventional scientific metatheory, methodology, methods, and goals as a means of gaining legitimacy and status. Portraying itself as a science and adopting scientific

methodology as its primary knowledge generating approach, helped social work to fortify its claim as a profession (Blau, 2017). While these efforts have had some success, this conservative approach to knowledge generation has limited the development of social work's progressive social agenda. Alternative approaches to inquiry like autoethnography that are more direct expressions of social work values have been slow to be recognized and when they have, their status is at least a notch below traditional research approaches.

A prominent expression of social work's privileging of conventional research, at least in the U.S., is its focus on effectiveness as designated by the term 'evidence-based.'³ In the U.S., human service organizations are eager (and sometimes required), to assert that their practices are evidence-based. Typically, this designation is taken to mean that the services the organization or practitioner provides are supported by research presumably assuring current and potential clients and funders of their effectiveness (the ability to achieve specified outcomes). The value of evidence-based practice is a complex issue subject to many of the same critiques as conventional research such as converting peoples' problems into operationalized variables, and in the current neo-liberal climate it has become a marketing and political tool.⁴

Research is seen as producing knowledge-justified true beliefs. It does so through its methodology and methods that meet certain criteria (Bauman, 1993). Once generated this knowledge is reified, existing apart from persons or from the site of its production and applied (generalized or 'translated') to other settings.

Knowledge implies understanding (in contrast, for example, to information). However, this understanding is bounded by the assumptions and methodology of the research. Because language is taken as unproblematic, it is assumed that what we call something denotes rather than constitutes its reality. As a result, lived experience – the focus of autoethnography - tends to be converted into the language of research such as variables, theoretical constructs, and quantitative expressions.

Autoethnography is a poor fit with this model. Its position between literature and science, its anti-realist, social constructionist orientation, its often explicit, social agenda, and evocative character, do not line up with the requirements of conventional research.

Not only does autoethnography represent an extreme alternative, but it challenges many sacrosanct or assumed presuppositions of conventional inquiry. Rather than causality and effectiveness, autoethnography's goals are more aligned with sensitization, conscientization, thick description, illumination, connection, and social change. For example, autoethnographers do not assume a realist version of the world in which the Real is discoverable. Rather, autoethnography focuses on meaning generation within cultural and social contexts. There is no separation between researcher and research participant, nor does inquiry follow strict protocols.

In contrast to producing knowledge that conforms to a methodological protocol, autoethnographers are interested in how knowledge is constructed by people in

their actual lives, and the meanings and functions those beliefs have within their social context. Truth as an expression of correspondence or efficient causality is not a goal, rather it is viewed as a partial, historically, culturally, and socially situated authoritative claim. There can be no 'immaculate perception' of reality. In place of seeking 'the establishment of reliable, value neutral truths about our designated segment of the objective world' (Gergen, 1990, p. 26), autoethnography generates narrative truth. It replaces the science story with its particular criteria and representations, with another kind of story focused on relationships, meaning, enactment, sense-making, emotions and struggle. In short, lived experience.

For autoethnographers, narratives not only represent but constitute reality (Bruner, 1991). Similar to what Van Maanen (1988) calls impressionist tales, truth is replaced by verisimilitude, coherence, interest, and the potential to promote progressive change.

Pragmatic issues

In addition to philosophical and methodological differences, there are practical barriers to the greater acceptance of autoethnography. Even for those interested in autoethnography, conducting one presents challenges such as writing in a more narrative, literary, and reflexive style, risking self-disclosure and rejection, institutional and publication issues. Given space limitations I will focus primarily on writing.

As a type of narrative, writing takes on a greater importance in autoethnography than in conventional research.⁵ Unlike conventional research, there is no template (for example, introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis, results, discussion), for authors to follow. Instead, author/researchers need to be a conscious not only of content, but of form, providing 'temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries' (Frank, 2010, p. 2) to the lives being written about.

Crafting a compelling, believable, coherent narrative is a demanding task. For academics it may require unlearning the writing genre into which they have been socialized 'that use highly specialised vocabulary, that efface the personal and flatten the voice, that avoid narrative in deference to dominant theories and methodologies of the social sciences' and learning to use literary skills that they have tried to avoid (Modjeska, 2006, p. 31, cited in Denshire, 2014). In working with authors on autoethnographies (Witkin, 2014), I found that senior academics were often most challenged by this kind of writing.

Autoethnographic writing gets to the nitty-gritty of human experience. Author/researchers want readers to feel their feelings, to experience their struggles, and to care about the persons being written about. Achieving this kind of connection requires conscious use of literary devices. For example, in her autoethnography

about losing her sight, Heidi Pfau (2007) masterfully uses dramatization and onomatopoeia to communicate her initial experience of being instructed in the use of a white cane.

Until that appointment, the cane had stayed folded on top of my refrigerator. I didn't want to be reminded of its presence in my life . . . I felt the gravel driveway roll under my shoes' rubber soles. The cane's elastic mechanism startled me as it sprung open. I held the rubber handle in my right hand and felt the flat edge where I was instructed to place my thumb. Tap. Tap. Tap. As the cane moved awkwardly in front of me, I fought the flood of emotion that consumed my inner world. Tap. Each step felt like a mile of uncertainty. Tap. A single tear rolled down my cheek. Tap. Tap. Potholes and cracks in the sidewalks became treacherous obstacles beneath my feet. Tap. Tap. The cane's movements were uncoordinated. Tap. Although I'm sure the rehabilitation professional said something to me during this lesson, I did not hear him. Tap. Tap. Tap. I heard only tapping. I felt only the shaky ground underneath my feet, the single tear on my cheek and the painful reality in my right hand. I was blind. (Pfau, 2007, p. 404)

Reading this passage, I could hear the tapping of Heidi's cane and feel the swell of emotions it evoked. How different would my reader's experience be, if it was simply a 'neutral' description of her learning to use a cane?

This passage also illustrates another important feature of autoethnographic writing: showing versus telling. Although a common mantra to fiction writers, showing is something academics, taught the virtues of invisible authorship and the use 'objective' language, have shunned. Succinctly put, 'Telling informs, while showing seeks to evoke and connect' (Spinazola, Ellis, and Bochner, 2021, p. 40). The difference is nicely illustrated in a sentence attributed to Anton Chekhov who is reputed to have originated the concept: 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.' More generally, showing uses actions, thoughts, words and sensory expressions to enhance readers' sense of the experience.

An expression of author transparency in autoethnography is reflexivity. According to Dean (2017, p. 2), reflexivity refers to 'how a researcher's personal characteristics (such as their 'race' and ethnic background, social class, and their general habitus and social disposition), and their position in the field of research (their research supervisors and colleagues, career position or similar), affects their research practice and their results.' Textually, reflexivity is related to authorial presence and the impossibility of remaining outside of one's text. Our beliefs, values, and commitments will influence what we research, how we research, and how we interpret and represent our findings. For autoethnographers, reflexivity may also include reflections on the process of writing and its possible impact.

Allan Irving's (2014) autoethnography about cross-dressing which 'had been a clouded secret for a long time' (p. 261) is a striking illustration of reflexivity.

I am always excited by the textures of the 'female' clothes I wear, and I hoped my writing could feel and express the textures of a life. Once I began writing, I found that the thread, once pulled, kept unraveling into complexities that had been hidden, a territory of the unknown, a territory of indiscernibility. On several occasions long periods of time went by when I couldn't write blocked by the absolute unsayableness of what most would probably see as the simplest of things. I would wait, a patient outlasting, until the whisperings of the past would again speak, until I imagined stones on fire, tulips in winter gardens, a song of loss that could break the hearts of beasts, a dark moon edged with fire and blood, until I was caught off-guard as in a sun shower. (Irving, 2014, p. 262)

Autoethnographies are often transgressive and therefore entail risk. Denshire (2014) notes,

In order to write auto-ethnography you cannot feel completely at home in your discipline and the discomfort experienced at stepping outside your own received frame is part of the auto-ethnographic task. (p. 834)

Undertaking such risk, as Irving did, illustrates another quality which may present challenges for those contemplating using this approach: courage. It's not a word you often hear associated with research, but one very relevant to autoethnography in which the authors may reveal information about themselves that was previously private, discover things about themselves which are unpleasant, or make themselves vulnerable to critique or even condemnation. As Lapadat (2017) reflects:

In telling one's own stories publicly without the protection of anonymity, an autoethnographic researcher risks stigma (Visse & Niemeijer, 2016), negative judgments by university colleagues, and undesired career consequences. In having the courage to make the private visible, autoethnographers embrace personal vulnerability but cannot know how it will play out as the written material takes on a life of its own. (Lapadat, 2017, p. 594)

Although autoethnographers may consider their work as partial and bounded by a particular time and social context, others may view it as an authoritative account, frozen in time. Dashper (2015, p. 513) comments, 'Once an autoethnography is published in the public domain aspects of the researcher's life and/or character are exposed and readers will interpret these narratives in ways the author may not have expected.' This risk-taking and the courage to embrace it, contributes to autoethnography's authenticity and its impact on readers.

Brief comments on other barriers.

Autoethnography is not being taught in social work programs so students are unlikely to be exposed to it. Although U.S. doctoral programs emphasize research training, they overwhelmingly favor traditional quantitative approaches (Oswald et al., 2022; Drisko et al., 2015). Oswald et al. (2022, p. 114) note, 'Forms of scholarly inquiry more aligned with justice-oriented practice, such as community-based methods, are very often diminished by the neoliberal academic regime that values profits over people, order over chaos, and standardization over complexity.' It is common in the doctoral course I currently teach for only one or two students to have heard of autoethnography. Finding faculty who are familiar with autoethnography or who recognize it as dissertation-worthy research may prove difficult. If successful there is the additional challenge of obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board (e.g., Forber-Pratt, 2015).

Social work academics face similar challenges when presenting their work to supervisors, tenure and promotion committees,⁶ or review boards. Also, publishing their work, particularly in social work journals, can be difficult. Hospitable journals are few and editors and reviewers are unlikely to have the background to evaluate autoethnography using appropriate criteria.⁷ Applying traditional criteria is like using the rules of one language game (to use a Wittgenstein phrase) to understand a different one. For example, a concept like validity when applied traditionally, is not applicable since what validity attempts to assess – how well a measure reflects 'reality' - is not part of the metatheory of autoethnography. This is not to suggest that such concepts should be discarded, rather that the scope of evaluative criteria would need to be broadened and applied situationally to autoethnography.

Alternative criteria might include reflexivity, substantive contributions, the significance of the cultural/social context, aesthetic merit, and how well the text holds readers' interest (Ellis, 2004, Richardson 2003).⁸ Also relevant are criteria related specifically to narrative as a form of representation; for example, the influence of the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008),⁹ the influence of other narratives (such as a story about being a survivor of abuse is connected to other stories related to men, relationships, cultural violence, and human development), and 'the circumstances in which the narrative is assembled and its intended audience' (Witkin, 2014, p. 15).

How Autoethnography Can Enhance Social Work Research, Practice, and Education?

Despite these obstacles, there is a strong case to be made, some touched on at the beginning of this essay, for autoethnography's potential contribution to

social work as a research approach, as a practice resource, and as a source of an educational enrichment.¹⁰

Crossing all three areas is autoethnography's focus on social justice: exposing systems of oppression and inequality and making subjugated and silenced knowledge visible. As Scott succinctly states, 'At its core, autoethnography is a social justice method' (Scott, 2022, p. 151). Drawing upon Rose (2022) he elaborates:

[Autoethnography] contributes not only to enriching our collective knowledges about ourselves and our world, but also to the constructive ways of envisioning and enacting a just future... address[ing] issues of inequity based upon race, class, gender, orientation, ability, patriarchy, consumption, political economy, and/or ideology, among many others. (Scott, 2022, p. 148)

For social work researchers the perspective of what has been termed critical autoethnography is particularly apposite. Rather than viewing research as a passive endeavor in which the extant world is categorized and causal linkages sought, there is an intentional interest in 'identifying and remedying social harms and injustices' (Adams, 2017, p. 63) and 'build[ing] new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices' (Hill Collins, p. 135, cited in Holman Jones, 2018). Boylorn and Orbe (2021, p. 8) expand upon this characterization:

Critical autoethnography is concerned with culture and power, and by extension, social constructions of cultural identities and intersectionality in the context of social inequalities. It requires self-interrogation and cultural accountability through a shifting of the gaze from Others to the cultural constructs, social circumstances, and oppressive inequalities that bind us. Critical autoethnography promotes critical self-reflexivity and cultural commentary to examine embodied experiences, relational encounters, and intercultural conundrums. Accordingly, it moves beyond simply documenting an experience to deconstructing it through critical analysis. (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021)

While researching this topic I resurfaced an old issue (1998) of the journal *Social Work* from the time I was editor-in-chief. It was a commemorative issue in honor of social work's centennial. Potential contributors were asked to submit manuscripts that looked at social work's history related to their topic and to propose recommendations for the future. I was curious to see how autoethnography would fit with their views.

Interestingly, the themes that emerged as defining characteristics of social work were 'a commitment to social change (activism) and social justice, the obligation to serve those who are poor and vulnerable, and a broad, contextual orientation toward individual and social problems' (Witkin, 1998, pp. 3-4). Additionally, one of the articles (Huff, 1998), discussed the use of photography by social work reformers in

the early 20th century to document the social conditions and the plight of people in difficult circumstances. In my summarizing editorial I wrote, 'It underscores the importance of crafting our messages to touch people's hearts as well as their minds. In fact, emotional appeals may be more important if our aim is to incite people to action' (Witkin, 1998, p. 6). This resonated strongly with autoethnographic narratives that evoke empathy and compassion, especially toward people who are 'not like us.'

Not surprisingly, social workers who have engaged in autoethnography have been drawn to this critical orientation (e.g., Hernandez-Carranza, Carranza, and Grigg, 2021; Krumer-Nevo, 2009; Gupta, 2017; Oswald, Bussey, and Thompson, 2022). In my opinion, adding this approach as a legitimate and significant expression of social work research is in keeping with the professed aims of the profession and would be 'future forming' (Gergen, 2015), rather than status quo or incremental change oriented, 'shift[ing] our priorities from investments in establishing truths and solidifying ideal practices, to efforts that actively mold desired futures' (Gergen, 2016, p. 3).

Other features of autoethnography would benefit practice. According to Deitering (2017, p. 10), 'to develop meaningful practice knowledge and to theorize from practice, we need to do localized, personal, embodied, affective, deeply situated, critical, reflective research. Autoethnography is a method that allows the researcher to do all of those things.'

Autoethnography provides a narrative portal into lives and social experiences that are rarely seen or heard. It does so by 'show[ing] us concrete daily details of people whose lives have been underrepresented or not represented at all, help[ing] us to reduce their marginalization, [and] show[ing] us how partial and situated our understanding of the world is' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

Autoethnography surfaces voices and standpoints lost in aggregations of data. It makes visible everyday lived experience and those that are private. Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones (2017) explain:

Autoethnographers can write about experiences that happen in private contexts, such as the bedroom or bathroom, or everyday interactions when others make offensive comments, or internal feelings of dissonance or confusion. For example, how might we study racist comments in everyday settings? It is impractical to create such a study in a laboratory setting where our purposes would not be disclosed. We could interview others about racist remarks they hear or make, but these others may not remember or admit to making these statements nor recognize or define their remarks as racist. However, the use of personal experience permits autoethnographers to describe and record the ways in which racism is experienced in the most mundane of settings.(Adams et al., 2017, p. 4).

These experiences can be difficult for people to speak about because of their

personal nature, association with feelings of shame or guilt, or because they do not know how to articulate them. For practitioners, learning about ‘under-the-radar’ life experiences of their clients can increase sensitivity to a person’s or group’s commonplace but formative experience illuminating how selves are socially constructed in different contexts. It can also provide insight into the struggles of those who have been marginalized or who have been malignantly positioned (Sabat, 2003), such that their attempts to communicate their subjectivity are not taken seriously.

Autoethnography’s substantive contributions to practice are also useful. It does this by ‘linking analysis and action by presenting the insights of theory in context, in practice and performance, and in people’s lives’ (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 7).

By blurring the research-practice boundary autoethnography provides a seamless way of addressing the ‘oft-chagrined’ practice-research gap (for example, Teater, 2017). Rather than assuming a gap, reifying it, and trying to ‘translate’ research outcomes for practice settings (and convince practitioners of their value), autoethnography integrates research and practice by producing actionable knowledge, ‘putting theory *into action* through storytelling’ (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 6, emphasis in original). The focus is on theorizing, ‘doing theory,’ rather than theory per se (Holman Jones, 2016). This narrative, theorizing approach is similar to the approach practitioners use with their clients, hearing stories and generating new ones that can be performed in their everyday lives. Thus, rather than bridge the alleged gap, it is dissolved (Witkin, 2011, 2017).

The above section on practice also applies to social work students as the vast majority will become practitioners. Pedagogically, autoethnographic inquiry is accessible and interesting. It is research that students actually read and absorb. As a teacher of research, I can attest to this difference and to the kinds of rich, highly engaged class discussions autoethnography evokes.

I found having social work students write their own autoethnographies to be an eye-opening experience. Writing as a form of inquiry becomes real with recognizable consequences such as a deeper understanding of how the cultural/social context influenced how they and others interpreted and reacted to their experience.

When I first began assigning autoethnography, I was surprised at the range of topics students chose to research, for example, Attention Deficit Disorder, death of a parent or sibling, a cancer diagnosis, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, child abuse, adoption, mental illness, gender and sexual identity, rape, and self-harm, especially since I was clear that this was not being written solely for themselves but for others who might benefit from their analyses. Relevant too was that the topics were typical of problems they would address with their clients. Conducting an autoethnography increased students’ sensitivity to the difficulty of expressing a life experience that felt shameful, embarrassing, or negative and how dominant understandings shaped their views and reactions.

As part of my assignment I had students compare their lived experience regarding the topic they were writing about to the research literature on that topic. They became aware of what was missing from conventional research accounts and where there was overlap. Their analyses also revealed how different ways of 'linguaging' and framing issues, invited different interpretations and interventions. The exercise also sensitized them to how, as 'evidence-based' practitioners, there would be a tendency to redefine others' subjectivity in terms prescribed by research rather than their experience.

Another useful exercise was having the students hold a dialogue between the self they were writing about in their autoethnography and the self that was writing the autoethnography. What did each want to know about the other? What questions did they want to ask? Afterwards they reviewed the dialogue for what was revealed, noticed, and not noticed. What seemed important, then and now? What did their dialogue reveal about the social or cultural context of the autoethnography topic?

As a pedagogical method, autoethnography contributes to transformative learning by unsettling categorical and taken-for-granted thinking (Mezirow, 2009). It is a valuable exercise in critical self-reflection, reflexivity, and creativity, all important to professional development.

Concluding Thoughts

There you have it. My argument for the value of autoethnography and why it should be given a legitimate and more prominent place in social work inquiry, practice, and education. I hope you found it compelling or at least intriguing enough to look further into autoethnography. Will my article, or even this special issue, have much of an impact? Probably not, at least in the short term. Even if you're convinced by my arguments, and those of the other authors, the acceptance and use of autoethnographies is not likely to change significantly until there is institutional change and more publication outlets.¹¹ But I am hopeful that my article adds another drop into the growing tide of interest in alternative approaches to inquiry and different forms of representation.

The challenge of autoethnography is not simply one of adopting a new method but addressing interrelated political and philosophical issues. This would entail accepting the idea that social work can thrive without striving to resemble conventional social science, but forge its own identity more closely aligned with its stated values and aims. A beginning step might be the recognition that conventional research's conservatism influences social work's progressive agenda, and that other approaches with different assumptions can facilitate our efforts for social change. We need to acknowledge that whatever we write, including research, involves decisions that will favor certain beliefs and ways of understanding and

marginalizing others. We need to loosen our embrace of a narrow version of truth as the primary aim of research and create space for understanding grounded in lived experience and change-oriented inquiry.

Orthodox research generates one kind of reality, autoethnography (and related approaches) generate another. We need both, but I would argue that the second kind is critical to our understanding of human experience and our ability to respond sensitively, relationally, creatively, and justly to the issues social workers confront.

Although not a social worker, the sociologist Norman Denzin (2021) sums up the future of autoethnography in a way that could have been directed to a social work audience:

It is about using autoethnography to perform work that leads to social justice, it is about critical discourse that addresses central issues confronting democracy and racism in post-postmodern, post-truth. It is about global life, narrative, and melodrama under the auspices of late neoliberal capitalism. (p. 291)

We live in unsettling times. Autoethnography offers social work another resource for confronting these issues and contributing to our hopes for the future.

Notes

1. Although my orientation is global, I have lived my entire life in the U.S. Therefore, I am most familiar with U.S. social work and that is my general standpoint. Nevertheless, I have tried to be cognizant of readers from other parts of the world.
2. A Google Scholar search during this same period on the word 'autoethnography' in the title yielded over 4000 hits, most of which were from the social sciences.
3. I use the term conventional (or traditional) research to mean the dominant neo-positivist or neo-empiricist view of research that privileges observable facts and methods designed to test those facts. To varying degrees this position includes (among others) transforming concepts into variables, operationalization, assumed researcher neutrality, clear divisions between the researcher and the researched, adherence to strict protocols, and replication.
4. A more detailed exposition of evidence-based practice is beyond the scope of this paper. Readers interested in learning more about the controversies related to evidence-based practice might consult Denzin (2011); Goldenberg (2006); Staller (2006); and Witkin and Harrison (2001).
5. Writing is not the only form of representation used in autoethnography. For example, performance has also been recognized as another legitimate and

- useful form of expression (see, for example, Spry, 2011, 2021).
6. The uncertainty about autoethnography as legitimate research often extends to institutional review boards. I've heard stories on both ends of the spectrum. Applicants struggling to explain to these boards how what they're proposing constitutes research and others where the boards decide it is not research and therefore not within the purview of their authority.
 7. At this time, the journal, *Qualitative Social Work*, appears to publish most of the autoethnographies.
 8. I am focusing here on evocative autoethnographies. Analytic autoethnographies might be more amenable to certain traditional evaluative criteria. See Sparkes (2021) for a listing of possible criteria.
 9. Some environments will affirm certain narratives and counter others, for example, schools, nursing homes, and courtrooms (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008).
 10. Although for the sake of clarity and individual interests I separate these areas in this discussion, the potential contributions identified can be applied to all.
 11. There is the additional factor of readership based on the journal's circulation and that academics tend to read articles that are within their areas of interest.

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