Collaborative autoethnography and social work

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Abstract: Like autoethnography, (AE), collaborative autoethnography (CAE) results in highly personalised narrative accounts of the researcher's engagement with specific sociocultural contexts. CAE adds a collective interpretation to that engagement. While CAE has thus far been little used in social work practice and education, it is an emerging methodological approach that offers new and different insights and opportunities. This paper discusses CAE and its relationship with social work practice and education. In it I discuss how CAE allows for a collective exploration of an individual experience and how these explorations, and the process of obtaining them, have many benefits for social work practitioners and social work students alike. The similarities between CAE and social work are highlighted, by focussing on some of the very core skills and values that lie at the heart of social work, such as listening, collaborating and showing empathy, CAE would seem a natural progression for inquiry within social work. This contribution to the special issue has implications for both social work practice and social work education.

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Throughout this special edition, other, much more experienced and prolific scholars than I debate and discuss autoethnography (AE) in a range of guises. My contribution to this edition is more prosaic, as I discuss the applicability of *collaborative* autoethnography (CAE) to social work practice and education, drawing on a 'hands on' example to highlight key points of such an approach.

Social work and autoethnography: Self-evident companions?

Although I am now a social work academic, I am a practitioner at heart, being a qualified and (Social Work England) registered social worker with a background in adult services working with people who have a diagnosis of learning (intellectual) disability. My practice background has been shaped by recognising the importance of hearing (and listening) to the voice(s) of those often seen and regarded as silent and attempting to empower people who use social work and related services. Now as an academic, my focus is on engaging with social work students as well as practitioners, particularly those who may feel that research (or inquiry) is not for them. I believe, and try to demonstrate, that collaborative autoethnography can be an effective way of both bridging the gap between practice and research and informing social work activity whilst drawing on readily transferable social work knowledge, values and skills already possessed by many.

Reflecting on my own social work practice and the early days of my academic career, I realised that I had in fact been writing autoethnographically for some years before actually hearing and understanding what the word meant. My 2008 PhD included extracts from my journal where I reflected on the process of researching a topic that I was heavily involved in, and in 2014 I wrote about my experience of spending time with my mother and sisters in a hospice (Gant, 2017a). Like others before me (White, 2003) I felt an immediate sense of connection when I realised that writing with often 'searing subjectivity' had the potential to offer much to both me and to others, both personally and professionally, and that autoethnography is a valid, if not always a fully accepted and conventional research method. In some respects, such an approach should not have come as such a big surprise – after all, social workers are educated to write both reflectively and reflexively (Ferreira and Ferreira 2019), but in their contexts with little or no formal acknowledgement of the parallels to basic autoethnographic practice and research. Thus, drawing explicitly on my lived experiences as a parent-carer of a daughter with a severe learning disability (Gant, 2017b), wanting to share these and make links with others in similar circumstances proved both cathartic and informative.

One of the core features of 'good' social work is collaboration - but collaboration is more than just getting the job done with the help of others. Successful collaboration

requires those involved to communicate clearly, be self-effacing, reflective, and honest. Collaboration is an essential element of both social work education and practice: therefore, it follows that when considering ways to inform and involve social work students and practitioners, a collaborative research methodology should be considered as a viable method for obtaining, sharing and analysing information and 'data'.

The use of autoethnography across the social work domain is developing, as demonstrated by this special issue, as well as by the visibility of a range of (recent) publications and journals devoted solely to autoethnography. Likewise, collaborative autoethnography is increasingly regarded as a highly relevant, viable, and valuable qualitative research method (Hernandez, 2021), with applicability across a range of disciplines, including social work and most other human-service professions.

As a social worker, autoethnography allows for the active reflection on experience[1] in a way that consciously and explicitly draws on the extant literature and other methods of research, connecting and linking those reflections into broader and deeper levels of the topic under inquiry, and other relevant materials/ memes as these are seen to emerge. The increasing range and diverse applications of AE and CAE means it is challenging to offer a firm set of guidelines – a 'how to' guide - despite social work students and practitioners frequently asking for such a thing. Unfortunately (or, fortunately?) there are no set rules, only principles to guide and shape such inquiry, recognising within this that all forms of research must be ethically sound.

Subjectivity over objectivity.

The practice(s) of AE and CAE are inherently subjective methods of inquiry and have developed and evolved in part as a critique to the presumed and often assumed pre-eminence of objectivity/positivism as the core rationale for 'meaningful' research. AE/CAE embraces subjectivity in a way that conventional research does not always appear to, and for many, such an approach would be regarded as anathema to 'scientific' endeavour. Researchers wanting to provide meaning and insight into an area of inquiry are increasingly drawing on lived experience(s) and transforming these into a rich and highly subjective account, making much of what C. Wright-Mills would refer to as the use of the 'sociological imagination' (Wright-Mills, 1959).

As Ellis noted in 2007, autoethnography is a genre of writing and research, that begins with personal experiences and studies 'us' in relationships and situations (Ellis, 2007). Social Work as a discipline is ideally placed to draw on the autoethnographic canon, and collaborative autoethnography in particular, as

methods of inquiry to support meaning-making and to enhance the potentials for the development of new insights into specific issues. Social workers will often use (professional) stories to enable some sense to be made of practice, particularly in complex situations involving vulnerable populations where there are many competing narratives in play. Thereafter, using (professional) supervision and mentoring as vehicles, social workers can explore and debrief current and future scenarios and practices framed around past experiences, both positive and challenging, sharing and learning pragmatically (Hothersall, 2019), hopefully enhancing the value of practice, being closely linked to critical reflection (Fook, 2014), itself a key element of social work practice (Walker and Gant, 2021). Drawing on the principles of autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography is one way of doing this in a more focused and research-minded way. As with autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography connects the researcher's personal self to the broader cultural and societal contexts, within which meaningful (to me/ us) experiences occur. Both approaches are highly subjective and as such, offer a direct and more credible understanding of the topic. Collaborative autoethnography has been defined as a 'social' version of autoethnography (Arnold, 2020) and has been described as an 'important addition to the field of self-narrative research' (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri, 2017, p251) in which researchers share or 'pool' their stories to explore similarities and differences before exploring the meanings of such stories in relation to their socio-cultural (and professional) contexts (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez, 2016).

Supporting social work education and professional practice(s)

How then might collaborative autoethnography be utilised specifically to inform and support social work education and practice? Collaborative autoethnography clearly still focuses on examining the self and one's own experiences but does so collectively and collaboratively. It emerges from an analysis of 'what do these stories and experiences tell us?' The collection and analysis of information/data is an ongoing process during collaborative autoethnography, so working closely as part of a team is essential. As a phrase 'collaborative autoethnography' seems oxymoronic: how can something that is 'auto' be 'collaborative'? However unusual the choice of words appears, it works by inviting people to share stories, discuss epiphanies and experiences, even the very painful ones (Lewis, 2021). Thus, collaborative autoethnography balances the individual narrative of researchers with broader, collective experiences, allowing a light to shine on inquiry, of whatever sort.

Collaborative autoethnography highlights the power *of* relationships and the power *in* relationships. As an approach it is inherently and purposefully both subjective and, in many instances, deeply personal, developing from what

researchers describe as having a 'life changing' experience or a burning need to tell or share an account of an often highly emotional and personal experience.

Collaborative autoethnography then takes this one stage further. Through discussions and a sharing of understandings it is possible to see how the subtleties of an individual experience may be drawn out via supportive sharing and questioning from someone who has been through a similar experience, allowing that which at first may seemed nuanced to be given greater clarity and vibrancy. That is not to say that collaborative autoethnography is simply (and simplistically) 'a cosy chat', collaborative autoethnographers will be, and should expect to be, challenged by one another - what to leave in and out of written accounts, what to emphasise (or not), and how to arrive at decisions regarding interpretations and feelings which can be problematic. By working collaboratively, the limits of what can be explained by an individual autoethnography are stretched, with the validity of the meta narrative drawn out, such that it is then possible to tell a story from a range of perspectives, once again highlighting the benefit of working as a team.

Researchers engaging in producing a collaborative autoethnography need to note what their individual (and different?) accounts and perspectives are saying about a topic, and its relationship to wider society. When such accounts and perspectives have been brought together, it is important to explore what those differences and similarities say about either the issues discussed and/or the collaborator's responses, thus CAE adds a consolidated interpretation of individual experiences.

Earlier I noted that the essence of good social work involves collaboration, although this does not always mean agreement, as what is key in this process is exploring the reasons for and against a particular 'take' on an issue and the extent to which it can be justified. Differences of opinion are not necessarily a bad thing, and in both social work education and practice we need to report what we took from a given situation and our role within it, as there are always lessons to be learned. Within collaborative autoethnography, as with autoethnography, the use of 'I' is encouraged: such subjectivity is key to producing, acknowledging, and even celebrating the presence of the researcher in the research process, but necessarily (and obviously) within collaborative autoethnography, the 'I' needs to be prepared for greater focus to become 'We'.

For me the main purpose of collaborative autoethnography as a method is to allow students or practitioners to understand and be able to develop their capacity for critical reflection and empathy. Whether or not they fully agree with a situation is less of an issue; rather, being empathetic means being able to see others' perspectives and be sufficiently flexible to actively consider the merits of another's viewpoint. Thus, collaborative autoethnography is not necessarily about collaborating in terms of having the *same* view of a shared experience, or the phenomenon under investigation as that would be very dull and would not generate the debate and discussion necessary for the development of *shared* understandings, necessarily exploiting causal knowledge for the purposes of reaching common

goals. Rather it is a process to enhance a student's/practitioner's ability to reflect and be reflexive. Autoethnography is by its nature reflexive and subjective (Egeli, 2017), thus, collaborative autoethnography could be viewed as 'autoethnography in (collective?) action', as eliciting a response from collaborators brings any project alive and allows it to be developed at that moment in time creating a living, working project, not one waiting for a response from readers/experts/panels some months from inception when publication of findings *may* occur.

Using CAE within educational settings

In collaborative autoethnography, researchers articulate, test, and develop their perspectives based on a shared experience or phenomenon and together construct a joint narrative linking the subject under discussion with wider societal or cultural expectations/norms. This can add much to our understanding of a topic, its potential consequences (intended and unintended, particularly important in the policy/practice context) and of its likely impact on those individuals affected by it.

For example, a range of perspectives on the same event allows us to see how event X may create responses A, B, C, and D. For social workers and social work students the question is therefore: how might a collaborative autoethnography on event X and the responses that follow, be drawn together into a coherent account that represents a working consensus, whilst allowing the event or topic to be more widely understood? This is not simply about increasing social workers capacity to be empathetic or to reflect meaningfully, useful as these skills undoubtedly are, and neither is it a case of unquestionably agreeing with another's perspective. When utilised effectively (and some practice with it should be assumed to be necessary), collaborative autoethnography can be a valid and useful tool to allow practitioners engaged in the same situation 'in the moment' to consider feelings and note the responses evoked. This provides the shared reference point that opens opportunities to listen to other people's experience of the same thing and to consider all of those collectively: why did I/we react in that way? The context of a situation is key, as clearly, we all enter into experiences at a number of levels and with a range of presuppositions and other forms of both conscious and unconscious bias (Rogerson, Prescott and Howard, 2022).

When I talk to social work students about collaborative autoethnography I emphasise to them that it has two main elements: self-reflection and collaboration. Hinging on meaningful discourse and engagement with colleagues, collaborative autoethnography is a reflection of a shared experience, with researchers honestly, openly and accurately documenting their perspectives of it. Students and practitioners will often ask how to choose an area to research 'in depth', to show what 'it' is like from the inside, and clearly there are several ways of approaching

this. Thinking about what the 'it' is that they feel a desire to shine a light on is key. We all vary in how and why we choose what we write about, or sometimes the experience chooses us, and additionally, the timing must feel right. For researchers interrogating the self, not only does the topic of their inquiry need careful and thoughtful consideration, but so too does the timing. For a long time, I wanted to write about my own experiences of parenting a child with a severe disability and the stigma I felt of being a carer, and yet for many years it was just too raw an experience to share with others. The notes and diary entries I had made were all there, representing a story demanding to be told, but somehow the time was not right until around the time my daughter reached the age of 16 and I then felt ready. But don't ask me why then, or even why I knew that this was the topic and now was the time – I just did. So, in selecting a *shared* experience to focus on, whether that be an 'epiphany', or a shared occurrence that just has to be explored in the interests of best practice or policy implementation, the issue is less to do with finding a valuable and relevant topic, but how to prioritise topics in such a way that participants feel as ready as they can be to consider it in depth, and to take account of the operational/research pressures that may be extant: something which requires careful thought. Data is wherever we chose to look for it: inscriptions on park benches, newspaper announcements of births, deaths and marriages, social media platforms, blogs, and other online posts, and of course day-to-day encounters with others, to name but a few. For collaborative autoethnographers, and social work students and practitioners, opportunities for data collection are extensive, including examining reports, reflective writings, revisiting diary entries, examining voice recordings, poetry or songs, as well as reflecting on images and other artefacts (Caffrey, Fruin, McHale, Ridgway and McHale, 2020), including those generated by the professional context within which one is working.

Collaborative autoethnography can be carried out in many other ways: for example, it may involve researchers interviewing each other about a given topic and reflecting each researcher's perspective or recording and then reflecting on 'conversations with a purpose', something which students on professional award-bearing programmes can derive great benefit from, as such activity is core to their professional activity. The one element these all share is that of connection - an essential component of many research projects, but of collaborative autoethnography in particular. For those wanting to engage in collaborative autoethnography it can appear at first that having such choice is overwhelming -there are potentially limitless ways of gathering information and sharing experiences, actively and consciously linking them to the wider social and *professional* milieu of which the researchers are a part. Collaborative autoethnography is potentially seductive, and any of the above methods help to connect researchers, with stories being told, experiences being shared and discussed, and with secrets and other opinions being aired.

To illustrate the opportunities and challenges inherent in CAE, the project I

worked on with postgraduate social work students (Gant, Cheatham, DiVito, Offei, Williams and Yatosenge, 2019) regarding their experiences on a social work practice (field) placement is illuminating[2]. The normative expectations regarding practice learning opportunities ('placements'), namely that students will be appropriately and fully supported and provided with opportunities to develop their skills commensurate with their level of study and background under the mentorship of experienced practitioners, would not lead one to expect students to dread their forthcoming placement and feel overwhelmed by their workload once *in situ*. Collaborating on an autoethnography to examine the placement experience offered students the same reference point and an opportunity to appreciate the role and nature of empathy more fully as a process feature of their experience on placement.

Students shared their individualised accounts and then discussed and debated the details between them in a kind of informal focus-group setting. This back-and-forth discussion added to the ebb and flow of the development of a collaborative autoethnography as a work in progress concerning *process*, which was not an easy one, because we are all vulnerable when we expose our feelings about our experience, even in what we perceive as a supportive and safe environment. Students drew out from their discussions salient details regarding the nature of their placement and their responses to these as well as asking themselves 'How do my/our findings from my/our experience(s) fit with those normative expectations of placements (this topic)?' The student–supervisor power imbalance (Hewson and Gant, 2020) was noted and during often quite candid discussions, searching questions were asked between the collaborators regarding where their thoughts and ideas came from. In this example, students highlighted the significance of their own background and upbringing and previous educational experiences, as well as the relevance of their expectations and pre-conceived ideas regarding a practice placement as key features for them.

This collaborative autoethnography allowed for the expression of multiple perspectives and made available important and highly relevant data. For example, when I wanted to open the dialogue of what it is like to be a social work student on placement, I could re-visit my own diaries and journals, workbooks, and reflective accounts to share *my* perspective, although I recognise that I am reflecting on my accounts from almost 30 years ago, writing from the perspective of a white European, single parent female. Thus, to broaden out the research into the topic of social work students on placement, more data was needed, and data that reflected the increasing diversity of students now engaged in social work education (de Bie, Chaplin, Vengis, Dagnachew and Jackson, 2021; Hanley 2021) and experiencing these lengthy, unpaid placement periods (Hodge, Oke, McIntyre and Turner, 2021). Whilst I can offer a 'single story', how much better any inquiry can be when sharing multiple perspectives of such a common and shared experience. By encouraging postgraduate social work students to become involved in this inquiry utilising collaborative autoethnography as the method of choice, opportunities were created

to expand consideration of the issues and bring in different perspectives, particularly in relation to age, gender, and cultural background.

Students had several face-to-face discussions where they shared their individual accounts and asked each other questions such as 'What is going on here'? 'Why does my experience (a 70-day placement in the first year of a social work programme) feel so different from yours?' 'What can we do about these differences?' 'What needs to be highlighted and shared with and for others?' 'What does the wider literature about social work students on placement tell us about these sorts of experiences?' and 'How might our shared account add to what is known?' Such a process also allowed for the development of friendships and for some, new coping strategies for their next practice placement as well as functioning as a useful pedagogical tool for group-based practices (Hornsby, Davis and Reilly, 2021). As with Shaw, Anderson, and Grant's 2016 account of their collaborative autoethnography, the developing account/paper was regularly shared across the group and resulted in several versions emerging, with multiple layers of meaning, ultimately revealing an evocative account of their experience(s) that the group felt was worthy of submission to a peer-reviewed journal for consideration for publication.

Using CAE within practice-based settings

As well as functioning as a pedagogical tool (Barr 2019) and as a relational-based research method (Phillips, Christensen-Strynø, and Frølunde, 2021) collaborative autoethnography can prove to be a useful approach for social work practitioners, as we all need to question why we think and act in the ways we do, particularly when we have the same reference point. Significantly too, where legal, professional, and other mandates may prescribe or otherwise define our practices, this highlights the significance of transparency, accountability, and responsibility (Devlieghere and Gillingham 2021). Developing the use of collaborative autoethnography within the practice setting can highlight potential points of tension, which may be useful to open debate, and from a social work perspective, allow more meaningful and focused discussion of how we respond to a range of situations, particularly those often characterised in practice by complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity (Iancu and Lanteigne 2022; Ylvisaker and Rugkåsa 2022).

Collaborative autoethnography therefore has a role within social work practice; by taking a shared experience as the *professional* phenomenon under investigation, a collaborative autoethnography may shine a light on a range of issues, including why some social workers feel threatened by a given situation whereas others do not, and is the way I/we undertake a certain set of (mandated/professional) practices the only and/or the best way to approach them? (Morley and Fleming 2021). There are numerous different perspectives on any situation, so why is it that some are held in

higher esteem that others? It may be because professional protocols/mandates to some extent dictate practice(s) or it may be that 'received wisdom' (Rojek 2012) and other forms of experiential knowledge play a significant part (Hothersall 2017) in how practitioners do what they do. But these situations still require to be considered on a case-by-case basis, recognising the uniqueness of each practice situation in the lives of those people on the receiving end of service delivery, acknowledging the impact of neoliberalism and organisational and professional cultures (Morley and O'Bree, 2021), particularly in the digital age (Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino, and Ulmestig, 2022).

So, for social work practitioners, it is about the active engagement with such practices and the utilisation of the CAE method. If we can see the process as being the act of collaboration, then the method is about coming to an understanding about why our practices and perspectives on these may differ. Let us take as an example the reported 'self-neglect' of a service user that practitioners are trying to engage with (Mason and Evans, 2020). On viewing such a situation, some social workers may see 'self-neglect', whereas others might see freedom of choice and independence (Braye, Orr, and Preston-Shoot, 2017). Recognising the perspective(s) of others, the relative nature of thresholds for intervention (Kopelman, 1997) and not assuming there is but one view or one way of doing things is, for me, an advantage: thus, familiarity with the central tenets of collaborative autoethnography, utilising skills of negotiation and critical reflection are essential and can be enhanced within the parameters of CAE. Collaborative autoethnography then can enhance the capacity of social workers to empathise in new and different ways: to see the same (familiar) situation very differently and yet come to a shared consensus, which can be revelatory. By applying such a methodological tool, enhancements in our understandings of empathic and perspectival processes and their significance of and for practice can allow differing viewpoints to coalesce into meaningful and more ethically focused perspectives (McAuliffe, 2021; Thelin, 2021).

CAE as a meaningful way forward in education and research

As both educators and practitioners, the use of the collaborative encounter offers the opportunity to see depth and deeper layers of meaning and uncover the many (often) unspoken nuances and subtleties that may go unquestioned in everyday practice(s). Collaborative autoethnography means asking questions and engaging in deep, not 'surface' level thinking. Practitioners of this craft need to be open and ask, 'Why do we see it that way?' even when what is being referred to may well be commonplace and/or routine, as it is these perspectival differences that create difficulties in achieving understanding, and make consensus challenging, such that avoiding such questions in the first place makes for an easier, but less rewarding,

approach to both education and practice.

If we view collaborative autoethnography as having similarities to some forms of peer-led critical reflection used in both educational (Strang, 2021) and practice-based settings (Morley and O'Bree, 2021), what makes critical autoethnography stand out is its focus on making explicit its links to culture (be that personal, professional and societal forms) and the engagement with the wider literature on the topic at hand, so referring to the earlier example, what does the literature tell us about self-neglect and how does that relate to *normative* understandings regarding self-care and situations where these are not followed, either consciously or otherwise?

When taking a critical/radical autoethnographic approach, it is important to note that everyone's perspective will vary in some way. It is useful to consider here that critical/radical are to be considered here from their Latin origins where 'radic/radix' refers to the 'root' of something, so in asking 'What are the perspectival differences in our practice(s)?', and for educators, 'How can we assist students to understand the topic at hand?', CAE can allow a deeper examination of cultural phenomenon in a meaningful way. Such a process is less about the individualised *autoethnography*, as this is *my* account, and more about the *collaboration* of those using this method, CAE allowing for the exploration of how *we* experience the issue or phenomenon, comparing, contrasting, and analysing in a supportive group context.

Social workers occupy incredibly privileged positions working with people often when they are at their most vulnerable, aiming to support and empower those in need. CAE, like social work practice, is built on connections and relationships – both are fundamentally relational (Timmerman and Baart, 2022). Social work is, or should be, a profession built on honesty, effective and open communication, and meaningful/sincere relationships. Taking needs-based assessment, a key element of social work practice as an example, it is possible to see the significance of such relational and other theoretical links (Healy, 2022). As social workers we listen to people's stories, experiences, and perspectives, produced as they are in relation to us, reflect on them and together we co-construct a narrative which is used as evidence for services or support. This co-constructed narrative can be told in many ways, and just like collaborative autoethnography it relies on the relationship between those involved. For Vellman (2003 p6) the distinctive feature of a narrative is that it 'completes an emotional cadence in the audience.' It is this emotional cadence that collaborative autoethnographers hope to achieve, whilst helping people to develop understanding and a re-framing of their experience of an issue.

Relational constructions of self-hood inevitably include the perspectives of others and it is within this that collaborative autoethnography has much to offer. For Lapadat, Black, Clark, Gremm, Karanja, Mieke, and Quinlan, (2010) working together addresses a weakness in the use of autobiographic data, namely that of being too close to the data, preventing it being seen in a holistic way. For social work and other human services professions, there is potential within autoethnography

to have effective non-academic collaborations (academics and practitioners) which allows for relationships to be developed and sustained with a range of different partners. I have met and worked with many excellent social workers over the years, some who have said they 'don't get' research with what they describe as its complicated terminology and rules of engagement. But these individuals are highly skilled professionals, excellent communicators and well able to build relationships to facilitate the drawing out of hidden nuances and spotting the gaps in narratives and other aspects of a situation, as many practitioners know that what is *not said* is often as important as what *is said*. In some respects, too, these *'pracademic'* collaborations can contribute to the emerging field of 'slow scholarship' because of their unique insights into the culturally contingent influence of ideology, experience, and other meta-theoretical factors (Wahab, Mehrotra and Myers, 2022).

When collaborating on an autoethnography it is important to note there is no strict protocol to follow or specialized language that needs to be used. Also, the relationships in these collaborations are not hierarchical as in many research contexts, making collaborative autoethnography a more attractive proposition to neophyte social work researchers. Qualitative researchers, and collaborative autoethnographers need to recognise, embrace and celebrate diverse perspectives, and collaborative autoethnography can provide a pertinent methodology for investigating sensitive and often perplexing experiences. It is important to note that the process of producing a collaborative autoethnography itself is not linear, as it may involve multiple conversations, meetings, discussions and the sharing of drafts and notes. The focus of any collaborative autoethnography therefore needs to be on self-interrogation by researchers in a collective sense: it cannot be isolated, as it is tangible and must be lived and experienced. This is not easy, as collaborative autoethnography requires the researchers to place their own experiences in the foreground, which makes for vulnerability, but in an intentional sense.

Great as the opportunities are, there are also challenges associated with collaborative autoethnography. As noted earlier, it is located in the qualitative tradition and can be intense. It is not always easy to investigate a topic when you are so subjectively invested in it, and it may evoke painful memories. Critics refer to the lack of objectivity within autoethnography and question its representativeness methodologically. If autoethnography is critiqued as being too emotive and 'not proper research', then collaborative autoethnography offers a response by broadening the horizons of the topic under inquiry and offering a shared perspective and greater enlightenment on the nature of experience(s) (Beattie 2022). Autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography are still criticised as being non-representative. They can be 'messy' (Witkin 2014), usually produced by scholars and academics, infrequently by social work practitioners, and even less likely to be produced by people with lived experience of using social work services. By broadening out the approach to inquiry, drawing in social work students and practitioners we may eventually make inroads to truly offer a voice to people who

use social work services and move towards a more balanced form of epistemic justice (Liabo *et al* 2022). Furthermore, and in taking proper account of the role of power within research and other forms of praxis, we should however recognise, as Buck (2020 p247) notes, that '…those subject to these powers are not powerless'. Collaborative autoethnography has a role to play here.

In conclusion, I see the link between collaborative autoethnography, social work practice and social work as clearly advantageous. Practitioners within social work are already familiar and competent with the use of methods of critical reflection and are skilled communicators, both elements naturalistically supporting the development of collaborative autoethnography. Collaborative autoethnography for me adds up to the act of coming together with a common experience or encounter that has much to offer both social work education and social work practice. Collaborative autoethnography allows practitioners and social work students to develop skills of analysis, and the ability to become skilled in self-critiquing their own thoughts and feelings in the context of the other person's thoughts and feelings. The relational aspects of social work practice cannot be ignored, and collaborative autoethnography has much to offer by drawing on these and making links with wider cultural encounters, experiences and expectations. Such an approach brings a personal and unique set of experiences to issues under scrutiny, offering a uniqueness that cannot be replicated. One of the common criticisms of autoethnography, however, as researchers know with any qualitative method, exact replication is never achievable. When considering collaborative autoethnography as a method it is important to note that from the outset respect for each other's perspectives is essential, and that this is especially true throughout the analysis stage where the giving and receiving of meaningful feedback is fundamental. Clearly, multiple approaches are necessary in considering any phenomena, and collaborative autoethnography does not suit every situation, but it can be a useful and innovative method, deserving of more attention in the social work canon.

CAE can lead to the enhancement of autoethnography and strengthen it as a qualitative method, assisting in its impact whilst offering an additional level of (mutual) scrutiny above and beyond that of autoethnography. Such 'inbuilt reliability' (Voyce and Carson 2021) is particularly helpful in certain situations where peer investigation and the opportunity to critically reflect on one's own role in knowledge production is essential. For students, social workers and those with whom they work, there is a role for collaborative autoethnography in relation to one's own empowerment, all processes being designed to be supportive and trustworthy. There is also, and understandably, a political element to collaborative/ autoethnography that all those involved need to embrace in order to extend levels of social understanding and highlight discrimination and oppression as it is experienced first-hand. Denzin sums this up nicely when he says that autoethnography 'allows us to examine how the private troubles of individuals are connected to public issues and to public responses to these troubles' (Denzin, 2014,

pp. 5-6). Is it optimistic or naïve to say it also may be an opportunity to challenge in some small way the rise of disinformation (Bendall and Robertson, 2018)?

Social work practice for me intertwines with collaborative autoethnography, linked as they both are to relationships, as both social workers and researchers want to make a difference, and often work as a team to add to existing knowledge and to articulate the perspective of those frequently unheard, which is a vital and particular feature of collaborative autoethnography. Additionally, for social work educators, collaborative autoethnography is seductive, as it offers a safe space for `novice' student researchers to develop and deepen their own learning and then to share and develop it with others. Collaboration in many and varied forms is an intrinsic part of human life and is or should be at the heart of society, and of everything we as humans do. It is axiomatic in the 'caring' professions such as health and social work, and therefore, by my reckoning, collaboration in our inquiry should be seriously considered by researchers.

Notes

1. These include both personal and professional which is important to note as these two domains are, to all intents and purposes, inseparable in most if not all forms of human service activity, even though the purists might feel otherwise.
2. Reading accounts of other researchers who noted difficulties in obtaining ethical approval for similar projects, in this case I was relieved to find that the university ethics committee were supportive of the project and subject to one or two minor amendments, gave approval to proceed with the project.

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