Autoethnography for social workers: New approaches

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Abstract: In this paper the authors introduce readers to the field of autoethnography (AE). They provide an overview of the field, then describe several different forms of AE. These include positive autoethnography, collaborative AE, duoethnography, and digital autoethnographical psychobiography, in both national and international formats (DCAP and IDCAP). They point out how AE is distinguished from autobiography. They stress the application of AE as a way for social work academics, their students, and their service users to capture elements of their professional practice, and the nature of their working relationships and experiences. This approach enables social workers and their clients to participate as equal partners in a process which can be cathartic as well as being respectful of each other's position.

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Introduction to autoethnography (Patrick)

Social workers face many professional and personal demands. As well as being upholders of the law, they must also act as 'grit in the system' to jam the cogwheels of their own and others' processes to protect and promote the rights of their clients, often in the context of inadequate resources and perverse incentives (Bee, 2016; Tunstill and Willow, 2017; Maekowitz and Pollack, 2021). At the same time, social workers are implored to be more curious and incredulous whilst the level of demand for services, and reduction in resources, means that there is rarely time to do the minimum (Hall, 2023; Jones, 2024). Social workers are the target of criticism and blame from the press (Leedham, 2022) as well as scrutiny through inquests, investigations, reviews, court action and professional bodies.

Safeguarding Adults Reviews (SARs, Section 43 Care Act 2014) and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs, Children Act 2004) and The Child Safeguarding Practice Review and Relevant Agency (England) Regulations 2018/2023) have been established to facilitate multi-agency learning and change, usually following the death of an adult or child who had been abused or neglected.

Whilst these reviews are of considerable value and can drive improvement, they often recite a now familiar litany of failure and, in many cases despite their intentions and analysis, ultimately implore social workers (and other professionals) to 'try harder'. The real barriers and obstacles to effective practice are rarely fully identified and explored (e.g., Preston-Shoot, 2021) and questions and challenges remain for both social workers and their clients.

For example, how are social workers to consider the extent and effectiveness of their 'professional curiosity', or their sensitivity and responsiveness to 'feigned compliance', otherwise rather erroneously known as 'disguised compliance' (Hopkinson, 2021)? How should social workers avoid 'confirmation bias' and how should they respond to the challenges of multi-agency working? What does being 'trauma informed' and 'attachment based' mean for social work practice? How can social workers understand their own experiences and those of their clients from a perspective that challenges, rather than accepts, inequalities, discrimination, and structural barriers? (Witkin, 2022). These questions lead to a more fundamental one. How are social workers to understand, set out and explore the challenges they, and their clients face? One way might be through autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a qualitative 'research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')' (Adams et al., 2017, p.1) These three components can be delineated as follows (Adams and Herrmann (2023):

'Auto' means self-reflection on decisions and events. The contemplation of how we understood, felt, internalised, and reacted to experiences can provide insights into the reasons for professional practice.

'Ethno' means the exploration of 'cultural expectations, beliefs and practices' (Adams and Herrman, 2023, p.3). Professional and work culture consists of the often-unquestioned assumptions and shared understandings.

'Graphy' means 'the art of writing' (Adams and Herrman, 2023, p.3), which means that the product of autoethnography should be readable and, hopefully, informative.

The personal experience studies using autoethnography are infused with political and cultural norms and expectations. Rigorous self-reflection, 'reflexivity', a practice familiar to social workers (Ferguson, 2018), is required to identify and interrogate where inner, individual life intersects with social life and identity.

Much autoethnographic research has taken place within a political context of marginalised and minoritised voices. The topics of autoethnography are often those which may have gone unexplored, not only due to the feelings of discomfort, revulsion, or vulnerability that they might induce in readers, but also because they challenge assumptions and power relationships. Examples of the use of autoethnography in social work research have included an account of a developing professional relationship and ultimately friendship with a man who was rough-sleeping (Hansson-Blomkvist and Niklasson, 2022); the effects of poverty in child abuse and neglect (Hardy, 2024); the experiences of invisibility and abandonment

by transgender/ nonbinary students in social work education (Akapnitis, 2023), and of the use of Life Story Work with young people (Ricketts, 2023).

In addition to giving a voice to people who might otherwise be voiceless on topics that are often ignored or avoided, autoethnography offers authors an opportunity for the reappraisal, reconsideration and reconstruction of events and phenomena (McIlveen, 2008), which may not have been clear at the time they were first experienced. This re-authoring of personal narratives of accounts of events (White, 2005), especially if otherwise underheard or drowned out by other voices, can be powerfully cathartic. Authors can present their own account and reflections, rather than be the subject of someone else's version of who they are and what has happened to them. Autoethnography can enable the direct communication of experience to a readership, who otherwise would have had no knowledge, and certainly no insider knowledge, of the subject matter.

Autoethnography requires discipline and rigour. Without this, it can collapse into a 'formless recitation of self-indulgence and self-reference', (Hopkinson and Niklasson, 2024). However, the rich description of experiences can have a power of its own to tell stories that otherwise go unheard and to raise and explore topics that might challenge traditional power structures. Autoethnography provides an opportunity for social workers to write about their own experiences rather than to be written about in reports, enquiries, newspapers, and reviews.

Autoethnography can take several forms. Some autoethnographies are evocative (Anderson, 2006), producing a rich description of the nature and intensity of the autoethnographer's feelings about, and interactions with, their topic. The overall aim is to induce an emotional reaction in the reader to move and inspire them. Other autoethnographies are 'analytical' and offer explanations for the 'what, why and how' of their topic. Autoethnography is beginning to gain attention in social work research (Witkin, 2022) and is itself also a developing research method.

Whilst much autoethnography focuses on evoking or describing the role of forces of oppression in creating and maintaining barriers to the resources and opportunities necessary for fulfilment, positive autoethnography focuses on adapting and thriving. There are many examples in SARs and CSPRs of positive outcomes not being achieved but there must be value in exploring and recording successes and achievements.

Some autoethnographies are conducted by individuals whilst others are collaborative (Hernandez et al., 2017) involving multiple authors challenging and learning from each other in a shared process of discovery. Collaborative autoethnography can be a means of collaborative research across disciplines and has a special significance when it is done with people who are service experienced.

Social workers are often implored to 'think family' and consider the dynamics of family relationships, to seek out 'hidden adults or child' and to identify and assess the effectiveness of 'protective factors' in family relationships. Duoethnography can be used to explore relationships and to consider these as unique entities worthy of study (e.g., Niklasson and Niklasson, 2024).

It can be useful to study the lives and experiences of others from our own perspective (Hopkinson and Niklasson, 2024). Doing so helps us to gain insights into the challenges they faced, how these affected them and how the same challenges might affect us now. Digital Collaborative Autoethnographical Psychobiography (DCAP) offers a means of studying another person whilst at the same time learning about ourselves. It builds on the opportunities offered by collaborative autoethnography and includes international and as well as national participation.

The following sections of this paper will set out the principles of different approaches to autoethnography which may be of interest in social workers.

Positive autoethnography (Jerome)

Part of the inspiration for co-authoring this paper on autoethnography (AE), is to try and encourage social workers, their students and related health and social care professionals to consider using autoethnography in their practice. AE can truly capture the richness and complexity of both providing and receiving health and social care services. To try and foster this, we co-edited a special issue of Social Work and Social Sciences Review (Carson and Hurst, 2022) and an issue of the British Journal of Mental Health Nursing (Carson, Green and Gournay, 2022). Alec Grant and I co-edited a recent book, 'Autoethnography in Psychology and Mental Health: New Voices,' which featured several new writers (Grant and Carson, 2024). A lot of this work has originated from the University of Greater Manchester (formerly known as the University of Bolton), which can lay claim to having seen the development of two new approaches to autoethnography, IDCAP, led by Patrick and Mats, and Positive Autoethnography, developed by Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky, Mark Weeks and me.

Positive Autoethnography (PosAE), is a fusion of positive psychology with autoethnography (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). I first came across positive psychology around 2007 and slowly developed an interest in this rapidly developing field. I was inspired by the work of Professor Martin Seligman (Seligman and Czikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2011). I was a later convert to the field of autoethnography. In writing a reflective piece on why we decided to study psychology, one of the peer reviewers said that we needed to draw more on the autoethnographic literature (Hurst and Carson, 2021). This was news to Robert and me as we did not realise what we were doing was constructing a collaborative autoethnographic account. It was however Freda who first suggested to Mark Weeks and me, that we might think of combining positive psychology and autoethnography. We then wrote the seminal paper on the topic (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). Freda, Mark, and I were not the first psychologists to write autoethnographic accounts. Professors Ian Parker, Geoffrey Beattie, and Hugh Koch had all written AE accounts before us (Parker, 2020; Beattie, 2021; Koch, 2021).

Perhaps most surprisingly, especially given his disdain for qualitative methods, Professor Seligman's own autobiography (Seligman, 2018), could be described as an autoethnographic account of his personal life and academic career. In a similar vein, Nick Hervey wrote an AE account for our special issue on his career as a social worker (Hervey, 2022).

Freda Gonot-Schoupinsky has gone onto co-author a series of papers on PosAE with famous psychologists. Her first paper was with Professor Joyce Shaffer and focussed on positive aging (Schaffer and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2024). Her next was with Professor Claude-Helene Meyer, which highlighted her very varied career background prior to becoming a professor of psychology in South Africa. More recent papers have focussed on Professor Everett Worthington, the leading researcher in the field of forgiveness (Worthington and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025), with Professor Paul Wong, who is credited with the development of Positive Psychology, 2.0, and who died a few months after this interview (Wong and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025) and with Professor Mark Weeks on positive introversion (Weeks and Gonot-Schoupinsky, 2025). These positive autoethnographic accounts provide fascinating insights into the lives and careers of these famous psychologists, but what about more ordinary folk?

If Positive Autoethnography is to reach out to the wider non-professional audience, then it needs to feature the stories of everyday folk who people can more easily identify with. Celebrities, such as Stephen Fry and his work to educate the public on bipolar disorder (see 'The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive' on YouTube), have an ability to reach millions of people given their high profile. I doubt that there is a single mental health professional who has done as much as Stephen Fry to raise awareness of bipolar disorder. However, Stephen was educated privately and attended Cambridge University. At the time of writing, he has just been awarded a knighthood for his services, especially to mental health. Would ordinary people be able to connect with his struggles? Positive Autoethnography needs more narrative accounts of how ordinary people have triumphed over adversity. In my professional academic work, I have come across more people who Regina Hartley would describe as 'scrappers rather than silver spooners.' I am constantly amazed by what these students have achieved. While my initial work in mental health led me to suggest that people who had overcome much adversity in their mental health journeys were 'recovery heroes,' (e.g., Peter Bullimore, see Bullimore and Carson, 2012), we renamed the series 'remarkable lives,' (see Hurst and Carson, 2021; Hurst et al., 2022). Lisa Ogilvie has curated a similar series on people who have recovered from addiction called, 'addiction recovery stories,' (see, Ogilvie and Carson, 2023). These accounts are somehow more authentic and perhaps more representative of the lives of ordinary people.

Positive Autoethnographic accounts have been emerging from our masters' students' dissertations at the University of Greater Manchester. The first student to publish such an account was Rob Balfour (Balfour, 2022). Rob described his life-long battle to recover from being sexually abused in a children's home. Ije Asike talked of

her long-term battle with living with lupus (Asike, 2025). These accounts written by the students themselves, show how they have battled over years and have managed to overcome all the obstacles placed in their way. While I revealed my own battles with alcohol (Carson and Ogilvie, 2022), thus far most of my own work has been in collaborative autoethnography (see Andrew's section below). Apart from the paper with Andrew, which detailed our psychiatric careers after we both left Reading University, Mats Niklasson and myself talked about our PhD journeys (Carson and Niklasson, 2023) and Robert Hurst and I talked about why we decided to study psychology (Hurst and Carson, 2021). This year I intend to write more individual AE accounts. Barrie Green has stated that if we do not write these things down, they get forgotten. I was planning to co-author an account of 'What the technician saw,' with Ian Harrison, who had been a technician in our Psychology Department at Bolton for 40 years. Ian was a little reticent about doing this, yet he had a fount of amazing anecdotes. Sadly, he died before we ever got around to writing his account. We will never discover what the technician actually saw.

Collaborative autoethnography (Andrew)

There are five recent scholarly articles where I have contributed to collaborative autoethnography, for the journals Mental Health and Social Inclusion and the British Journal of Mental Health Nursing.
My collaborations have been under the mentorship and leadership of Professor Jerome Carson of the University of Greater Manchester. It has been a pleasurable task to explore the lives of three popular musicians who experienced mental health issues, and to explore my life of lived experience of schizophrenia along a timeline shared with others.

Among the useful conversations I have had in the collaborative preparations for these articles, was one with Patrick Hopkinson. In looking at the life of Syd Barrett (Hopkinson et al., 2021), who founded Pink Floyd and who was then dropped by the band due to his erratic behaviour. We also discussed the work of Thomas Szasz (Szasz, 2010). Is mental illness really a myth? Thomas found little therapeutic value in the treatment of mental illness, a term that should be used sparingly. Rather Thomas and writers including Michel Foucault viewed the interventions for poor mental health, as merely to detain and keep out of society those who society rejects (Foucault, 2006). I think that we agreed that I experienced psychosis, as Syd Barratt probably did, and that I came back from 'a left turn' where my life fell apart with paranoia and delusion, but that Syd's did not. I was fortunate that antipsychotic interventions eventually worked for me.

Kevin Gournay also discovered the antipsychiatry movement on his journey from being a charge nurse at an institution where I was an inmate at the same time, to

becoming a Professor of Psychiatric Nursing. Along the way there was friction with established medics. In our joint autoethnography, Professor Carson describes his taking on the philosophy of the Recovery movement, which can be said to be an opposition to the medical model of mental health treatment. So, my co-authoring of papers with Kevin and Jerome (Voyce and Carson, 2020; Voyce et al, 2022) indicates how far the interventions in mental health have come since the 1990s, and how far I have come in that era from being part mental patient, part vagrant with a criminal record, to someone with an honorary doctorate.

Perhaps an outcome from this body of work is that we recognise that having a false sense of reality is more than fantasy, and that it is not good enough to merely remove from sight, those who society is uncomfortable with. Never give up.

The emerging group, IDCAP – International Digital Collaborative Autoethnographical Psychobiography scrutinised the life of three musicians including Peter Green, founder of Fleetwood Mac, a blues group who sold more records that the Beatles and Rolling Stones in 1969. It was interesting to look at Peter's work, lyrics, and psychosis with the Swedish musician and member of IDCAP, Peter Bryngelsson. Peter led us to look at Peter Green's forlorn lyrics and his perspective on giving things away, including the naming of the group after two other non-leading musicians, as well as, spectacularly, his money (Hopkinson et al, 2022).

A useful insight on Syd Barrett, Peter Green, and Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys came from Mats Niklasson, was that a common factor in the life of the schizophrenic is that we forget what life has taught us. Our openness on our lives has resulted in shared, collaborative, insights.

Duoethnography (Mats)

Some years ago, I was invited by Professor Jerome Carson to write a chapter for a book, which aimed to combine autoethnography, psychology and mental health. After having discussed different angles and starting points, we arrived at a perspective of psychological survival. Rhetorically, Jerome asked me how Irene and I had been able to live and work together for nearly 35 years. What made it possible to share each day and night i.e., almost 24/7, and still manage to keep the marriage alive? In fact, I had not given that question a thought until it was put to me, but being able to give an answer was tempting. Since 1989, Irene and I had been fully engaged, working hard to develop our establishment, the Vestibularis Clinic, where we assessed and trained children, youngsters, and adults with sensorimotor disorders (Niklasson et al., 2018). To me it was obvious that the proposed chapter should be written in collaboration with Irene, but she was reluctant, and I had little experience of writing 'collaborative autoethnography' (CAE). I had co-authored two papers, both of which had dealt with situations and circumstances radically different from

the one presently proposed (Niklasson and Blomkvist, 2022; Carson and Niklasson, 2023). Both papers had followed Bochner's and Ellis' suggestion (2016 p. 174) that in a CAE, 'researchers write their individual autoethnographies and simultaneously contribute their individual findings for collective analysis in a serious of standardized steps'. Irene's opinion was that, for us to be able to grasp and then account for the essence of how we succeeded in keeping and developing our relationship as a married couple and co-workers, another approach would suit us better.

I suggested that we should try 'duoethnography' (DE), which was described as, *'a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world'* (Norris et al., 2016 p.9). The founders of DE had previously concluded that, *'Ultimately, duoethnography is underpinned by the hope that we can learn to be with each other, not just in tolerance and understanding but in dialogic growth'* (Sawyer and Norris, 2015). We agreed that this approach seemed to suit us well, not the least because we were used to discussing almost everything. Therefore, to juxtapose our views would be fine. However, we soon found out that Breault (2016) had suggested that a too close relationship between researchers/authors would risk creating a 'meta-narrative' (Lyotard, 1979), i.e., an all-inclusive truth, which according to Breault could prevent a 'transformation' of our dialogue. Though, as Norris and colleagues (2016, p. 10) wrote, the 'transformation' should be reserved for the reader, to take place in *'a third space''* i.e., in the reader's own mind. This was a tempting idea, casting Irene and I as the 'thesis' vs 'anti-thesis,' and the reader as the 'synthesis'. Our conversations over the years have not always ended in a consensus, they have also developed into open-end discussions i.e., there was no 'transformation'.

All in all, we learned a lot during the writing of our chapter (Niklasson and Niklasson, 2024), using the ten tenets of DE (Norris et al., 2016), but most important was our conclusion that keeping up the dialogue and to never stop talking had been essential for keeping our marriage together and for the development of our mutual work.

Digital Autoethnographic Psychobiography (DCAP) (Patrick and Mats)

The accounts set out above have all focused on the use of 'autoethnography' to analyse your own experiences. However, what if your autoethnographical work also involves learning from the lives of other people? Unlike psychology, medicine or nursing, social work rarely venerates its history (e.g., Gosling, 2016) or identifies important persons to draw inspiration or ideas from. However, in common with other disciplines, there could be value in learning from social workers like Jane Addams (1860-1935) (Johnson, 2004) and others about how current concerns and

problems once were tackled. What can the experiences and achievements of, for example, Katherine Kendall (e.g., Brandwein, 2005) tell us about how we might respond to similar challenges in developing the profession now? Kendall's work had a profound impact on the status of social work education in the USA, and even more widely through her later work at the United Nations. What can we learn from the motivations, actions, and application of their values by, for example, Vera Lister, the British social worker, and co-founder of the Open University or from Cicely Saunders, one of the founders of hospices, or from Rajesh Tandon, who used participatory research to inspire social change in India (e.g., Goswami and Tandon, 2013)?

Casting the net more widely, what can we learn from others i.e., Angela Davies and Gloria Steinem who led social change or challenged vested interests and institutionalised power structures? These people existed, of course, within their own specific historical context. We face new circumstances and fresh challenges but by engaging with the profession's past, we might foster and promote a grounded sense of identity, purpose and direction that is independent from Local Government bureaucracy and the temporary enthusiasm of politicians who set their course by the 'lights of passing ships.' On a more local scale, what might the lives of people who have struggled with and overcome adversity teach you and your clients about resilience and recovery?

DCAP (Digital Collaborative Autoethnographical Psychobiography), and its international form, IDCAP (International Digital Collaborative Autoethnographical Psychobiography) offer a way of exploring these and other questions.

DCAP and IDCAP provide means of synthesising autoethnography with psychobiography to better understand the experiences of another person through your own experiences. DCAP has been used to explore what it means to recover from mental health needs in the musicians Syd Barrett (Hopkinson et al, 2022), Peter Green (Hopkinson et al, 2023) and Brian Wilson (Hopkinson et al, 2023). A fuller account of the discovery, method, and application of DCAP (Digital Collaborative Autoethnographical Psychobiography) can be found in Hopkinson and Niklasson (2024) but the following summary may help readers to get started.

DCAP starts with identifying a historical person, deceased or alive, to learn from (the psychobiography aspect) and with whom you, thereafter, compare your own experiences, deeply and explicitly set within the culture and context of your own life (the autoethnography aspect). Your choice of a historical person may be based either on the type of question that you want to explore or simply on what you find interesting and compelling about them.

The next step is to find at least one other person to work with. One of the great strengths of DCAP is that it is fundamentally collaborative. DCAP has an especial value in that it encourages collaboration with people who are service experienced as equal partners in research. The skills required in DCAP are human rather than technical and are synonymous with social work. These include listening, reading, sharing, reflecting, analysing, thinking, facilitating, and working in partnership

with people from other backgrounds and cultures.

After this comes a process of finding out as much as you can about the historical person. This process of discovery is not limited to just reading, it also includes watching films and videos and listening to recordings. It might even include speaking to people who knew them. At the same time, you have conversations and 'multilogues' (Van de Fiert, 2010) with your collaborators about what seems striking or relevant: what you see in your historical subject that you also recognise in you. In philosophy this is referred to as 'verstehen': the recognition of 'the I in the thou' (Hopkinson and Niklasson, 2024). Talk about the connections you have made between what you have learned about the historical person and your own life experiences, achievements, beliefs, values, and goals and about how both you and your historical subject are embedded within cultural contexts. These contexts might include relationships, expectations, barriers, and enablers. Some of these may be explicit but many are implicit and unexplored. These conversations and discussions will open opportunities for you to examine what it could mean to be a social worker within, for example, a complex hierarchy of professions with different levels of status, independence, and power, commanding different levels of deference as part of the 'Establishment' At this point it might be relevant to ask, what can be learned from how another social change leader navigated this web of privilege?

This part of the DCAP process is inextricably linked with writing. Whilst you might be able to eloquently and memorably, express your insights, reflections, and revelations verbally, it is better to form, capture and share them in writing. This also makes the autoethnographies you and your collaborators generate and the psychobiography you write, sharable with, and challengeable by, each other. Constructive challenge and debate are important parts of DCAP. Whilst your experiences are your own, within their own context, you and your collaborators may help each other to understand them better.

The idea of a research method that involves challenge and debate about our feelings, insights and reflections on our own experiences may appear discomfiting. However, the purpose is to assist us to develop a deeper understanding of ourselves, of others and of our cultural context. Mutual reliance and respect amongst collaborators (e.g., Sparkes, 2024) is required to create an environment which feels safe. An important aspect in achieving this is that DCAP uses 'conversations' or 'dialogues' (Bohm, 1996) and 'multilogues' (Van de Fiert, 2010) rather than discussion. We suggest that a 'conversation', 'dialogue' or 'multilogue', in general, is free flowing, and slow, whilst a discussion is specific, focused, and fast. DCAP involves sharing, inspiring, and learning from each other, not asserting one's own opinion as the dominant discourse.

You are likely to find that your DCAP writing process goes through several drafts, but the final stage will be your mutual agreement to a final version of your collaborative autoethnographical psychobiography. To share your manuscript with a wider audience, you may choose to submit it for publication in an academic or a

professional journal. Whichever way you chose, you might will hopefully inspire others to participate in reclaiming social work's professional identity and history.

Reflections on autoethnography (Alicia)

Writing this from the perspective of a legal scholar, which may be viewed as falling within either disciplines of social sciences or humanities, I appreciate the value of qualitative data and methods which involve approaches that integrate personal narratives as well as lived experiences (Yow, 2014; Mohajan, 2018; Poerwandari, 2021; Leggat et al., 2023). It is this deep qualitative data that is essential when researching complex phenomena such as law, ethics, and justice (Jones, Torres, and Arminio, 2021; Lim, 2024). Research methods that fall within this category include methods with strong links to reflexivity and experiential data (Jamie and Rathbone, 2022; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Ide and Beddoe, 2024).

Reflection can be understood as a process of introspection on personal experiences (Botelho, 2021; Stockwell, 2021; Johnson, 2023) to extract meaning (Ewing, Waugh and Smith, 2021; Cattaneo and Motta, 2021; Lindseth and Norberg, 2022) and usually involves taking a step back and critically examining events or actions (Marathe and Sen, 2021; Robertson, Le Sueur and Terblanche, 2021; Kantawala, 2023), thereby contemplating potential underlying causes or possible implications (Robertson, Le Sueur and Terblanche, 2021; Cartwright, Hayes, Yang and Shires, 2021; Hsbollah and Hassan, 2022). Understanding reflection as a process of critically assessing experiences for the purpose of gaining insights, often with the aim to improve future actions, has led to the development of the concept of the 'reflective practitioner,' most notably coined by Donald Schön (1991; 1984; 2017). Schön's concept focuses on two primary forms of reflection. Firstly, there is reflection-in-action, which refers to adapting during practice, and secondly, reflection-on-action, which involves analysing practice after it has occurred (Schön, 2013). As such, we have seen a strong focus on reflective practice in the areas of continuous learning and professional development (Mlambo, Silén, and McGrath, 2021; Fuertes-Camacho, Dulsat-Ortiz and Álvarez-Cánovas, 2021; Zimmer and Matthews, 2022), especially for people working within roles that have a strong social component, such as in law or social work, as it allows people to not only evaluate their own practices but also uncover patterns relating to decision-making, biases, or systemic barriers that could impact effectiveness (Antonopoulos and Madhloom, 2021; Waugh and Smith, 2021; Ewing, Simon, Boyd and Subica, 2022; Killick and Taylor, 2024).

Beyond reflection, the term reflexivity is understood to add a further academic dimension to reflection that includes the critical examination of biases, assumptions, and positionality of researchers (Secules et al., 2021; Jamieson, Govaart and Pownall, 2023; Aguilar, Torres, and Macias, 2025), bringing a more objective component

within a highly subjective method (Henderson, Lingle and Parkes, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). It is understood that by focusing more on reflexivity, an enhanced self-awareness can be achieved which strengthens both the credibility and ethical integrity, not just of the research itself, but also by adding more transparency to an inquiry (Rowlands, 2022; Adeoye and Omiwole, 2024; Dhakal and Panta, 2024).

When looking at autoethnography and its use of reflexivity, one can see why I understand it to be a method of experiential learning. This is because autoethnography extends reflective practice through using a researcher's personal experiences in a way that is particularly valuable in providing authentic perspectives on issues which affect specific populations. As autoethnographers analyse their lived experiences, they can reveal insights that may be inaccessible through other, more traditional research methods (Luitel and Dahal, 2021; Poerwandari, 2021; Beattie, 2022; Brookshaw, 2024).

Seen as a form of experiential learning, as originally articulated by Lewin (1948), autoethnography highlights the transformative potential of learning and teaching through reflection and application. When considering the information from the previous sections of this paper, one can see how autoethnography exemplifies this kind of experiential learning model by using personal experiences to explore systemic issues in a way that empowers both researchers and professionals to become learners and storytellers. This is where one can see the intersection between autoethnography as an academic research method and as a component of experiential learning and professional reflection, as well as the way both can enhance voices in the generation of knowledge and promote advocacy.

When focusing on reflexivity as the central component of autoethnography, it becomes evident that autoethnography is more than merely a qualitative research method in which the subject is also the person conducting the study. It is a key component within the broader frameworks of experiential learning and reflective practice – an approach that offers a method to record, critically reflect on, and give an account of experiences in an academically rigorous way.

Discussion (Patrick)

This paper should have given readers some idea of the scope of 'autoethnography' and of developments in the field, which might be relevant to social work. It has also provided some personal accounts of what doing autoethnography involves and its value for, and impact on, practitioners and people who have used services. Readers may, however, be pondering what separates the qualitative research method autoethnography from memoir or autobiography? There are several key differences.

Firstly, autoethnography involves critical reflection on events, experiences, and relationships. Therefore, it is not an exercise in self-justification but an exploration

of why decisions were made, actions taken, and emotions were felt and expressed. The autoethnography approach provides an opportunity for the person(s) involved to relate feelings to actions and to 'interrogate where inner, individual life intersects with social life and identity' (Hopkinson and Niklasson, 2024), i.e., to include and to challenge different perspectives to generate even deep reflections and insights.

Secondly, autoethnography is set in, and involves investigation of a cultural context. This context consists of the tacit rules and assumptions, which underly our interactions with each other and form the structure of power relationships and hierarchies (e.g., Polanyi, 2009). Autoethnography focuses on making the implicit explicit, on saying what has not been said. At the same time, autoethnography sets out experiences that are often overlooked and devalued or suppressed because they are uncomfortable or challenging.

Thirdly, autoethnography can be conducted individually but also with others, collaboratively.

These factors enable autoethnography to be used to explore topics that could not be accessed as thoroughly through other research methods. Unlike other forms of qualitative research, autoethnography does not require the identification of themes and patterns. As an example, the exploration of the friendship between a social worker, Ulrika Hansson-Blomkvist, and James, a man who was rough-sleeping (Niklasson and Hansson-Blomkvist 2022), could only have been written as collaborative autoethnography. Ulrika had little experience of autoethnography, of academic writing or of submitting articles to academic journals. However, her collaboration with the experienced autoethnographer Mats, enabled it to be published in an academic journal. According to Ulrika, the story of James is well-known amongst homeless people in London. There are, hopefully, further opportunities for collaborative autoethnographies between James, Ulrika, and others. Consequently, autoethnography can open opportunities for collaboration with people who are otherwise excluded from contributing to academic debate.

Autoethnography has the advantage of having a low barrier to entry. The only equipment required are a computer with a word processor, internet access and, if you wish to work remotely and collaboratively, some form of video conferencing software. Autoethnography does not require formal research methods training, which makes it particularly accessible for people whose formal education may have been disrupted by trauma and illness. What you write may not have been written by anyone else before, so academic referencing is not always necessary. The choice of topic for your autoethnography is your own and does not have to be drawn from existing theories or rooted in a particular discipline. However, this does not mean that you can write how- or whatever you want. As always there are ethical considerations. Excellent guidelines are to be found in Andrew Sparkes' paper (2024).

Even if writing is not your strength, autoethnography can still be viable. As for now, autoethnography is a developing field and autoethnographies can take different forms. The authors of this paper have written in an academic way, as befits an

academic journal, but autoethnography can be told through stories, poems, essays, or through an educational novel. Mixed media including film and music can also be used, which means that autoethnography does not necessarily require access to academic journals.

Much of the inner life of professional practice or of using services is unrecorded and therefore easily lost. Policy, practice, and legislation all change; services are regrouped and restructured, and styles of service delivery develop and are discarded. There is a need to capture accounts of the experiences of professionals and of the people they serve before they are forgotten. There is a need to tell stories in our own words rather than wait for historians to claim them or for other academic researchers to combine, theme, reconstruct and approximate them. We hope that you, the reader, will be inspired to try autoethnography in its different forms, either alone or together with colleagues. Telling your story can make a difference.

Conclusions (Jerome)

Few professions face as much public scrutiny as social work. The work is both demanding and complex. Autoethnography offers a way of collecting and reflecting on these demands and pressures. In this paper we have outlined a range of possible forms of AE which could benefit social work academics, their students, and their clients. Positive autoethnography would enable social workers to focus on aspects of their work which might address issues such as hope and resilience. Collaborative AE could enable social workers to reflect on their work together and where their lives might intersect. Duoethnography could reflect the work of social workers who may be seeing families together. Digital autoethnographical psychobiography could link social workers and others at both a national and an international level. They could look at the work of leading social work academics from the past and see how they might understand the lives these people lived and what motivated them. We respectfully suggest that autoethnography in all its forms has much to offer social work.

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