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Elaine Gregersen<sup>a</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Northumbria Law School, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, England*

[elaine.gregersen@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:elaine.gregersen@northumbria.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0621-8444>

@alawuntoherself

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Abstract:

Autoethnography is a contemporary qualitative approach to research and writing where the researcher uses their lived experience as data. Autoethnographers reflect deeply on, and make sense of, their own struggles as well as exploring cultural practices and beliefs.

A diverse range of academic disciplines have embraced autoethnography as a research method. Legal education, however, rarely mentions autoethnography. This is a pivotal time for legal education and autoethnography. We have an opportunity to enhance the quality of legal education research, particularly where law teachers want to utilise creative, literary techniques and draw on personal experiences.

This article provides the first comprehensive assessment of the practicalities and pitfalls of doing autoethnography in legal education research. It uses lived experience narrative, employing first-person present tense storytelling, to examine and extend discussions on major methodological issues faced by autoethnographers. Above all, however, this article challenges law teachers to develop robust and rigorous autoethnographic research.

Acknowledgements: The content and style of this paper has travelled some way since first submission. This final product would not have been possible without the immensely detailed and constructive feedback from my reviewers. Thank you.

This is my first piece of substantive writing since my son, Henry, died. There was a time when I believed I would never write again. I have thought of Henry, and his surviving twin Blake, as words unexpectedly flowed out onto the laptop screen in front of me. They are always my inspiration and I am lucky to be their mum.

## TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE LAW SCHOOL: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND LEGAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

### Introduction

Autoethnography is a contemporary qualitative approach to research and writing where the researcher uses their lived experience as data.<sup>1</sup> Blending autobiography and memoir with ethnography,<sup>2</sup> autoethnographers reflect deeply on, and make sense of, their own struggles as well as exploring cultural practices and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> At its best, autoethnography sheds light on humanity<sup>4</sup> in a way that is meaningful for the researcher and reader.<sup>5</sup>

There is an increasing interest in autoethnography set in the world of academia. Academics have used autoethnographic methods to scrutinise experiences like surviving a research quality assessment exercise,<sup>6</sup> applying for department chair,<sup>7</sup> navigating life as a doctoral student,<sup>8</sup> and, sadly, dealing with bullying and discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Autoethnography has also found its way

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Berg Publishers 1997); Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (AltaMira Press 2004); Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview' (2011) 12 *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 1; Kathryn Haynes, 'Tensions in (re)presenting the self in reflexive autoethnographical research' (2011) 6(2) *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 134; Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography* (Oxford University Press 2015); Lydia Turner, Nigel P. Short, Alec Grant, Tony E. Adams (eds), *International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice* (Routledge 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1); Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (Routledge 2016); Carolyn Ellis (n 1).

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Vickers, 'Researchers as storytellers: Writing on the edge - and without a safety net' (2002) 8 *Qualitative Inquiry* 608.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, 'We Can Tell You Stories: Politics, Pleasure and Pain in Qualitative Inquiry' (*YouTube*, 23 April 2014) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKZ-wuJ\\_vnQ&lc=Ughe9sZx7isUJHgCoAEC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKZ-wuJ_vnQ&lc=Ughe9sZx7isUJHgCoAEC)> accessed 30 November 2020.

<sup>6</sup> A. C. Sparkes, 'Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration' (2007) 7 *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* 521.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Rambo, 'Strange Accounts: Applying for the Department Chair Position and Writing Threats and Secrets "in Play"' (2016) 45 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 3.

<sup>8</sup> Jess Moriarty, 'Leaving the blood in: Experiences with an autoethnographic doctoral thesis' in Nigel Short, Lydia Turner, and Alec Grant (eds), *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Sense Publishers 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Vickers (n 4); Margaret Vickers, 'Autoethnography as Sensemaking: A Story of Bullying', 13 *Culture and Organisation* (2007) 223.

into a diverse range of disciplines, including criminology,<sup>10</sup> sport science,<sup>11</sup> business and entrepreneurship,<sup>12</sup> and music studies.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, legal education research rarely mentions autoethnography. I suspect this is because few law teachers have knowledge of the intricacies of the method. As one of my colleagues once said, with frustration, “Just how do you DO it?!”. Being an autoethnographer in the law school has been a lonely experience.<sup>14</sup> However, we are starting to see the first shoots of interest in legal education autoethnography.<sup>15</sup> I welcome this shift, but it is a pivotal time. We need to proceed with clarity - and caution.

This article uses lived experience narrative to examine and extend discussions on major methodological issues faced by autoethnographers. I employ first-person present tense storytelling,<sup>16</sup> which is perhaps a radical departure from the style of writing familiar to readers of *The Law Teacher*. However, through this autoethnographic technique, I seek to advance understanding of autoethnography as a research method. My narrative covers my journey into autoethnography, the ethical dilemmas associated with life writing, and the criticism I and other autoethnographers have faced. This article provides the first comprehensive assessment of the practicalities and pitfalls of doing autoethnography as a law teacher, but, above all, it challenges law teachers to develop robust and rigorous autoethnographic research. Now, let me tell you a story about autoethnography.

## Discovering autoethnography

It is 2015. I am trudging down the first floor corridor of my Law School, towards my office, when I bump into a much-respected colleague and friend. We exchange complimentary noises about a lunchtime research session we attended an hour or so ago. Then, I decide to have a moan. I’m fairly new to research and, buoyed by youthful exuberance and self-confidence, I’ve been sending my first scribbles to legal education journals. A journal editor has emailed. “Your work”, she writes, “needs to be more scholarly”. “It is”, she continues, “too personal”. Too modern. Not academic enough.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Wakeman, ‘Fieldwork, Biography and Emotion: Doing Criminological Autoethnography’ (2014) 54 *British Journal of Criminology* 705.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g. A. C. Sparkes, ‘The Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Bodyself’ (1996) 2 *Qualitative Inquiry* 463; Andrew C. Sparkes, ‘Bodies, Identities, Selves: Autoethnographic Fragments and Reflections’ in Jim Denison and Pirkko Markula (eds), *Moving writing: crafting movement in sport research* (Oxford 2003); Michele Cox, Geoff Dickson and Barbara Cox, ‘Lifting the veil on allowing headscarves in football: A co-constructed and analytical autoethnography’ (2017) 20 *Sport Management Review* 522.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Kathryn Haynes, ‘Linking narrative and identity construction: using autobiography in accounting research’ (2006) 17 *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 399; Haynes (n 1); Mark Learmonth and Michael Humphreys, ‘Autoethnography and academic identity: Glimpsing business school doppelgängers’ (2012) 19 *Organization* 99; Joanne James, ‘Towards a metaphorical framework of team coaching: an autoethnography’ (DBA thesis, Northumbria University 2017); Heewon Chang and Wendy Bilgen, ‘Autoethnography in Leadership Studies: Past, Present, and Future’ (2020) 1 *Journal of Autoethnography* 93.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Christopher Wiley, ‘Autoethnography, Autobiography, and Creative Art as Academic Research in Music Studies: A Fugal Ethnodrama’ (2019) 18 *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 73.

<sup>14</sup> I know this first-hand. Until 2019, I did not know of any other law teacher writing about autoethnographic methods.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Yau, ‘Reshaping the teaching–research nexus: connecting with students through research blogging (with an autoethnographic perspective) before they become lawyers’ (2019) 54 *The Law Teacher* 261; Senthurun Raj, ‘Teaching feeling: bringing emotion into the law school’ (2020) *The Law Teacher* <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03069400.2020.1781456>> accessed 29 November 2020.

<sup>16</sup> In doing so, I am influenced by autoethnographers who have used first-person storytelling to explore autoethnography as qualitative inquiry, including: Laura L. Ellingson “‘Then You Know How I Feel’: Empathy, Identification, and Reflexivity in Fieldwork’ (1998) 4(4) *Qualitative Inquiry* 492; Carolyn Ellis (n 1); Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur Bochner ‘Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject’ in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage 2000); Bochner and Ellis (n 3).

I am angry. I don't want to be conventional. I write in stories and I use personal experience. I can't bring myself to adhere solely to orthodox representations of research. Frustrated, I relay all of this to my colleague. "I do not fit in academia!", I finish, with more than a touch of drama. My colleague listens calmly. Sensing I am done, she nods, takes a breath and says, "I think you might like autoethnography".

The day progresses. I ferry myself to and from teaching sessions. When I'm able to retreat back to my shared office space, I am continually interrupted by students and staff. Our office is chaotic and noisy today, and I find it hard to do any sort of focused work. The conversation with my colleague lingers, however. In between disturbances, I manage to perform a couple of cursory Google searches for 'autoethnography'. I am intrigued as I quickly pick up snippets of information. I learn that autoethnography places intense attention on lived experience.<sup>17</sup> Autoethnographic research is creative, experimental, and encourages a deeper understanding of experiences typically sanitised or concealed.<sup>18</sup> I am excited.

When I return home later that evening, I continue searching online. I stumble upon a YouTube video of Professors Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner speaking to the Fourth Israeli Interdisciplinary Conference of Qualitative Research.<sup>19</sup> I can still remember Professor Ellis' exuberant "Hello from Tampa, Florida!" echoing around my house. The Professors were due to be at the conference, but their flight was cancelled at late notice. Professor Bochner laments their "deep sense of loss"<sup>20</sup> at this turn of events. They both speak so warmly, with emotion. So personal. I don't think I've seen a keynote speech like this before. It seems a world away from the conventional 'norms' of academia.

Ellis and Bochner talk about research as storytelling, allowing readers to enter the researcher's experiences and feel their feelings.<sup>21</sup> They emphasise how our personal encounters, emotions and interactions should be at the centre of the narrative. Through this video, and, later, their numerous autoethnographic works, I discover that autoethnography can be traced back the 1980s during a period known as the Crisis of Representation where researchers started to question accepted perspectives on writing and method.<sup>22</sup>

I read how the Crisis of Representation opened the doors for stories and storytelling, acknowledgment of emotions and bias, and rejection of colonialist traditions of entering, studying, and leaving a culture.<sup>23</sup> At times, however, I struggle to accept the romanticisation of the rise of autoethnography. Realistically, most methods textbooks of the day still focused almost entirely on quantitative research. Even established qualitative methods like participant observation were ignored due to their "inability to conform to the canons of scientific method".<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, I discover that personal narrative research continued to grow throughout the 1990s. I delve into the history, reading key texts like the first edited collection of lived experience research<sup>25</sup> and Ellis' ground-breaking methodological novel about autoethnography.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Ellis (n 1).

<sup>18</sup> Kenyan G. Tomaselli, 'Where Does My Body Belong?' in Lydia Turner, Nigel P. Short, Alec Grant, Tony E. Adams (eds), *International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice* (Routledge 2018), at p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Ellis and Bochner (n 5).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1); Ellis, Adams and Bochner (n 1); Ellis and Bochner (n 16).

<sup>23</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Bryman, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (Routledge 1988), at p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> C. Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Sage 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Ellis (n 1).

I focus much of my attention on Ellis' work. It resonates with me. One day, on the Metro home, I read an early co-authored piece with Bochner containing the story of the termination of their pregnancy.<sup>27</sup> The prose is so powerful, I feel faint and have to sit down. I begin to understand how autoethnography "isn't meant to be consumed as "knowledge" or received passively".<sup>28</sup> Autoethnography transports me into an experience and encourages me to "think about taken-for-granted norms [...] and practices in new, unique and complicated ways".<sup>29</sup>

### Choosing an autoethnographic genre

As the months pass, I consume more and more autoethnographic work. I read at least two articles per day, often on my commute. Some, like Tamas' "Autoethnography, Ethics, and Making Your Baby Cry"<sup>30</sup> and Haynes' "Tensions in (re)presenting the self in reflexive autobiographical research",<sup>31</sup> engage my brain in ways I haven't felt for a long time. Others are superficial, and don't seem to fully grasp the autoethnographic methods they purport to follow. I start to lose track of what I've read and what I think about the content. Being an ex-private practice commercial lawyer, I start a spreadsheet. I include column headings like "Author", "Year", "Title", "Journal/Book", "Keywords", "Author's objectives" and "Author's conclusions". The spreadsheet looks uninviting and a little dull. I add two more headings: "Elaine's happy thoughts" and "Elaine's unhappy thoughts". Simple and childish, but somewhere I can jot down my inner monologue whilst reading.

The spreadsheet fills up, and I become more aware than ever of the disparate nature of autoethnographic research. Far from being one-size-fits-all, autoethnography appears in many diverse forms. Sometimes it seems so abstract that I start to empathise with the view that autoethnography is "less of a method and more of a philosophy".<sup>32</sup> In research sessions, there are whispers about my newfound interest and colleagues come up to me in the break and chat to me about "this new auto-thingy you're doing". They are interested. But the question is always the same: "How exactly is it done?". I am frustrated by my inability to provide a succinct answer.

Much of the autoethnography I gravitate towards could be categorised as evocative autoethnography. These autoethnographers are telling a story. Stories can, of course, be represented in several forms, including poetry,<sup>33</sup> poetic-narrative,<sup>34</sup> novel,<sup>35</sup> drama-dialogue,<sup>36</sup> and personal narrative.<sup>37</sup> Bochner & Ellis' excellent *Evocative Autoethnography* is devoted to

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<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Telling and performing personal stories: The constraints of choice in abortion' in C. Ellis & M. Flaherty (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Sage 1992). Bochner and Ellis met in 1990 when they were both at University of South Florida. A textual performance of their meeting is presented in the section "Our story: Carolyn and Art Come Together" in Bochner and Ellis (n 3), at pp. 36-42.

<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Talking Over Ethnography' in Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (eds), *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (AltaMira Press 1996), at p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p.33.

<sup>30</sup> Sophie Tamas, 'Autoethnography, Ethics, and Making Your Baby Cry' (2011) 11(3) *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies* 258.

<sup>31</sup> Haynes (n 1).

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography' (2006) 5 *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 146, at p. 152.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Wyatt, "'Ian Schneider' At the 9/11 Memorial' (2016) 5 *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 4.

<sup>34</sup> David. I. Hanauer, 'Growing up in the unseen shadow of the Kindertransport: A poetic-narrative autoethnography' (2012) 18 *Qualitative Inquiry* 845.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis (n 1).

<sup>36</sup> Ellis and Bochner (n 28).

<sup>37</sup> Tony E. Adams, 'Seeking Father: Relationally Reframing a Troubled Love Story' (2006) 12 *Qualitative Inquiry* 704.

the art of crafting stories.<sup>38</sup> This textbook provides in-depth notes on constructing a story, including character, setting, time, and the difference between showing and telling.

Advice on writing dialogue, choosing a narrative voice, and shaping plot is also available in the very accessible book *Autoethnography*,<sup>39</sup> which I receive as a Christmas gift one year. A short while after, one of its co-editors, Professor Tony Adams, writes to me unexpectedly. He has enjoyed my first publication about autoethnography. I run around my living room, clutching my mobile phone with the email still on screen, screeching with delight at the implausibility of it all. I blurt “Professor Tony Adams! Professor Tony Adams!” repeatedly to my husband, who does not know who or what I am talking about. Professor Adams calls *Autoethnography* “the little green book” and, from then on, so do I.

I start to find comfort, rather than frustration, in the many ways and means of writing evocative autoethnography. Ellis recommends taking retrospective field notes and recalling as much detail as possible about the personal experience you are researching.<sup>40</sup> She suggests organising notes chronologically at first, then filling in new memories as they arrive. “Remember”, Ellis says, “you are creating the story; it is not there waiting to be found”.<sup>41</sup> Some autoethnographers prefer to take synchronous notes and use them to create fictionalised accounts of events and/or experiences.<sup>42</sup> Others look for personal and cultural texts, such as photographs, drawings, and films<sup>43</sup> to build their narratives. In every case, autoethnographers aligned to the evocative tradition “seek to make people feel deep in their guts and in their bones, using various forms of literary artfulness and storytelling to place the reader in the action”.<sup>44</sup> When I read this, my stomach dips. I am not sure I am capable of such intricate and technical work.

As I read wider and deeper, I become more alive to disputes between autoethnographers. Evocative autoethnography, it seems, is not the be-all-and-end-all to everyone. For some, the focus on evocative autoethnography has “obscured”<sup>45</sup> the notion that autoethnographic research can be compatible with traditional ethnographic practices. An alternative – analytic autoethnography – moves away from creative storytelling and puts the emphasis back on theoretical analysis.<sup>46</sup> Analytic autoethnography calls for analytic reflexivity, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and a commitment to theory.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, some autoethnographers query whether analytic autoethnography is a type of autoethnography at all.<sup>48</sup> Others, however, see this review as a “corrective”,<sup>49</sup> bringing autoethnography back to the traditions of qualitative research.

The analytic autoethnography that has emerged uses third-person voice<sup>50</sup> and separates experience from analysis. Like evocative autoethnography, there is still a focus on collecting data, but that data is unlikely to be shaped into first or second-person stories, arranged into

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<sup>38</sup> Bochner and Ellis (n 3).

<sup>39</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1).

<sup>40</sup> Ellis (n 1).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, at p.117.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Clair Doloriert and Sally Sambrook, ‘Ethical confessions of the “I” of autoethnography: the student's dilemma’ (2009) 4 *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* 27.

<sup>43</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Bochner and Ellis (n 3), at p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Leon Anderson, ‘Analytic Autoethnography’ (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 373, at p. 373.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, at p. 374.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, at p. 378.

<sup>48</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, ‘Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy’ (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 429, at p. 431.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Atkinson, ‘Rescuing Autoethnography’ (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 400, at p. 400.

<sup>50</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p. 85

poetic form, or used to construct hybrid texts. Analytic autoethnography tends to be presented in a traditional format. An evocative autoethnographer exploring a bereavement might produce a multi-voiced story, constructed through intense memory work. In contrast, an analytic autoethnographer, might typically start with an introduction to the literature on grief, explain their methodology and data analysis, and end with a discussion of results or insights about their loss.<sup>51</sup> This is not to say that analytic autoethnographers refrain from utilising personal narrative. Rather, they might present the narrative and then offer reflexive analysis of it.<sup>52</sup>

I reflect on my own autoethnographic work and find myself in a predicament. I greatly admire the evocative autoethnography I have read. Certain pieces of evocative autoethnography have had a significant effect on me, personally as well as professionally. They have made me feel as well as think.<sup>53</sup> However, my systematic, rulebook loving sensibilities draw me towards the traditional tenets of analytic autoethnography. I don't like all of the rules though. I particularly dislike the idea that I would be required to include voices other than my own in my autoethnographic work.

A few years after I discover autoethnography, a newly published article catches my eye. Written by Stahlke Wall, it is called "Toward a Moderate Autoethnography".<sup>54</sup> I have never heard autoethnography called 'moderate' before. The word moderation conjures images of temperance and calm. As an advocate of autoethnography, this is not something I tend to experience.<sup>55</sup>

I like Stahlke Wall's straight-forward and no-nonsense approach. She queries whether unanalysed texts like poetry and stories can truly be deemed autoethnography - no matter how beautiful or engaging they might be - if they fail to "critique or even identify the discourses they wish to challenge".<sup>56</sup> Her vision of moderate autoethnography allows for immersive, inventive, and deeply personal narratives, but also strives to move "collective thinking forward"<sup>57</sup> whilst "sustaining confidence in the quality, rigor, and usefulness"<sup>58</sup> of the study. I start to wonder if I need to be more like her, generally, never mind in terms of my research.

I read a number of autoethnographies that exist somewhere in-between evocative/analytic framing. Some autoethnographers explicitly refer to their work as analytical-evocative.<sup>59</sup> Others talk about "braiding"<sup>60</sup> interpretative and highly personal texts with systematic analysis. Autoethnographers combine story with commentary,<sup>61</sup> offer contemporaneous field notes

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<sup>51</sup> It's important to stress that I can only generalise here. My comments are based on my experience of reading autoethnographies explicitly positioned as being in the analytic tradition. I appreciate there may many ways of presenting analytic autoethnography, but this is what I typically see in papers of this nature.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. L. DiAnne Borders and Amanda L. Giordano, 'Confronting Confrontation in Clinical Supervision: An Analytical Autoethnography' (2016) 94 *Journal of Counseling & Development* 454.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis and Bocher (n 28).

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Stahlke Wall, 'Toward a Moderate Autoethnography' (2016) 15(1) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1.

<sup>55</sup> I have been subject to online trolling as a consequence of writing about autoethnography. My experience with trolling is beyond the scope of this article, but I cover it in detail in Elaine Campbell, 'Apparently Being a Self-Obsessed C\*\*t Is Now Academically Lauded': Experiencing Twitter Trolling of Autoethnographers' (2017) 18(3) *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Article 16.

<sup>56</sup> Stahlke Wall (n 54), at p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, at p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, at p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> Kenyan G. Tomaselli (n 18), at p. 171.

<sup>60</sup> Barbara Tedlock, 'Braiding Evocative with Analytic Autoethnography' in Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Left Coast Press 2013), at p. 358.

<sup>61</sup> T. E. Adams, 'Mothers, faggots, and witnessing (un)contestable experience' (2009) 1 *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 619; Barbara J. Jago, 'Chronicling an academic depression' (2002) 31 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 729.



alongside sensemaking description,<sup>62</sup> or use first-person vignettes interwoven with reflections on observations and emotions.<sup>63</sup> This seems to be the type of autoethnography Stahlke Wall wants me to embrace. I like it. It seems to be the best of both worlds. I refrain, however, from badging myself as a moderate autoethnographer. In truth, I don't want to be thought of as moderate in anything I do. Autoethnography is such a rich, insightful, complicated, and controversial way of doing research. Being 'moderate' seems so average, and a touch boring.

I struggle with who I am as an autoethnographer. I can see the benefits of labelling my research. I wouldn't need to think so much about where I stand, and others might find it easier to understand my position. I can imagine them saying, "Ah, you're an evocative autoethnographer. You like artistic, innovative storytelling". And I would nod. And that would be the end of that. But it feels disingenuous and restrictive. Over time, I publish my own autoethnographic work. I tend to use personal diary entries as data. Sometimes I let the entries speak for themselves, peppering them throughout the publication alongside academic commentary. Elsewhere, I systematically analyse the entries using thematic analysis.<sup>64</sup> When presenting at conferences and research symposia, I switch between giving traditionally structured papers and contemporary narrative accounts. I like the freedom to move up and down the spectrum of autoethnography on offer depending on the needs and aims of the research project and intended audience. For me, the beauty of autoethnography is the range of representation available, each providing an opportunity to illustrate cultural experience and seek a response from an audience.

### **Questions of validity and rigour**

Shortly after our fateful conversation, my colleague from the corridor masterminds a Professional Doctorate programme for our Law School. It becomes known as the DLaw. Although I'm not entirely sure what the DLaw will entail or how it will work, I sign up immediately. At this stage in my career, I have been a university law clinic supervisor for four years. I am frustrated at the paucity of insider narratives detailing the reality of the supervisory role. I want to research my lived experience as a supervisor, and I want to learn more about autoethnography. The DLaw opens a pathway to do all these things. Over the next three and a half years, I produce a thesis comprising a deeply reflexive narrative about law clinic supervision whilst simultaneously unpacking methodological grey areas in autoethnographic practice. I weave autoethnography and clinical legal education together in an attempt to scrutinise them both.<sup>65</sup>

The DLaw programme starts with a block of taught sessions. I spend an intensive few weeks absorbed in discussions on research paradigms and document analysis, attending literature review training sessions, and learning about evidence and warrant. My cohort, a small but engaged group of colleagues, take part willingly in group feedback. We make suggestions

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<sup>62</sup> Vickers (n 9).

<sup>63</sup> Kathryn Haynes, 'Sexuality and sexual symbolism as processes of gendered identity formation' (2013) 26 *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 374.

<sup>64</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' (2006) 3 *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77. Thematic analysis has proved a very popular method of qualitative analysis, especially in the last decade. Its popularity has however been accompanied by continuing confusion about what thematic analysis is, its philosophical underpinnings, and best practice. If you are interested in thematic analysis, I recommend reading more of Clarke and Braun/Braun and Clarke's work including Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Counselling and Psychotherapy Research: A Critical Reflection' (2018) 18 *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 107; Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?' (2020) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* DOI: [10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238).

<sup>65</sup> Elaine Gregersen, 'The lived experience of a university law clinic supervisor: an autoethnographic inquiry' (Doctoral thesis, Northumbria University 2019).

about each other's topics and methods. We become ridiculously giddy when we use the word 'epistemology' in a sentence for the first time. Slowly, we each start to fashion something resembling a research proposal.

The taught part of the programme culminates in a half day gathering. An end of year show. We have been asked to create a poster setting out the main tenets of our research proposal. It is likely to be messy and unfinished, but we are told the poster will be an important artefact going forward. A sort of snapshot of where we once were. I have never made a poster before, but I pull together some clip art and a few text boxes and – voila! – I have produced a portrait of what I know and how I know it. At the centre of my poster is a red heart with 'autoethnography' written prominently within.

So far, our DLaw sessions have been limited to our merry band and course facilitators. The end of year show, however, is open to all. I am not especially nervous, as I suspect most staff will be too busy to attend. Imagine my surprise, then, when high-ranking colleagues from a range of departments decide to join us. We are given a few minutes to stand in front of our poster and explain our proposal. They are invited to give feedback and gently challenge our thought process. When it is my turn, I bounce out of my seat, start pointing at my poster, and jump straight into declaring my fascination with autoethnography. I flap my hands around to mask my anxiety, all the while wondering what the hell everyone thinks of me, and my research, and my poster with the massive red heart in the centre. When I am done, the most senior person in the room says: "Isn't it just Bridget Jones' Diary?!"

In Helen Fielding's incredibly popular 1996 novel, the titular 30-something Bridget writes about her disastrous relationships, overindulgence in alcohol and cigarettes, and comic pratfalls at work. By evoking Bridget Jones, my colleague has summed up the central argument against my chosen method. Lived experience research can be seen as "soft and fluffy"<sup>66</sup> or "artsy-craftsy".<sup>67</sup> Autoethnography, in particular, is characterised as "an intellectual cul de sac",<sup>68</sup> typically featuring "overwrought autobiographical sad stories about how hard things are or were for the writer".<sup>69</sup>

How can I convince my questioner that autoethnography is a serious scholarly activity? On one level, I don't want to try. I sometimes get tired of attempting to justify the presence of the self in research and writing. I am influenced by those who say we shouldn't need to explain ourselves,<sup>70</sup> and I sense that more autoethnographers are resisting "trite criticisms"<sup>71</sup> in respect of autoethnography's existence. For example, the editors of the *Journal of Autoethnography* will reject manuscripts seeking to defend or apologize for using the method.<sup>72</sup> That said, I

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<sup>66</sup> Sarah Wall, 'An Autoethnography on Learning about Autoethnography' (2006) 5(2) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 146, at p. 147.

<sup>67</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, 'Prospect for a Post-Modern Ethnography' (1999) 28(6) *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 669, at p. 672.

<sup>68</sup> Sara Delamont, 'The Only Honest Thing: Autoethnography, Reflexivity and Small Crises in Fieldwork. *Ethnography and Education*' (2009) 4(1) *Ethnography and Education* 51, at p. 51.

<sup>69</sup> Sanders (n 67), at p. 672.

<sup>70</sup> As Gingrich-Philbrook puts it, "I swear to God, if I read one more essay attempting to justify the presence of the self in writing to the patriarchal council of self-satisfied social scientists I'll, well, I could say "Scream" or "Go to Wal-Mart after all," but I think I'll let it go with this, I think I'll put it this way: "If I read one more essay blah blah blah, I think I'll put it down" (Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, 'Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences' (2005) 25(4) *Text and Performance Quarterly* 297, at p. 311).

<sup>71</sup> Lydia Turner, Nigel P. Short, Alec Grant, Tony E. Adams, 'Assemblages' in Lydia Turner, Nigel P. Short, Alec Grant, Tony E. Adams (eds), *International Perspectives on Autoethnographic Research and Practice*, at p. 274.

<sup>72</sup> Tony Adams and Andrew Herrmann, 'Introducing *Journal of Autoethnography*' (*Journal of Autoethnography*, 10 January 2020) <<https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/48826/introducing-journal-of-autoethnography/>> accessed on 6 May 2021.

understand why questions about the validity of autoethnography are raised. It's important to have an answer.

My view is that personal narrative research can be a valid form of science, if it comes carefully crafted and offers insightful contributions to knowledge. Autoethnography is hard work. The autoethnographies I have written required robust and deep introspection, lengthy honing of the text, and complex revisits and reviews. As Bochner says, autoethnography “has to merge painstaking empirical research with taxing artistic labor”.<sup>73</sup> Diary entries can be utilised as autoethnographic data, but the value comes from the “*particular, nuanced, complex, and insider insights*”<sup>74</sup> arising from the diary itself. In addition, I like how autoethnographic writing offers a forum for experiences that are frequently “ignored, distorted or silenced because of the discomfort they cause”.<sup>75</sup> Griffin, for example, has advocated for Black Feminist Autoethnography as a theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to “critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood”.<sup>76</sup> Autoethnography has been credited as giving “a voice to the voiceless”.<sup>77</sup>

Of course, personal narratives of life in the law school do exist. For example, first-hand accounts are utilised with great regularity in my field of clinical legal education. Law clinicians are by their nature reflective practitioners,<sup>78</sup> often looking to develop reflexive practice in the students they supervise.<sup>79</sup> Yet, whilst there are plenty of personal accounts of clinical legal education,<sup>80</sup> the research itself is rarely positioned as a form of self-study like autoethnography. In fact, method is seldom alluded to at all.<sup>81</sup> Legal cases are stories, so perhaps it's unsurprising that law teachers turn to storytelling in their own writing. Difficulties arise, however, when the stories are surface-level, overly descriptive, and exhibit little knowledge or understanding of lived experience research.

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<sup>73</sup> Bochner and Ellis (n 3), at p. 248.

<sup>74</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p. 103 (emphasis in original).

<sup>75</sup> R. Bridgens, ‘Autoethnography and Untold Stories’ (2007) 4 *Qualitative Researcher* 4, at p. 4. Autoethnography has historically appealed to persons of colour, women, and LGBTQ+ researchers (Ellis and Bochner (n 28), at p. 18).

<sup>76</sup> Rachel Alicia Griffin, ‘I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance’ (2012) 35(2) *Women’s Studies in Communication* 138.

<sup>77</sup> Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner, and Alex Grant, ‘Acknowledgements’ in Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner, and Alec Grant (eds), *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Sense Publishers 2013), at p. xi.

<sup>78</sup> See e.g. Stacy Caplow, ‘A Year in Practice: The Journal of a Reflective Clinician’ (1993) 3(1) *Clinical Law Review* 1; Kevin Kerrigan and Victoria Murray (eds), *A Student Guide to Clinical Legal Education and Pro Bono* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. Rachel Spencer, ‘Holding Up the Mirror: A theoretical and practical analysis of the role of reflection in Clinical Legal Education’ (2012) 18 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 181; Jonny Hall, ‘Building reflection into the clinic supervision experience: research methods for the reflective teacher’ (2019) 5(4) *The Law Teacher* 475. There are also a plethora of references to reflection in Linden Thomas and Nick Johnson (eds), *The Clinical Legal Education Handbook* (University of London Press 2020) <<https://humanities-digital-library.org/index.php/hdl/catalog/view/clinical-legal-education/152/327-1>> accessed 6 May 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Examples can be found in the archives of *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* and *Clinical Law Review*. See also, Linden Thomas, Steven Vaughan, Bharat Malkini and Theresa Lynch (eds), *Reimagining Clinical Legal Education* (Hart 2018).

<sup>81</sup> Please see Chapter 2 of Gregersen (n 65) for a discussion on the lack of autoethnography in experiential education generally, and Chapter 3 for a detailed exploration of the state of play, methodologically speaking, of research on supervision on clinical legal education.

The quality of legal education scholarship more generally has been raised before.<sup>82</sup> Cownie, for example, fiercely finds fault with those who have treated legal education as a “hobby”.<sup>83</sup> She writes:

“They have basically described what they do, or think should be done, in a law lecture or tutorial, and have published articles (or sometimes even whole books) about legal education that are purely descriptive, with no (or few) references to the relevant literature, and without including any critique”.<sup>84</sup>

Cownie’s assessment mirrors the comments of the 2014 REF Panel, who welcomed the inclusion of legal education research but judged it “uneven”<sup>85</sup> with some outputs lacking “methodological rigour and significance”.<sup>86</sup> For those, like me, wishing to research our experience of life in the law school, autoethnography presents a happy solution. We can continue to write our experimental, creative narratives, but with methodological diligence and thoroughness and through situation in (and contributions to) the relevant methodological and disciplinary literatures. Autoethnography has the potential to add rich and wide-ranging insights to legal education research. However, it must be done well. There is a difference between anecdote and autoethnography. Autoethnography creates “charged moments of clarity, connection, and change”.<sup>87</sup> It is not a superficial sketch. Autoethnographic practice takes time, and asks much, emotionally, of the researcher. And so, we must not fall into the trap of simply labelling any personal narrative as ‘autoethnographic’. If we do this, we underestimate the deep work autoethnographers must undertake.

Naturally, I do not say any of this at the end of year show. The room has erupted into gentle laughter at my questioner’s pop culture reference. My exuberance has faded and I wonder if I am, indeed, ridiculous. Today, nearly 6 years on, I think about that moment a great deal. I wish I had the opportunity to return to the room. I would speak with greater confidence about the power of insider research into experiences that cannot be directly observed. I would make the case that autoethnography requires more than simply writing about yourself. And I might quote Wall, who remarked that whilst she valued quantitative research and admired those who excelled at it, she was “not interested in disembodied research that aims to speak neutrally for everyone”.<sup>88</sup>

## Writing about others: being an ethical autoethnographer

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<sup>82</sup> See, e.g. Jane Ching, Paul Maharg, Avrom Sherr, and Julian Webb, ‘An overture for well-tempered regulators: four variations on a LETR theme’ (2015) 49(2) *The Law Teacher* 143, where legal education research was characterised as “disturbingly chaotic” (p. 146). In my field, clinical scholars have called for clearer links to methodology and further use of methodological innovations (see, e.g. Elaine Hall, ‘Editorial - How Do We Know What We Know About Clinical Legal Education?’ (2015) 22(3) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 234; Tribe Mkwebu, ‘A Systematic Review of Literature on Clinical Legal Education: A Tool for Researchers in Responding to an Explosion of Clinical Scholarship’ (2015) 22(3) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 238; Tribe Mkwebu, ‘Clinical Pedagogy: A Systematic Review of Factors Influential in the Establishment and Sustainability of Clinical Programmes and a Grounded Theory Explication of a Clinical Legal Education Case Study in Zimbabwe’ (Doctorate of Philosophy, Northumbria University, 2016).

<sup>83</sup> Fiona Cownie, ‘Legal Education Research’ in Chris Ashford and Jessica Guth (eds), *The Legal Academics Handbook* (Palgrave 2016), at p. 171.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Research Excellence Framework, ‘REF Research Excellence Framework 2014: Overview report by Main Panel C and Sub-panels 16 to 26’, (Report, January 2015), <<https://www.ref.ac.uk/2014/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20C%20overview%20report.pdf>> accessed 9 May 2021, at p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, ‘Autoethnography: making the personal political’, in Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage Publications, Inc., 2005).

<sup>88</sup> Stahlke Wall (n 54), at p.6

My proposal passes, and I spend the first year of my DLaw reading and reviewing the literature on autoethnography and clinical legal education. In year 2, I progress to data collection. I keep a diary of my experiences working in our law clinic. Originally, I had planned to write a diary entry at the end of each working day. I soon realise this is cumbersome and unnatural. On occasion there is little to say, but most days I write multiple entries as events unfold. My contemporaneous notes capture “a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape”<sup>89</sup> of clinical supervision than memory alone would have produced.

Finding guidance on what to write is hard. Diaries are mentioned as a mode of inquiry in autoethnographic texts, but I find little detail other than repeated (but unanalysed) references to authors who have utilised diary entries in their autoethnographies. I dig into the works referenced, hoping to discover a ‘how to’ explanation of diary writing. Curiously, some of the autoethnographers listed do not use the word ‘diary’ at all. Jenks took field notes.<sup>90</sup> Vickers made file notes.<sup>91</sup> Given their rejection of the word ‘diary’, I presume that Jenks and Vickers’ research will follow a similar pattern. However, Vickers’ file notes are brimming with emotion, bringing to life the fear and trauma she experienced whilst being bullied at work. Conversely, Jenks is at pains to say that she had eliminated emotion from her field notes. Frustrated with the limited advice on diarising in autoethnography, I decide to use my own initiative, take Vickers’ lead, and attempt to capture the reality – good and ill - of my working day.

I write about the lack of control I have over my day, my resentment that the urgent nature of live client work means I lose out on research time, my frustration with poor quality student work, and the multifaceted relationship I have with my students. I talk about being drained. I capture the gnawing worry, frustration, and guilt I feel as a clinic supervisor.

Having heard that I’m keeping a diary, long-standing colleagues ask me what I’m writing about and, sometimes, I detect a note of nervousness. A new addition to the Law School is more forthright. “I’m afraid I don’t like it”, she says bluntly whilst we are stood in the world’s longest queue for the cafeteria. There is nowhere to escape, so I nod and look longingly at the greasy chips. “You’re writing about students? About staff? Right? How did you get consent? I take it everything’s anonymised?”. I go to speak but before any words can form, she continues. “But then, people will still work it out, you know? They’ll know it’s them.” She’s right. My interactions with third parties pepper the course of my working day, and certainly my diary is full of encounters with students and conversations with colleagues. Superficially, autoethnographic research appears to avoid ethical issues. I’m not obtaining data from participants through, for example, interviews or surveys. I’m simply writing about myself. Yet, I don’t live alone on a desert island. The potential to harm others is real.

Unlike my difficulties finding guidance on diary writing, I unearth plentiful advice on autoethnographic ethics. There are a variety of perspectives. Tolich’s *10 foundational guidelines for autoethnographers*<sup>92</sup> is mentioned often. I like Tolich’s recommendation to assume all people mentioned in the text will read it someday. I have trouble, however, with

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<sup>89</sup> D. Jean Clandinin & F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (Jossey-Bass, Inc. 2000), at p.54.

<sup>90</sup> Elaine Jenks, ‘Searching for Autoethnographic Credibility: Reflections from a Mom with a Notepad’ in Arthur. P. Bochner & Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (AltaMira Press 2002).

<sup>91</sup> Vickers (n 9).

<sup>92</sup> Martin Tolich, ‘A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers’ (2010) 20 *Qualitative Health Research* 1599.

Tolich's insistence that I should follow typical informed consent procedures. I understand that if I were to interview my students about their experience of the clinic I would need to provide documentation setting out the purpose and form of the research. The students would give written consent to take part in the research, which could be withdrawn at any time. With autoethnography, however, must I gain informed consent from everyone I come into contact with and who *might* one day be part of my narrative?

I toy with asking my students to provide generic consent for my autoethnographic research on the basis that our interactions might spark a diary entry. However, I question whether consent in this instance would truly be informed. I would not be able to say with any certainty if and how the student might be included. In addition, I am conscious of the power imbalance here. I am supervising the students. I assess their work and have sole responsibility for providing a mark at the end of a key year in their academic life. They may feel compelled to 'help' my research. Telling autoethnographers to "get informed consent"<sup>93</sup> is not as straightforward as it sounds.

In my efforts to produce ethically sound autoethnographic research, I turn to alternative methods of reducing potential harm. For example, as Tolich recommends,<sup>94</sup> I anonymise all content. However, anonymisation doesn't feel enough. I go a step further, engaging in a process of considering and re-considering what I am disclosing, how much to tell, and whether to allow some realities to simply slip away. This concept of "mindful slippage"<sup>95</sup> is the greatest influence on my approach to autoethnographic ethics. It is akin to a piece of software running along in the background of my mind whilst I draft and review my autoethnographies.<sup>96</sup> I alter timelines. I minimise events. Sometimes, I take a number of experiences and assemble a new fiction, based in truth but less harmful than the precise reality. I edit, right up to the wire on occasion. Do these revisions make my story less trustworthy? No, because I am simply saying to you "this is how it felt for me - can you feel it too?". Exact dates and precise words are not as important as weight and texture.<sup>97</sup> Once, I deleted a short passage from an autoethnography on mental health illness a few days before publication. I will always be grateful for letting those few sentences spirit away into the ether never to be read. Their erasure made no difference to the truthfulness of the overarching narrative, but, in hindsight, they had the potential to expose the roots of a private conversation not meant for public consumption.

Despite my actions, I am still plagued with concerns about my approach to autoethnographic ethics. Anonymisation may shield my students from being recognised by others, but self-recognition is still a possibility. One day, in my diary, I write about an unusual incident where a student has seriously breached clinic procedures. I question why the student doesn't seem to care. I wonder whether my attempts to foster a collegial environment have led to this lax appreciation for rules. I sit at my desk and stare at the diary contemplating what to do. I have disguised the student's identity, but they would likely recognise the event were they to read the entry. I suspect the diary will not be seen for at least another 2 to 3 years, depending on when I complete my PhD and the finished thesis is eventually uploaded to my university's repository. I am not publishing my diary within weeks or even months of the incident, where the student

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<sup>93</sup> J. A. Tullis, 'Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research' in Stacy Holman Jones, Tony. E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Routledge 2016), at p. 257.

<sup>94</sup> Tolich (n 92).

<sup>95</sup> Dolort and Sambrook (n 42); Kristina Medford, 'Caught With a Fake ID: Ethical Questions About Slippage in Autoethnograph' (2006) 12 *Qualitative Inquiry* 853.

<sup>96</sup> I explain this in more detail in Chapter 5 of Gregersen (n 65).

<sup>97</sup> An analysis of the nature of truth is beyond the scope of this article, but if you are looking for more on reality and fiction in autoethnographic research I would encourage you to seek out the fiery argument between autoethnography students represented in Bochner and Ellis (n 3) at pp. 229-233.

might be caused some embarrassment and there may be a buzz within the student community as they try to determine who I'm talking about. Time will have passed and the student is unlikely to suffer harm were they to seek out and read my thesis.

Exactly 3 years later, my thesis is released. I scroll to the appendices where the full copy of my diary resides. I make peace with the fact that it would be impossible to eradicate the risk of harm to others, but that I acted with care to do everything I could to reduce it. Each autoethnographer must take responsibility and decide how to manage ethical concerns, taking into consideration the specific context of their personal circumstances and the nature of the research. However, acknowledging there are ethical issues with autoethnographic research is a fundamental first step.

### **The career-related risks of autoethnographic research**

Early one morning when I am just about to leave my office to go and teach, an email entitled 'Autoethnography' arrives. It is from Professor Andrew Sparkes. I have cited Professor Sparkes in a number of my published articles and it is utterly terrifying to see his name appear in my inbox. I panic, and start to search PDFs of my publications for any instances where I have mentioned his research, fearful that I may have misrepresented his ideas.

I have widely touted Sparkes' fictional autoethnography on the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise (replaced by the Research Excellence Framework in 2014), written a decade earlier, as one of my favourite pieces of autoethnography. In his account of life at the "University of Wannabee Academic",<sup>98</sup> Sparkes did not name any real institutions or people, but plot points were clearly influenced by his conversations with academics as well as his own experiences. The characters seemed familiar. 'Steve': competitive, individualistic, and metric-obsessed. 'Paul': an outstanding teacher, with excellent student evaluations, struggling to meet unrealistic research expectations. 'Jim': the Director of Research, attempting to fight against a culture of "papers out and grants in"<sup>99</sup> and suffering mental health illness as a result. I loved it. I thought it was truthful, engaging, and powerful. Now he is writing to me. I admire his work and I do not want to be a disappointment.

Happily, Professor Sparkes' email simply says that he enjoyed my recent autoethnographic output. He kindly attaches a pre-publication version of a new book chapter he has written.<sup>100</sup> He thinks I might find it of interest. I do. The chapter contains information about the fallout of the RAE article. I am shocked. It transpires that the article was picked up by the Times Higher Education (THE) where it was accompanied by a photograph of Sparkes' Vice-Chancellor at a THE awards ceremony. Sparkes was called to a number of meetings with senior management, including the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. His research profile was criticised with "ferocity".<sup>101</sup> He was told he had embarrassed the Vice-Chancellor.<sup>102</sup> He was asked several times, "Who pays your wages?".<sup>103</sup> After 22 years with the institution, Sparkes left.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Sparkes (n 6).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., at p. 532.

<sup>100</sup> The published version can be found at: Andrew Sparkes, 'Autoethnography Comes Of Age: Consequences, Comforts, and Concerns' in Dennis Beach, Carl Bagley and Sofia Marques da Silva (eds), *The Wiley Handbook of Ethnography of Education* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2018)

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 495.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

I had thought that Sparkes would be celebrated by his employer for his innovative work, not chastised. Gore says, “in fiction, there are certain prices we do not have to pay”<sup>105</sup> but given Sparkes’ experience fictionalisation doesn’t appear to be the get-out-of-jail-free card autoethnographers might seek to rely on.<sup>106</sup> And, if an imaginary story can get you into trouble, what happens when we write fully and freely about our experiences? A number of academics have spoken openly about the negative consequences of publishing autoethnographic work.<sup>107</sup> They say they have suffered from a “spoiled identity”<sup>108</sup> in some quarters of academia. Autoethnography is a risky business.

There will be some colleagues, some departments, entire universities even, who will not like what you write. They may not understand, or see the value in, autoethnography. We cannot be naïve to this, even if we disagree vociferously. This is one of the pitfalls of engaging in autoethnographic work. Happily, my lived experience research has led to a number of career highlights. My most cited publications are either autoethnographies or ruminations on autoethnographic practice. I review for the *Journal of Autoethnography*, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* and the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*. I was awarded the Emerald Literati Highly Commended Paper 2019 for my autoethnography on depression and anxiety.<sup>109</sup> I do, however, think very carefully before committing my words to paper. I practice self-care when writing, sometimes diluting content I know to be particularly incendiary. Yet, the attractiveness of autoethnography – for me – is how it allows me to write the way I want about the topics that are dear to me. If I was asked to move away from this contemporary approach<sup>110</sup> then academic life would not appeal as much. I might end up looking elsewhere for fulfilment.

### What next?

Back in 2016, I made the rather bold statement that the law school was “a rich site of interest from which illuminative questions about our socio-cultural life, constraints and desires can be raised”.<sup>111</sup> Autoethnography, I argued, could help answer those questions.

Time for me to make another bold statement. Where we go from here is important. If legal educators are going to embrace autoethnography then we need to proceed with caution. We need to fully understand the background to the rise of autoethnography, so we can pay tribute to scholars who have forged a path for us to use this method by doing “deep and careful”<sup>112</sup> reflective work. We need to appreciate that autoethnography is not a one-size-fits-all term, and that there are many ways of doing, analysing, and publishing autoethnographic work. Finally, we must not shy away from ethical issues inherent in autoethnographic practice, and the potential professional risks when we declare ourselves as autoethnographers.

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<sup>105</sup> Ariel Gore, ‘The part I can't tell you’ in Joy Castro (ed), *Family Trouble: Memorists on the Hazards and Rewards of Revealing Family* (University of Nebraska Press 2013), at p. 60.

<sup>106</sup> Fictionalisation has been presented as a way of reducing or avoiding problems in life writing. See, e.g. Carolyn Ellis, ‘Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others’ (2007) 13 *Qualitative Inquiry* 3; Tolich (n 92).

<sup>107</sup> Pat Sikes, ‘On Dodgy Ground? Problematics and Ethics in Educational Research’ (2006) 29(1) *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 105; Rambo (n 7); Sparkes (n 98).

<sup>108</sup> Rambo (n 7), at p.7.

<sup>109</sup> Elaine Campbell, ‘Reconstructing my Identity: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Depression and Anxiety in Academia. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*’ (2018) 7(3) 235.

<sup>110</sup> I do think there is a time and place for different methods. I’m not wedded to autoethnography completely, but it has fast become my preferred method for many of my research projects.

<sup>111</sup> Elaine Campbell, ‘Exploring Autoethnography as a Method and Methodology in Legal Education Research’ (2016) *Asian Journal of Legal Education* 3(1) 95, at 98.

<sup>112</sup> Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (n 1), at p. 2.



I am not the gatekeeper for autoethnography. However, I do worry that autoethnography may turn into a buzzword, thrown into research papers with little consideration of its background, or the rigour required to craft an piece that satisfies both literary and scholarly expectations. Whilst I encourage law teachers to engage with autoethnography, we should be aiming to produce excellent autoethnographic research that is introspective, ethical, and robust. We have an opportunity here, but we must go forward with care.