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Article

From Maverick to Mainstream: Autoethnography's Place in Legal Research

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Abstract

Autoethnography, a research method that uses lived experience as data, has grown steadily in prominence over the past two decades. Once a marginal approach, autoethnographic research is now recognised across disciplines, with dedicated conferences, textbooks and journals. Legal scholarship has begun to engage with autoethnography more recently, with applications emerging across legal education, legal practice, and doctoral research.

This growing body of work represents a welcome methodological expansion within the legal academy. At the same time, it marks a critical moment for autoethnography's development in law. As interest in the approach increases, three interrelated challenges have become apparent. First, autoethnography is sometimes conflated with reflective or autobiographical writing, overlooking the thick description and analytical rigour the method demands. Second, to date, the breadth of autoethnographic practice remains underutilised within law; the field has yet to engage fully with the diversity of forms and frameworks available. The

third and most complex challenge relates to ethical risk. Questions of researcher vulnerability and self-care remain insufficiently addressed within legal autoethnography.

This paper traces the emergence of autoethnography in legal research and offers a critical examination of its possibilities, its perils, and the ethical complexities that accompany its practice. In doing so, it argues for a more methodologically informed and ethically attentive engagement with autoethnography in law.

Keywords: autoethnography, lived experience research, ethics, researcher self-care.

Article Text

1. Introduction

During the past two decades, autoethnography – a contemporary qualitative approach where researchers use their own lived experience as data – has found a greater level of acceptance within the academy. Once dismissed as ‘an intellectual *cul de sac*’¹ or even ‘artsy-craftsy literary exercises’,² it has gained a foothold in numerous disciplines across the social sciences, humanities and beyond. Where once introspection and narrative may have been viewed with suspicion,³ today they are recognised as part of a nuanced, complex, and ethically engaged

¹ Sara Delamont, ‘The only honest thing: autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork’ (2009) 4 *Ethnography and Education* 51, 61.

² Clinton R Sanders, ‘Prospect for a post-modern ethnography’ (1999) 28 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 669, 672.

³ Ellis’s work – individually and collaboratively – makes a major contribution to our understanding of the historical development of autoethnography, including criticism levelled at it. See: Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (AltaMira Press 2004); Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams and Arthur P Bochner, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’ (2011) 12 *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1; Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography* (Oxford University Press 2015); Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (Routledge 2016).

understanding of the social world.⁴ This marks a profound shift in what counts as legitimate knowledge and who gets to produce it.

The transformation is visible in the institutional landscape. For example, in 2020 the Journal of Autoethnography became the first journal solely dedicated to the practice of autoethnography as a method of inquiry. High-profile international conferences also feature dedicated panels on autoethnographic inquiry,⁵ and leading research journals have produced special issues showcasing creative and reflexive approaches to writing.⁶ In addition, the proliferation of experimental works – including visual and performative autoethnographies⁷ – signals a wider movement toward methodological variety. Autoethnography is no longer a maverick newcomer; it has become a dynamic component of contemporary research practice.

Within legal research, this shift is particularly interesting. Law has traditionally valued doctrinal precision – precedent, objectivity and the ‘black letter’ that guides us. Yet, legal scholars are increasingly grappling with autoethnography in a range of contexts, including legal education, legal practice, and doctoral research. As each year passes, more legal

⁴ Scholars talk about autoethnography having ‘flourished’ – see Tony E Adams and Andrew F Herrmann, ‘Expanding Our Autoethnographic Future’ (2020) 1 Journal of Autoethnography 1.

⁵ A selection of conferences taking place in 2026 include: International Conference of Autoethnography (yearly), “Narrating Lives”: International Conference on Storytelling, (Auto)Biography and (Auto)Ethnography (London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in collaboration with University of Cyprus), and the International Symposium of Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry. The 2026 American Educational Research Association conference has a specific Narrative Research Special Interest Group that focuses on narrative inquiry and related methods such as autoethnography.

⁶ See, for example: Genealogy, Mental Health and Social Inclusion, New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, and Journal of Organizational Ethnography.

⁷ See, for example, Maria Marta Andreatta, ‘Being a vegan: A performative autoethnography’ (2015) 15 Cultural Studies↔Critical Methodologies 477; Tami Spry, ‘Who are “we” in performative autoethnography?’ (2017) 10 International Review of Qualitative Research 46; Clare Williams, ‘A Visual Autoethnography of a PhD Journey’ (2021) 3 Amicus Curiae 391; Elissa Foster, ‘There Was an Old Woman Who... Lost Patience With the Academy and Performed Her Frustration at a Public Meeting’ (2023) 23 Cultural Studies↔Critical Methodologies 529.

autoethnography emerges,⁸ demonstrating that law is not just a system of rules but also an embodied experience that is felt in a profoundly personal way.

This is, however, a critical time for autoethnography's place within the legal academy. Three interrelated challenges have emerged. First, there is a danger that 'personal' or 'reflective' writing may be erroneously labelled as autoethnographic without any real understanding of the deep theoretical, methodological and ethical work autoethnographers must undertake.⁹ Autoethnography is not merely confession; it is also a critique of cultural norms, experience and practice and seeks a reciprocal response from audiences.¹⁰ Without greater rigour, there is a danger that autoethnography becomes a catch-all term for any form of self-narrative, rather than the nuanced and complex research method it is.

A second challenge concerns the breadth of autoethnographic practice itself. Autoethnography has several genres, from evocative and artistic styles¹¹ to analytic¹² and

⁸ See the statistics provided in Elaine Campbell, 'Exploring Autoethnography as a Method and Methodology in Legal Education Research' (2016) 3 *Asian Journal of Legal Education* 95; Elaine Gregersen, 'The lived experience of a university law clinic supervisor: an autoethnographic inquiry' (PhD thesis, Northumbria University 2019); Elaine Gregersen, 'Telling stories about the law school: autoethnography and legal education' (2022) 56 *The Law Teacher* 24.

⁹ See, for example, Tony E Adams and Andrew F. Herrmann, 'Making a Case for Autoethnography' (2025) 6 *Journal of Autoethnography* 1. In this editorial, Adams and Herrmann offer advice to scholars who want to try autoethnography but are worried about justifying its use to advisors, colleagues and editors. As part of their advice, they note that good autoethnography requires thick description – 'what's happening, whether it's exploring space and place, living through psychotic episodes, cruising for sex, going through dialysis, or trying to understand errors and absences in family stories' (3).

¹⁰ Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography*.

¹¹ For an excellent in-depth exploration of evocative autoethnography, see: Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*.

¹² Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography' (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 373; Kevin D Vryan, 'Expanding Analytic Autoethnography and Enhancing Its Potential' (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 405.

collaborative forms.¹³ To date, within legal research this diversity is underutilised. Some scholars in law are beginning to position their work within these traditions – such as visual autoethnography that combines text and computer gaming to explore the culture of the doctoral journey¹⁴ – but these remain exceptions. The majority of autoethnographic studies in law adopt the method in a general sense, often without specifying which strand or genre of autoethnography informs their design. As a result, the sophistication evident in other disciplines has yet to be fully realised in legal autoethnographic research. This, in turn, risks halting the conceptual richness of our work.

The most complex challenge, however, relates to ethical risk. Autoethnography is, by its very nature, intensely personal and often seen as ‘dodgy ground’.¹⁵ Life writing may produce important insights into the cultural climate of the day, but it also exposes – in perpetuity – stories that cannot be taken back.¹⁶ This may have repercussions for identifiable third parties who appear in the story *and* for the author. Indeed, new autoethnographers, buoyed by exuberance for the method, may inadvertently enter dangerous territory. Institutions and

¹³ Lydia Arnold, ‘Doing Collaborative Autoethnography’ (6 August 2020) <https://lydia-arnold.com/2020/08/06/doing-collaborative-autoethnography> accessed 26 November 2025; Emma Nordbäck, Marko Hakonen and Janne Tienari, ‘Academic identities and sense of place: A collaborative autoethnography in the neoliberal university’ (2022) 53 *Management Learning* 331; Samantha Wilkinson and Catherine Wilkinson, ‘Performing care: emotion work and ‘dignity work’ – a joint autoethnography of caring for our mum at the end of life’ (2020) *Sociology of Health & Illness* 1.

¹⁴ Williams, ‘A Visual Autoethnography of a PhD Journey’.

¹⁵ Pat Sikes, ‘On dodgy ground? Problematics and ethics in educational research’ (2006) 29 *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 105.

¹⁶ Carolyn Ellis has written about the emotional and ethical conflicts that emerged when she conducted fieldwork between 1972 and 1984 in isolated fishing communities, later published as *Fisher Folk: Two Communities on Chesapeake Bay* (University of Kentucky Press 1986). In a reflective account, Ellis recounts conversations with members of the community on her return to ‘Fishneck’, including one participant’s response: ‘I thought we was friends, you and me, just talkin’. I didn’t think you would put it in no book.’ See Carolyn Ellis, ‘Emotional and Ethical Quagmires in returning to the field’ (1995) *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 68,79.

doctoral supervisors are still learning how to support such work,¹⁷ particularly within law where traditional ethical risk assessments are not necessarily designed for autoethnographic research. These tensions are not unique to legal research, however. Similar ethical challenges have been documented in other tightly regulated professions, such as social work¹⁸, suggesting that legal scholarship may be encountering issues that neighbouring fields have already begun to navigate. Law can therefore learn from the strategies (and missteps) of those adjacent disciplines. Above all, addressing ethical risk is central to the credibility and sustainability of autoethnography within law.

This article argues that autoethnography's transition from the margins to the mainstream of legal research represents both possibility and peril. On the one hand, autoethnography enables legal scholars to interrogate how the law operates in the world. On the other, its rapid uptake – without a deep understanding of the history of the method and the diverse ways in which it can be employed – risks superficiality and therefore dilution.

The discussion proceeds in three parts. The first part provides an overview of the history of autoethnography, outlining its evolution within the broader landscape of qualitative inquiry. The second part traces the emergence of autoethnography within legal research, highlighting

¹⁷ Sally Sambrook, Jim Stewart and Clair Roberts, 'Doctoral supervision... a view from above, below and in the middle!' (2008) 32 *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 71; 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); Tony E Adams and Andrew F Herrmann, 'Making a Case for Autoethnography' (2025) 6 *Journal of Autoethnography* 1.

¹⁸ See, for example, Sarah Banks, *Ethics and Values in Social Work* (5th edn, Red Globe Press 2021) and Jan Fook, *Social Work: A Critical Approach To Practice* (Sage Publication 2012). One of the most confronting discussions of ethical exposure and narrative responsibility appears in Kathy Charmaz, 'Stories of Suffering: Subjective Tales and Research Narratives' (1999) 9 *Qualitative Health Research* 362.

key developments and studies from legal education, legal practice and doctoral experience that illustrate methodological innovation. The final part offers a critical analysis of the benefits and pitfalls of autoethnographic practice, focussing on the need for greater understanding of self-care in the field. In presenting my arguments in this way, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of autoethnography's role in shaping the future of legal scholarship.

2. The evolution of autoethnography

The genesis of the term *autoethnography* can be traced to Karl Heider, who in 1975 used it to describe the process by which members of a culture might give accounts of their own experiences within that culture.¹⁹ Two years later, Kenneth Hayano developed the concept further, referring to the phenomenon of ethnographers conducting 'ethnographies of their own people'.²⁰ Hayano first encountered the term in Sir Raymond Firth's 1966 structuralism seminar at the London School of Economics, where Firth recalled an earlier debate in Bronisław Malinowski's seminar some three decades prior.²¹ That discussion had, as Hayano noted, 'pointedly raised the question of judging the validity of anthropological data by assessing the characteristics, interests, and origin of the person who did the fieldwork.'²²

Through Heider and Hayano, *autoethnography* entered the research lexicon, yet early conceptualisations maintained a clear division between researcher and researched. At that stage, autoethnography was conceived primarily as *ethnography about one's own people*

¹⁹ Karl G. Heider, 'What Do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography' (1975) 31 *Journal of Anthropological Research* 3.

²⁰ David M. Hayano, 'Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects' (1979) 38 *Human Organization* 99, 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 100.

rather than *ethnography about oneself*. It would be several decades before scholars began to explore autoethnography as an inward, reflexive practice capable of interrogating the researcher's own position, identity, and emotional entanglement with the research process. Personal accounts and reflexive modes of inquiry were marginalised – dismissed as a 'niche product' written only by 'a few conservative historians and [...] a handful of social scientists rebelling against the casual orthodoxies of their disciplines.'²³ Quantitative analysis, driven by positivist assumptions of neutrality and replicability, dominated the research landscape.²⁴

Ellis offers a striking illustration of this academic climate. Reflecting on her early graduate training, she recalls being instructed to eliminate any trace of subjectivity from her work. Among her archived course materials from 1975 is a handout that reads: 'Ideally one's field notes should be such that an independent reader could take them and arrive at the same inferences and explanations as oneself.'²⁵ At the time, her personal experience as a researcher was not considered a legitimate site of knowledge production, at least not in published scholarship.

Yet, as Atkinson cautions, it is 'far too easy - and misleading'²⁶ to ascribe an absence of reflexivity to earlier generations of researchers. Some exceptions demonstrate that self-awareness and experiential reflection were present, even if not under the title of autoethnography. Wallace's short but compelling account of 'a typical day at the office'

²³ Andrew Abbott, 'Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology' (2007) 25 *Sociological Theory* 67, 69.

²⁴ Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview'; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*; Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*.

²⁵ Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, 15-16.

²⁶ Paul Atkinson, 'Rescuing Autoethnography' (2006) 35 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 400, 400.

exemplifies this.²⁷ He justified a reflective approach to anthropological work by arguing that ‘in the field neither interviewing nor participant observation is quite enough. One needs not merely to question, observe, and imitate; one needs to be able to feel that one has done a similar thing ‘for real’ back home.’²⁸

Ellis herself would later embody this reflexive stance in her ethnographic studies of small fishing communities in the United States, where she examined social organisation, family life, and working practices.²⁹ Rejecting the role of neutral observer prescribed by her training, she became increasingly aware of how her own emotions and experiences informed her understanding of others.³⁰ Although her early publications did not explicitly foreground this reflexivity, she later acknowledged that she would ‘sneak’³¹ herself into her writing through narrative vignettes – an embryonic form of what would later be recognised as autoethnographic storytelling. This period of methodological constraint, punctuated by moments of quiet resistance, set the stage for the emergence of autoethnography as a mode of inquiry.

By the 1980s, an influx of new voices across the humanities and social sciences began to challenge accepted perspectives on writing, method, and representation.³² Scholars sought

²⁷ Anthony FC Wallace, ‘A Day at the Office’ in Solon Toothaker Kimball and James Bennett Watson (eds), *Crossing Cultural Boundaries: The Anthropological Experience* (Chandler 1972), 193.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁹ Carolyn Ellis, *Fisher Folk: Two communities on Chesapeake Bay* (University Press of Kentucky 1986).

³⁰ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*; Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*.

³¹ Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*, 26.

³² Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P Bochner, ‘We Can Tell You Stories: Politics, Pleasure and Pain in Qualitative Inquiry’ (YouTube, 2014) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKZ-wuJ_vnQ#:~:text=Autoethnography%20in%20Qualitative%20inquiry%20%2D%20Professor,This%20content%20isn't%20available accessed 26 November 2025.

to bridge literature, philosophy, and social science, producing work that questioned long-held assumptions about objectivity and the nature of truth in research. Some of the most venerated notions of scientific validity were explicitly contested by postmodern and post-structuralist thinkers such as Richard Rorty³³ and Jean-François Lyotard.³⁴ Their work collectively pushed against the authority of positivism and re-centred meaning, interpretation, and narrative as legitimate practices.

In this climate, researchers in anthropology, sociology, communication studies, and feminist inquiry began writing and advocating for personal narrative, subjectivity, and reflexivity in research.³⁵ The resulting methodological shift has come to be known as the Crisis of Representation.³⁶ Marcus and Fischer describe the Crisis of Representation as ‘pervasive’,³⁷ with challenges to traditional empiricism emerging not only in the social sciences but also across art, literature, economics, and even mathematics. It was, they argued, a period ‘rich in experimentation and conceptual risk-taking’³⁸ during which dominant epistemological structures were ‘suspended’.³⁹

The 1990s represented a fertile period of growth for experimental and narrative forms of qualitative inquiry. Scholars sought new ways to represent lived experience, blending

³³ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays 1972-1980)* (University of Minnesota Press 1982).

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press 1984).

³⁵ Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, *Autoethnography*.

³⁶ George E Marcus and Michael M J Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (2nd edn, University of Chicago Press 1999); Ellis, Adams and Bochner, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’.

³⁷ Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

ethnographic observation with personal reflection and creative expression. Ellis and Flaherty's landmark collection, *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience*, foregrounded subjectivity as a legitimate site of research and included contributions from several scholars who would become central to the autoethnographic movement.⁴⁰ This decade also saw personal narrative gain increasing methodological visibility within major academic handbooks. The first edition of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, for example, included a dedicated chapter on Personal Experience Methods.⁴¹ This inclusion marked an institutional acknowledgement that self-narrative and experience-based inquiry were not merely stylistic innovations but legitimate methodological approaches.

In 1999, Bochner and Ellis conducted a search for scholarly articles and book chapters that were explicitly identified as autoethnography. They found fewer than forty such publications.⁴² A decade later, Muncey reported a similar experience. While preparing her book *Creating Autoethnographies*, she maintained a record of publications listed in the Web of Science database under the keyword 'autoethnography'.⁴³ Between 1990 and 2002, her list never exceeded five items.⁴⁴ The early 2000s, however, marked a decisive turning point. Muncey observed that from 2003 onwards, a minimum of thirty-five autoethnography-related publications appeared annually in the database.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Carolyn Ellis and Michael G Flaherty, *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Sage 1992).

⁴¹ Jean D Clandinin and Michael F Connelly, 'Personal Experience Methods' in Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Sage 1994).

⁴² Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories*.

⁴³ Tessa Muncey, *Creating Autoethnographies* (SAGE Publications Ltd. 2010).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

By the mid-2010s, the pace of growth had accelerated dramatically. Bochner noted that autoethnography had evolved from a marginal practice to a ‘burgeoning interest’⁴⁶ within qualitative research. Search data underscore this expansion. In April 2017, my own Google Scholar query for ‘autoethnography’ returned approximately 28,400 results;⁴⁷ by January 2019, that number had increased to 38,500.⁴⁸ I repeated the same search in October 2025 whilst preparing this paper. It had risen significantly – to 133,000. In February 2026, it had increased again to 148,000 results. While such figures must be interpreted cautiously, they nevertheless signal a striking shift in the visibility and legitimacy of autoethnographic work across the academy.

You will note that I have not produced a chronology of autoethnography’s presence within legal research. While autoethnography has become increasingly established across a range of disciplines, its uptake within legal scholarship has been comparatively limited. Law’s emphasis on doctrinal analysis and objective detachment has traditionally left little space for reflexivity and self-representation. As a result, legal engagement with autoethnography has tended to emerge in isolated pockets. Nonetheless, a small but significant body of work has begun to explore how autoethnographic methods can illuminate the lived experience of legal pedagogy, legal practice, and doctoral research. Though limited in number, these studies are an indication of legal scholars’ desire to embrace contemporary, creative methods alongside more customary designs. The sections that follow examine these engagements thematically.

⁴⁶ Arthur P Bochner, ‘On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning’ (2012) 22 *Narrative Inquiry* 155.

⁴⁷ Elaine Gregersen, *The lived experience of a university law clinic supervisor: an autoethnographic inquiry*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

3.1 Autoethnography and legal pedagogy

Legal education has provided some of the earliest and most fertile ground for autoethnographic experimentation, much of it emerging from my own engagement with the method. My interest in autoethnography began in 2010 when I commenced a part-time Professional Doctorate in Law. Determined to write from within my lived experience as a pro bono law clinic supervisor, I sought a methodology that aligned with my interpretive and creative orientation toward research. That search led me to autoethnography, which offered both the rigour and the expressive latitude to examine my own practice.

Since that time, I have published a series of studies including my doctoral thesis that explore the complexities of supervision and professional identity formation in university pro bono law clinics. Across these works, I employ personal narrative and reflective vignettes to interrogate how the shifting identities of mentor, tutor, colleague and friend are negotiated within the microcosm of the clinic.⁴⁹ The autoethnographic approach allows for an intimate examination of the relational labour that regularly underpins legal education, but which often remains invisible within doctrinal scholarship.

More recently, Higson-Bliss has broadened this pedagogical thread and utilised an evocative narrative style to reflect on her first year as a law lecturer.⁵⁰ By exploring the tensions between personal authenticity and institutional expectations, her work reveals the challenges faced by

⁴⁹ See, for example, Elaine Campbell, 'Reconstructing my identity: an autoethnographic exploration of depression and anxiety in academia' (2018) 7 *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 235; Elaine Gregersen, 'Telling stories about the law school: autoethnography and legal education' (n 8); Elaine Gregersen, 'The Emotional Impact of Law Clinic Supervision: An Autoethnography', *Contemporary Challenges in Clinical Legal Education* (Routledge 2023).

⁵⁰ Laura Higson-Bliss, "'I'm my own biggest critic': an autoethnographic reflection on an early-career researcher's first year as a lecturer in law' (2023) 57 *The Law Teacher* 513.

early-career academics navigating performative professionalism within legal education. Importantly, this study also offers a candid reflection on the challenges of adopting an autoethnographic stance. It demonstrates a level of methodological awareness that does not always appear in all legal scholarship aligning itself with autoethnography.

Other autoethnographic engagements with pedagogic research include reflections on changes in teaching practice within a foundation module in law⁵¹ and efforts to connect with students through research blogging.⁵² A further example is an autoethnographic account of the design and delivery of an undergraduate elective Law and Emotion module.⁵³

The prominence of pedagogic literature within legal autoethnography suggests that teaching has provided an accessible entry point for experiential and narrative methods within law. Autoethnography enables law teachers to interrogate their own practice and position within institutional structures, while challenging assumptions about authority and expertise in the classroom. Importantly, these studies also illustrate the vulnerabilities involved in adopting an autoethnographic approach, including concerns about exposure and academic credibility.

3.2 Autoethnography and legal practice

Beyond legal education, autoethnography has been taken up more selectively within accounts of legal practice. Where it does appear, it is most often mobilised to interrogate the lived

⁵¹ Alicia Danielsson, 'An autoethnographic study of a research and teaching for transformative Education Journey in Foundation law teaching—preparing diverse students for law school' (2021) 3 *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Educational Research* 68.

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Senthoran Raj, 'Teaching feeling: bringing emotion into the law school' (2020) *The Law Teacher* 1.

realities of legal work characterised by high levels of emotional labour and ethical tension. This section examines how autoethnography has been used to explore legal practice in family law, sports law, environmental law, asylum law, and criminal law, with family law representing the most coherent and sustained site of autoethnographic development.

Family law

Many of the family law studies using autoethnography have reflected the emotionally charged nature of the work.⁵⁴ Restrictions on legal aid has intensified pressures on practitioners, clients, and the courts. In turn this has created conditions ripe for reflexive inquiry into the human experience of family justice. The Family Bar, in particular, has emerged as a key site of self-examination through narrative and personal story, with scholars turning to autoethnography to make sense of the realities of practice.

One strand of this research interrogates how practitioners survive and sustain themselves within a system perceived as 'nearing collapse'.⁵⁵ For example, Holt and Thomson's study provides a rich illustration of this movement. Drawing on eighteen months of experience practising at the Family Bar, their research captures the acute pressures and moral tensions of contemporary family justice work. They lay bare the emotional toll of the lack of involvement of the child in proceedings, the delays in court cases, and the challenges for litigants in person and domestic abuse victims. Through these accounts, they reveal the human costs of

⁵⁴ In particular, in England and Wales, the profound structural challenges that have characterised the aftermath of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

⁵⁵ Kim Holt and Callum Thomson, 'Autoethnography: a personal reflection on the work of the family bar in the North of England' (2023) 45 *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 62, 76.

austerity-driven reform whilst also highlighting the skills and attributes demonstrated by barristers to ‘prop up’⁵⁶ the system. Their work demonstrates the potential of autoethnography not merely to document experience but to critique institutional structures that normalise vulnerability, retraumatisation, and hostility.

Other contributions focus on the embodied and psychological dimensions of legal work. Thomson and Richardson, for example, explore vicarious trauma among family law practitioners, drawing on personal experiences of wellbeing first as students and later in practice.⁵⁷ Their dialogic and reflective approach exposes how a ‘work hard, play hard’ professional culture – coupled with a lack of openness about the emotional burden of casework – can erode mental health.⁵⁸ By articulating these experiences, their work highlights the role of autoethnography as both a method of inquiry and a form of self-care, offering a structured means to process and articulate experiences that might otherwise remain suppressed.

Holt and Kelly have extended this trajectory by employing symbiotic autoethnography to analyse the transformation of legal space and time during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁹ By situating lived experience within the wider systemic shift to digital hearings, they interrogate how technological mediation reshapes advocacy, access to justice, and the rhythm of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁷ Callum Thomson and Kayliegh Richardson, ‘Wellbeing and Vicarious Trauma: Personal Reflections on Support for Students, Practitioners and Clinicians in Family Law’ in Emma Jones and Caroline Strevens (eds), *Wellbeing and Transitions in Law: Legal Education and the Legal Profession* (Springer 2023).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Kim Holt and Nancy Kelly, ‘Time, public and personal space, safe and just systemic change: a symbiotic autoethnographic study of remote digital hearings within the English Family Courts between March 2020 and October 2023’ (2024) 46 *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 602.

courtroom life. This symbiotic approach, as proposed by Beattie,⁶⁰ represents a methodological evolution – one that integrates personal narrative with institutional critique to explore the conditions under which sustainable systemic change might occur.

Together, these studies reveal that emotional and psychological engagement with legal work is essential to understanding the realities of family practice. They demonstrate that autoethnography can operate as both mirror and method, reflecting the lived experience of the family justice system while offering new means to articulate systemic challenges.

Sports Law

Autoethnography has also found a home in more specialised corners of legal and regulatory scholarship, such as sports law. For example, Cox, Dickson, and Cox utilise a collective autoethnographic approach to chart their campaign to remove the prohibition on headscarves in women's football.⁶¹ Their study interweaves personal experience with critical analysis of sports governance and gendered power relations, offering a compelling example of how lived experience can drive both legal advocacy and scholarly critique. Elsewhere, autoethnographic methods have been used to interrogate the systemic failures surrounding athlete safeguarding. One analytic autoethnography, for example, written from the perspective of a federation director, examines the development of a reporting protocol after multiple harassment allegations were raised against a university cheerleading coach in

⁶⁰ Liana Beattie, *Symbiotic Autoethnography: Moving Beyond the Boundaries of Qualitative Methodologies* (Bloomsbury Academic 2022).

⁶¹ 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.

Brazil.⁶² These works show autoethnography's capacity to bridge activism, law, and personal narrative, situating the researcher as both participant *and* change agent.

Other examples

Outside family and sports law, autoethnography has occasionally been deployed as a means of challenging disciplinary norms within more doctrinally entrenched fields. For example, Brooks' provocative account of conducting environmental law research through radical autoethnographic methods has been described as 'unorthodox' and 'stimulating for [its] unconventionality'.⁶³ A similar comment might be levelled at Arvidsson and Noll's autoethnographic reflections on data wrangling and discretion in asylum law, especially with its use of machine learning.⁶⁴

Most recently, autoethnography was employed to a London police officer's enforcement of the misuse of drugs law.⁶⁵ The researcher recounts his relationships with individuals experiencing homelessness, mental health conditions and substance dependence, as well as the visibility of the local drugs trade. Through these reflections, he advocates for a cultural shift towards public health-orientated and trauma-informed policing. As he observes, 'Daily, I had to navigate the tension between legal mandates and the complex realities of vulnerability

⁶² William F Santana, "'I Don't Know Where to Report What Happened': An Analytical Autoethnography on Developing a Protocol to Prevent Harassment and Abuse in Cheerleading' (2025) 1 *Sociology of Sport Journal* 1.

⁶³ Victoria Brooks, 'F#cking research ethics through radical method: autoethnography and the field of environmental law', in Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos and Victoria Brooks (eds) *Research Methods in Environmental Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2017)

⁶⁴ Matilda Arvidsson and Gregor Noll, 'Decision Making in Asylum Law and Machine Learning: Autoethnographic Lessons Learned on Data Wrangling and Human Discretion' (2023) 92 *Nordic Journal of International Law* 56.

⁶⁵ Julia Ryland and Benjamin D Scher, 'Following the evidence-base or exacerbating harms? An autoethnography of a London metropolitan police officer' (2024) 11 *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice* 195.

and addiction.⁶⁶ This study underscores autoethnography's capacity to provide insight into the operation of the law on the ground, and paves the way for similar studies located in legal institutions.

3.3 Autoethnography in law doctorates

Doctoral research has become another important site for autoethnographic innovation in law, particularly in relation to questions of identity, positionality, and the ethics of fieldwork. For doctoral researchers, methodological choices are often inseparable from institutional scrutiny and professional transformation.⁶⁷ In this context, autoethnography offers doctoral candidates a means to document research experience as they unfold and expose the demands of becoming a legal scholar in the academy.

One strand of doctoral autoethnography centres on fieldwork and the emotional labour required to gain and keep access. A study grounded in ethnographic engagement with defence lawyers in Norwegian rape trials, for example, illustrates the complexity of rapport-building in this sensitive legal setting.⁶⁸ The account exposes the tensions between access and trust in qualitative work, and the moral and interpersonal questions that arise in the everyday negotiations of this type of research. Autoethnography in this context functions as a reflexive tool through which the researcher can interrogate their own positionality and vulnerability within the field.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁶⁷ One of the most compelling accounts of the doctoral experience is offered by Jess Moriarty, who reflects on the vulnerabilities and methodological tensions of autoethnographic doctoral research. See: Moriarty, 'Leaving the blood in'.

⁶⁸ Anne Bitsch, 'The micro-politics of emotions in legal space: An autoethnography about sexual violence and displacement in Norway' (2018) 25 *Gender, Place & Culture* 1514.

A different strand turns the gaze inward to the experience of the candidacy itself. An exciting addition to this literature is Williams' multi-modal autoethnography, tracing the emotional and intellectual contours of her PhD experience whilst confronting issues of academic precarity, identity, and belonging.⁶⁹ By blending narrative and visual forms, her work challenges conventional expectations of legal scholarship, positioning creativity and vulnerability as valid modes of inquiry. In doing so, this autoethnography challenges the conceptualisation of doctoral study as a private struggle and positions it as a communal experience worthy of creative examination.

Together, these studies demonstrate how autoethnography can operate as both a method and a support structure for early-career researchers. They illustrate autoethnography's potential as doctoral candidates navigate the boundaries between self, scholarship, and institutional authority. Though still limited in number, these doctoral autoethnographies also signal a generational shift in legal academia – one where personal narrative, when done well, is increasingly recognised as a source of methodological depth.

4. The possibilities and perils of autoethnographic practice for lawyers

Possibilities: diversity and the power of storytelling

Autoethnography's appeal lies in its openness: it encompasses a diverse range of genres and expressive forms that invite creativity, inclusivity, and experimentation. Far from a singular method, it is better understood as a family of genres that move between the evocative and

⁶⁹ Williams, 'A Visual Autoethnography of a PhD Journey'.

the analytical.⁷⁰ Scholars may write through poetry,⁷¹ poetic-narrative,⁷² diaries,⁷³ or drama;⁷⁴ others turn to the visual – drawing, photography, or film⁷⁵ – to render their experiences. The rise of collaborative and duo-ethnographies⁷⁶ add yet another dimension, using storytelling to examine shared professional or cultural lives. This diversity means that autoethnography offers an entry point for almost every kind of researcher: those drawn to artistic expression, those more inclined to traditional and analytic forms, and those working across disciplinary or methodological boundaries.

Alongside its expressive opportunities, autoethnography also has a profound political significance. Storytelling itself becomes a mode of critique – a way to contest what Lyotard called the ‘grand narratives’⁷⁷ through which dominant groups legitimise knowledge and silence others. Legal scholarship has long been shaped by the authority of the white, male, non-disabled, and socio-economically privileged voice. Autoethnographic storytelling from a range of writers helps us to acknowledge that experience at the margins is not anecdotal but

⁷⁰ For an in-depth discussion of analytic autoethnography, see the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (vol 35, issue 4, August 2006).

⁷¹ See, for example, David Ian Hanauer, ‘Mourning writing: A poetic autoethnography on the passing of my father’ (2021) 27 *Qualitative Inquiry* 37; Shawn Anthony Robinson, ‘“Me against the world”: Autoethnographic poetry’ (2017) 32 *Disability & Society* 748.

⁷² David I Hanauer, ‘Growing up in the unseen shadow of the kindertransport: A poetic-narrative autoethnography’ (2012) 18 *Qualitative Inquiry* 845.

⁷³ Jarrett Neal, ‘Private Pages, Public Spaces: Diaries and Autoethnography’ (2020) 1 *Journal of Autoethnography* 425.

⁷⁴ Ronald J Ricci, ‘Autoethnographic verse: Nicky’s boy: a life in two worlds’ (2003) 8 *The Qualitative Report* 591.

⁷⁵ Caroline Scarles, ‘Where words fail, visuals ignite: Opportunities for visual autoethnography in tourism research’ (2010) 37 *Annals of Tourism Research* 905; Terry Ownby, ‘Critical visual methodology: Photographs and narrative text as a visual autoethnography’ (2013) 2 *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies* 1; Anna Hunter, ‘Snapshots of selfhood: Curating academic identity through visual autoethnography’ (2020) 25 *International Journal for Academic Development* 310; Williams, ‘A Visual Autoethnography of a PhD Journey’.

⁷⁶ In terms of one of the most thoughtful duo-autoethnographic contributions, I am especially drawn to Wilkinson and Wilkinson’s ‘Performing Care: Emotion Work and “Dignity Work” – A Joint Autoethnography of Caring for Our Mum at the End of Life’.

⁷⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

constitutive of law's reality. By making the invisible visible,⁷⁸ autoethnography allows those who are often excluded from legal discourse – students, junior practitioners, carers, disabled people, and individuals from racialised or queer communities – to narrate their encounters with law and legal education on their own terms.

Perils: uneven standards and ethical tensions

While autoethnography's openness and inclusivity have fuelled its growth, these same qualities create the potential for misunderstanding and methodological dilution. In some areas of legal research, 'autoethnography' is used almost interchangeably with 'reflection' – as if any first-person account of professional experience automatically qualifies as methodological autoethnography. This slippage risks reducing a rich tradition of deep work into a stylistic choice, and encourages superficial self-expression rather than truly self-analytical scholarship.

A related problem stems from a lack of engagement with the history of the method. Despite a growing body of literature spanning four decades, many legal researchers employ the label *autoethnographic* without reference to the foundational work which has shaped the field. The result is a potential inconsistency in quality. For example, I recently came across a doctoral thesis that positioned itself as autoethnography but contained no citations from autoethnographic literature at all. Without methodological literacy, published

⁷⁸ Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner and Alec Grant, 'Acknowledgements' in Nigel P. Short, Lydia Turner and Alec Grant (eds), *Contemporary British Autoethnography* (Sense Publishers 2013).

autoethnography risks losing the reflexive, ethical, and analytical depth that distinguishes it from mere personal reflection.

Autoethnography also raises complex ethical tensions. Writing about our own experience inevitably involves others – family members, colleagues, students, clients – whose lives intersect with our narrative. Ellis describes this as the problem of relational ethics: the responsibility to protect the dignity and privacy of intimate others even as we write our own truths.⁷⁹ This act of representation involves a delicate balance between authenticity and potential harm. The challenge lies in how to act responsibly, without silencing your truth or betraying other people's privacy.

The guidance available to autoethnographers on this issue varies widely in quality and coherence, with some scholars observing that there is no universally accepted set of ethical principles.⁸⁰ The absence of a single set of rules is not unique to autoethnography. Methods grounded in ethnography, narrative inquiry and participatory research have long grappled with ethical uncertainty, especially in relation to consent and representation.⁸¹ However, these challenges are often intensified in autoethnography, where the researcher's own life, relationships and emotional experiences comprise the data *and* the site of analysis.⁸²

⁷⁹ Carolyn Ellis, 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others' (2007) 13 *Qualitative Inquiry* 3.

⁸⁰ Martin Tolich, 'A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers' (2010) 20 *Qualitative Health Research* 1599.

⁸¹ Tom Clark and others (eds), *Social Research Methods* (6th edn, Oxford University Press 2021) and Norman K Denzin and others (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (6th edn, Sage Publications Inc 2023)

⁸² Carolyn Ellis, 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives'; Tolich, 'A Critique of Current Practice'.

As a result, the field has developed a series of overlapping frameworks that collectively emphasise care, consent, and caution.⁸³ Across these approaches, common principles emerge: the protection of participants' anonymity, the seeking of consent where possible, and an awareness of the researcher's own wellbeing as part of the ethical equation. Significantly, the most recent *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*⁸⁴ acknowledges auto/biographical and autoethnographic approaches – an encouraging step toward institutional recognition of the method's ethical distinctiveness.

I know from my own autoethnographic work that ethical decision-making remains context-driven and deeply personal. Therefore, I am sceptical of one-size-fits-all rules. Many of us would welcome, as Gingrich-Philbrook wryly imagines, 'a kind of cross between an existential oven-timer and a drag-queen fairy godmother to look over your shoulder at the screen and say 'Bing! You're done, Honey; this shit is baked; anyone who tells you different, I will come over and stomp their ass!'.⁸⁵ However, sadly, no such figure exists. Each project demands situationally-sensitive judgments. The rigid application of prescribed rules should not be mistaken for moral certainty. Guidelines are just that - they do not free researchers from the responsibility of making difficult decisions. New dilemmas will inevitably arise. Ethical autoethnography cannot be reduced to procedural compliance.

⁸³ See, for example: G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Andrew C Sparkes, 'Embodiment, academics, and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration' (2007) 7 *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 52; Kristina Medford, 'Caught With a Fake ID: Ethical Questions About *Slippage* in Autoethnography' (2006) 12 *Qualitative Inquiry* 853; Tolich, 'A Critique of Current Practice'; Jillian A Tullis, 'Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research' in Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E Adams and Carolyn Ellis (eds), *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Routledge 2016).

⁸⁴ British Educational Research Association, 2024.

⁸⁵ Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, 'Autoethnography's Family Values: Easy Access to Compulsory Experiences' (2005) 25 *Text and Performance Quarterly* 297, 311.

Equally, the exposure of the self that autoethnography demands is underappreciated generally and rarely touched on in legal scholarship. The permanence of publication means that vulnerability, once shared, cannot be easily retracted – if at all. Legal autoethnographers must therefore navigate what they are willing to disclose about their own life, with the risk that the way they feel about this may change over time. I was recently contacted by a new colleague who had read my own autoethnography about the depression and anxiety I experienced as a legal academic.⁸⁶ This is a permanent record of a difficult period in my life which I view as contextually different following my subsequent diagnosis of autism. However, it is a snapshot of a self I inhabited temporarily, preserved without the benefit of later insight. What once felt like an honest account of struggle now reads to me as an incomplete narrative. This raises a broader challenge for legal autoethnographers: our published vulnerabilities calcify experiences that continue to evolve.

Autoethnographic research also involves ethical complexity at the moment of consumption. Engaging with others' intensely personal narratives demands its own form of reflexive care. Over the course of my doctoral study, I immersed myself in hundreds of autoethnographic works – five lever-arch files of printed articles, a desk stacked with books, and an electronic library containing more than five hundred records. Some pieces, particularly those addressing childhood sexual abuse, remain unbearable to revisit. In autoethnography, readers do not simply *learn about* the events described but *inhabit* them. The act of reading autoethnographic research becomes a site of emotional labour. For legal scholars newly

⁸⁶ Campbell, 'Reconstructing my identity'.

engaging with autoethnography – and for the supervisors or research mentors advising them – cultivating this awareness (and opportunities for support) is vital.

Recognising these perils does not diminish the value of autoethnography; rather, it calls for a more reflexive and disciplined practice. I have learned that there are no tidy resolutions, only ongoing negotiations. This does not mean that autoethnography is inherently flawed. Instead, it is a reminder that autoethnography is more complex than just ‘telling your story’.

4. Conclusion

This article has traced autoethnography’s development, mapped its appearance in legal scholarship, and examined both its possibilities and its perils. In doing so, it provides the first account of autoethnography’s trajectory within legal research, situating an emerging body of work within the broader evolution of autoethnographic practice. It also draws attention to the risk of conceptual dilution, superficial self-expression, and ethical mismanagement in legal autoethnography.

The argument I have advanced is that autoethnography adds value by developing the world of legal research. However, this promise comes with a warning. For autoethnography to flourish within law, researchers must engage seriously with its historical roots, its diverse genres, and the ethical responsibilities that accompany research of this nature. Only through such engagement can we ensure that legal autoethnography develops as a sustainable and rigorous mode of inquiry, rather than a fleeting dalliance.

Autoethnography's future in legal research will depend on how well scholars can maintain a balance between creativity and rigour. If done well, autoethnography can help expand the methodological repertoire of legal scholarship – acknowledging that law is a deeply human practice that is lived as well as learned.

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