The Autoethnographer's Ball, 2040

ABSTRACT Patricia A. and Peter Adler's 1999 article on The Ethnographer's Ball, a hypothetical geography of the community of ethnographers, launched this exercise in futurist speculation. What will happen to autoethnography in the future? What historical trajectory will it take? The adherents of autoethnography—now in its ascendance as a research movement, particularly with the launch of its new journal—will likely follow one or another trajectory that previous intellectual communities have traced. This paper projects five potential scenarios for the future of autoethnography twenty years from now: from universal acceptance, to a narrowly defined community, to being hijacked by a future intellectual movement, to institutionalization within the academy, to complete disappearance. It compares these scenarios to the fates of other scholarly communities such as symbolic interaction, world-systems analysis, and social impact assessment.

KEYWORDS future of autoethnography, Ethnographer’s Ball, intellectual movements

The Ethnographer’s Ball took place in New York City in August of 1980. Peter and Patti Adler, sociologists, long-time ethnographers, and later editors of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (JCE), hosted the ball at her father’s Upper East Side townhouse during the meetings of the American Sociological Association. According to the Adlers, about 150 ethnographers attended, among them Anselm Strauss, Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, and a bunch of other people whom all qualitative graduate students are forced to read. I was there as a cohost, a newly minted editor at Sage Publications given the responsibility of the care and feeding of sociologists, particularly this group of ethnographers. This included providing the funds for Peter and Patti’s party. P&P were still grad students. I was a rookie editor. None of us was thirty years old yet.

An offsite party at a sociology conference is not remarkable. What was unusual was the setting. Patti’s father was a well-known New York art dealer, instrumental in bringing painters like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Robert Rauschenberg to the public. While these painters were not yet bringing in megamillions for their work in 1980, each of the paintings on the walls and sculptures on pedestals in the living room far outpaced the lifetime earning power of anyone at the party. As I walked in, Patti whispered to me, “I hope no one gets too drunk; if any of these get ruined, I’m in deep trouble.”

Two decades later, in 1999, Adler and Adler wrote an article for JCE, a journal they had edited for eight years, called The Ethnographer’s Ball—Revisited. In it, they fantasized a twenty-year reunion of the original Ethnographer’s Ball. They envisioned various communities of qualitative research mingling over chianti, cheddar, ciabatta, and canvases
now worth much more than in 1980. The Adlers’ article divided the qualitative community, at least the sociological component of it, into three basic groups. In one corner were the postmodernists, including people like Norm Denzin, Patricia Clough, and discourse analysts such as Jay Gubrium and Robert Dingwall.² Hanging out in the living room were the classic ethnographers, those who did realist ethnography, folks like Gary Alan Fine and dramaturgist Lyn Lofland.³ The third group included “mainstream” ethnographers, scholars who brought traditional social science into their research projects and produced things like grounded theory and ethnomethodology.⁴ P&P were quick to mention that sociology was no longer the only home for qualitative work, that people like Carolyn Ellis had moved to a communication department, where she had coopted some mainstream communication folks like “that guy Bochner.”⁵ Education and organizational studies were also included, and Yvonna Lincoln’s, Harry Wolcott’s, and John Van Maanen’s names dropped.⁶

What was missing from this intellectual geography of qualitative research at the Y2K Ethnographer’s Ball? Autoethnography was there as a new approach just being experimented with. Community-based research was alluded to in the participatory action research of William Foote Whyte and in “community health outreach workers, indigenous people who serve as ethnographers for projects about inner-city drug use, the spread of AIDS and other epidemiological concerns.”⁷ Arts-based research is alluded to only in reference to the postmodernists and to the growth of visual anthropology.⁸ Mixed methods are referenced in another new development—computerized qualitative analysis programs.⁹

If another Ethnographer’s Ball were to be held this year, twenty years after the hypothetical ball of P&P’s article, all of these newfangled or not-yet-envisioned methodologies would be central to the qualitative enterprise: autoethnography, community-based participatory research, arts-based research, indigenous research, mixed methods, qualitative health research, posthumanism, and computerized data analysis. “Classic” ethnography is almost an afterthought in the contemporary qualitative world.

Why recount the real and imagined Ethnographer’s Balls here, at what could reasonably be considered the third Autoethnographer’s Ball?² My point here is the fluidity of scholarly domains, the centrality of change, and the inability to predict the future of where the research tradition will go. If we were to plan an Autoethnographer’s Ball for 2040—twenty years from now—what would that look like? Can we envision changes coming to the autoethnography project of today and to qualitative research more generally?

As a trained archaeologist, my own field is the past. What happened in previous eras, what people thought about what would happen in their future, and how they built their lives around the world they knew and the one they envisioned—this is what archaeologists study. It seems to be an appropriate place to begin this exercise.

One prediction is easy: those who heard this presentation at the Autoethnographer’s Ball in 2020 will undoubtedly be able to laugh about how that guy had it so wrong in his paper projecting two decades ahead. I won’t be the first to stumble in predicting the future. A couple of months ago, I unearthed in a used bookstore a bound set of Harper’s magazines containing issues from November 1860 through April 1861. Harper’s, that famous literary magazine of the nineteenth century, produced works by authors like
Charles Dickens, whose novels were first serialized for an American audience in Harper’s pages. In my bound set, each issue’s back section contained the news of the day, compiled by the editorial team. What happened in the six-month interval bound in that volume? Anyone who paid attention in US history class knows that this period covers the time from the election of Abraham Lincoln as President, through the secession of Southern states from the Union, to the firing on Fort Sumter and the beginning of the bloodiest and most divisive four-year period in American history. But the editors of Harper’s, documenting the daily events as they were occurring, could envision all of this in only the most abstract sense. The terms Gettysburg, Emancipation Proclamation, Ulysses S. Grant, John Wilkes Booth, Appomattox, let alone the Reconstruction, KKK, Emmett Till, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and hip hop, didn’t exist in their world.

Similarly, the Adlers’ 1999 article couldn’t envision autoethnography with its own series, handbook, journal, and conference; or that community-based participatory research would involve more than just a few street people helping ethnographers get their fieldnotes right. Nor can we today envision how the research program that Art and Carolyn have so carefully nurtured will end up. Nor the ones that Norm Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln champion. Nor Jan Morse’s. Nor Kathy Charmaz’s.

As a retired scholarly publisher, I have a different viewpoint on these trends than most scholars do, locked behind their disciplinary firewalls. Over a span of thirty-five years, I was the first qualitative research editor for Sage; after this, I created qualitative methods lists for AltaMira Press and Left Coast Press. It was my job to project where the field was going across multiple disciplines and to commission the books that would be relevant to scholars and their work two or three years down the road. I won’t begin to tell you how many times I (and other very talented editors) made wrong guesses. In baseball lore, the Mendoza line is the minimal standard of acceptable practice, where you’re OK if you rap a single at least 20 percent of the time. Success rates in publishing are a good equivalent—you do OK if you get it right 20 percent of the time. If you hit 30 percent, you’re an all-star.

Nor was this crystal ball profession limited to qualitative research. I followed the developments of dozens of different research areas in my years of commissioning books. Based on this experience, let me suggest five possible future scenarios for the autoethnographic project that Carolyn and Art have been instrumental in launching.

The Universal Scenario. What if autoethnography becomes a movement so popular that everyone is doing it? What would that look like for autoethnography? Distilled down to its most basic principle, it centers the scholar in the research. Seemingly a radical innovation when Carolyn was writing Final Negotiations, but was it? Go back to the very beginnings of the scholarly enterprise two hundred years ago, when everyone was an autoethnographer. Personal feelings and professional observations were seamlessly blended, even in such classic scientific works as Darwin’s Voyage of the Beagle:

I may mention one very trifling anecdote, which at the time struck me more forcibly than any story of cruelty. I was crossing a ferry with a negro [sic], who was uncommonly stupid. In endeavouring to make him understand, I talked loud, and made signs, in doing which I passed my hand near his face. He, I suppose, thought I was in a passion
and was going to strike him; for instantly, with a frightened look and half-shut eyes, he dropped his hands. I shall never forget my feelings of surprise, disgust, and shame, at seeing a great powerful man afraid even to ward off a blow, directed, as he thought, at his face. This man had been trained to a degradation lower than the slavery of the most helpless animal. 14

This is not the Darwin who dispassionately notates differences in the beaks of finches, but one who emotionally reacts to his field experiences, racist and repugnant though these reactions may be.

Now ratchet forward to the twenty-first century. How many articles proclaim themselves autoethnographies because they contain the word “I” or because the author relays personal field experiences as part of the text? Certainly, this is not the sophisticated version of autoethnography that scholars who spend their careers trying to forge a new research tradition have envisioned. But a successful autoethnographic intellectual movement might just have to embrace being incorporated into general academic work at a level of simplicity that washes away almost all of its principles. Already, Ellis and Bochner’s project has branched out to other types of autoethnography: the ethnic identity version of Heewon Chang, 15 the analytic autoethnography of Leon Anderson, 16 the moderate autoethnography of Sarah Stahlke Wall 17 and other health researchers. Over time, a successful movement will engender many other flavors, using the same term to produce something totally unrecognizable to anyone who sat through one of Art and Carolyn’s workshops.

The broader qualitative research project might be a good prototype of this, as there are people doing qualitative work everywhere in the academy, from anthropology through zoology. In the process of this expansion, the basic premises of the original method are often lost. If you ever want to see a qualitative researcher’s hair stand on end, sit in on a coffee-shop conversation between a quantitative researcher and his qualitative colleague, explaining to her how he added three lines to the bottom of his fourteen-item Likert survey questionnaire with the heading “Other Comments,” and boasting that, by including in his paper some of the comments written there, he has added a qualitative component to his study. Can that be all there is to qualitative research? Well, no. While that really is the basic premise of qualitative work, the dilution of authenticity, ethics, rigor, Othering, understanding of lifeworlds and culture, all of that gets washed away by the success of the research tradition.

Another good parallel to this would be the evolution of Marxist studies, which was all the rage in the academy in the 1960s and 1970s. Now, scholars who define themselves in Marxian terms are a small group and spend much time parsing out the contributions of the Frankfurt School or trying to divine what Saint Karl meant on page 324 of Das Capital, but everyone who does “critical” work, or “social justice” work, or “progressive” work is largely using the same principles to guide their scholarship as those set out by this revolutionary group four decades ago.

What has happened in both of these cases—and might be the future of autoethnography—is that they were incorporated, regularized to some extent into everyone’s work, so that the tradition that made them different, unique, revolutionary, became a standard
principle of scholarly practice at the most simplified level. This could easily be envisioned
for autoethnography, and already happens to some extent—where simply by adding a bit
of the “personal” to the article, an author can give the piece an autoethnographic tag.

So what happens to this group, those who continue to specialize in autoethnography,
in such a world? In proper ethnographic form, let’s call it the Isolated Tribe Scenario.

The evolutionary drive of any academic movement is to preserve its genome, to
replicate itself for future generations. Darwin 101. Thus, scholars train their students in
their ideas, values, and their methods of research. This group of acolytes is expected to
carry on their tradition long after the older generation of scholars is gone. For a while,
this might appear like a blossoming of a new world order. But as new generations go to
seek their own visions, the number of true believers shrinks to a fairly closed, defined
population, inbreeding for generations to come. This too is a possible future for
autoethnography.

This is how I view the community of symbolic interactionists. Many of the folks who
sipped chardonnay at the original Ethnographer’s Ball defined themselves in those terms.
They launched their own series, their own journal Symbolic Interaction, their own hand-
book, and they developed research centers. Today, forty years later, some of those
organizational structures exist, including the organization and the meeting. But their
numbers are few, in the low hundreds, and shrinking each year.

I won’t just pick on qualitative researchers. My own dissertation was based on a move-
ment called world-systems analysis, created by Yale sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein.
This brand of analysis blossomed in the 1980s when I was doing my dissertation work
and developed its own journals, centers, and meetings. But, over time, the circle narrowed
and narrowed and now consists of a very small group of inbred scholars and their
students. The leading world-systems journal, Review of the Braudel Center, folded in
2018 after forty years of publishing.

Could this be the scene at the Autoethnographer’s Ball in 2040? A group of a couple
of hundred graying scholars, many of whom were alumni of the 2020 Autoethnogra-
pher’s Ball, and some of their still-adoring students showing up in St. Petersburg with the
complaints of arthritis and ungrateful university administrators that graying scholars
usually have? In 2040 St. Petersburg, they rehash many of the same arguments, citing
the same people cited in 2020. They lament about how few students they have, how their
funding was cut, and how that’s probably a good thing because there’s almost no good
work done anymore anyway. “Except, I have this one promising student who...”

How could this happen? One of those other old scientists, a guy named Malthus,
pointed out that populations expand exponentially. If there were one hundred symbolic
interactionists at the Ethnographer’s Ball, and they each trained twenty students,
wouldn’t there be thousands of them a couple of academic generations later? Where did
all the symbolic interactionists or world-systems analysts disappear to? This brings up
another possible model, which I’ll anthropologically call the Village Raid Scenario.

Anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon documented how men of the Yanomamo tribe in
the Amazon forest used to raid each other’s villages and take women back to their own
community for marriage and procreation, raiding one population to build another.
Autoethnography can itself be accused of this, of capturing the long-term scholarly tradition of including personal biography in your work. World-systems analysis lost its moxie when people started studying globalization, another version of the same set of ideas, but with a slightly different emphasis, a different set of core readings, and a sexier title. Symbolic interactionists didn’t so much disappear as be “raided” by postmodernists, interpretivists, and arts-based researchers. More than a few of them became autoethnographers, Carolyn Ellis included.

Will this happen to autoethnography, where someone will create a different version of the same thing and bring all of those potential future autoethnographers into an as-yet-unnamed new movement? If this happens, I see it most likely coming from the humanities, where the drift toward being socially relevant is moving them closer to social research. Besides the work of ethnodramatists such as Johnny Saldana or Tami Spry, coming out of education or communication, there is an attempt from theater and creative writing departments to merge theatrical impulses with social research, very often told through personal narrative and ethnographic interviews, such as in the work of playwright Anna Deavere Smith. Maybe students will organize an Ethnodramatists’ Ball for 2040 instead.

What most autoethnographers would hope for would be a Ziggurat Scenario. The research project expands, creates its own departments, publications, and fixed spot in academic civilization, much like the development of the earliest cities with their own civic centers, city walls, and a ziggurat temple in the central square. There are some precedents for this: departments of Ethnic Studies or Gender Studies, both broad interdisciplinary areas affecting many parts of the academy—much the way autoethnography might be described—didn’t exist in the 1960s, but are not uncommon today. Dreaming of this is nice, isn’t it? But with the contraction of the academy, particularly in areas of social sciences and humanities, I wouldn’t look to see many autoethnographic ziggurats on the horizon, no matter how nice the view.

All of the above are better options than the Extinct Civilization Scenario. Babylonians. Romans. Aztecs. Haven’t seen them much on my news feeds lately. All extinct. Academic traditions die out too, disappear. I had great hopes in the 1980s that social impact assessment would become a major force in applied social research. I even published a couple of books on the subject. In the spectacular growth of environmental impact assessment, certainly there would be room for a social counterpart, or at least that’s what I thought. The books never sold very well, and I stopped taking proposals for them very quickly. Remember the Mendoza line in baseball? Let’s hope autoethnography doesn’t meet the same fate. An Autoethnographer’s Wake in 2040 doesn’t sound nearly as much fun as another Autoethnographer’s Ball.

Universal? Isolated tribe? Village raid? Ziggurats? Extinct civilization? Which of these scenarios—or none of these?—will be the future of autoethnography? In the tradition of the Harper’s editors of 1861, I’m too wary to make a prediction. One way or another, I cordially invite one and all (and your future students, some of whom are still in diapers today) to the Autoethnographer’s Ball in 2040 to evaluate how the autoethnography project has gone. But someone else will have to organize that event—my arthritis likely will be acting up too much for me to take the lead.
NOTES
2. Adler and Adler, 443–45
3. Adler and Adler, 445–46.
4. Adler and Adler, 447.
5. Adler and Adler, 448.
6. Adler and Adler, 448.
8. Adler and Adler, 447.
9. Adler and Adler, 446.
10. The original version of this paper was presented at the Symposium on Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry, St. Petersburg, Florida, in January 2019. Two previous conferences on autoethnography have been held in St. Petersburg, in 1990 and 2000, the first organized by Carolyn Ellis and Michael Flaherty and the second by Ellis and Art Bochner. They produced, respectively, the edited volumes *Investigating Subjectivity: Research on Lived Experience* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992) and *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). Given their content and attendees, these three conferences could reasonably be considered the first, second, and third Autoethnographer’s Balls.
11. The series *Ethnographic Alternatives* (AltaMira, now Rowman & Littlefield) and *Writing Lives* (Left Coast, now Routledge) were both edited by Ellis and Bochner and based in autoethnography. Ellis also co-edited with Stacy Holman Jones and Tony Adams the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013); The *Journal of Autoethnography* edited by Adams and Andrew Herrmann is new in 2020, and a scholarly organization on autoethnography and narrative is being developed at the time of this writing.
12. Publishers use the maxim, “You make 80 percent of your income on 20 percent of your books.”
15. Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2008.)