

Micro-Paper 25: *Emic/Etic*

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Defining the Term

Emic and *etic* refer to two dimensions through which we make sense of social phenomena in qualitative research. The *emic* dimension refers to the insider's perspective of a phenomenon, usually informed by social and contextual insights that inform its comprehension. The *emic* perspective begins from how people make sense of their reality and surroundings as the basis of analysis and interpretation. The *etic* dimension, on the other hand, refers to how outsiders (usually researchers who enter a field) make sense of these social phenomena, informed by views of research and theory.

Interpretations of social phenomena in qualitative inquiry usually involve navigating the tensions between the *emic* (insider's view) and *etic* (outsider's view) dimensions. In some cases, the *emic* and *etic* are easily distinguishable: the researcher sometimes is the outsider (*etic*) and the community is the insider (*emic*). However, these dimensions are neither clear-cut nor simple binary oppositions.

The reality of qualitative research usually shows us that the researchers themselves, especially in participatory and emancipatory approaches to research, need to deal with the *emic* and the *etic* *within themselves*. In fact, one could argue that this tension is what enables the researchers to provide stronger analyses of the realities they are studying.

Connecting it to LSLP

Given our interest in ethnographic approaches to our research, our projects have provided interesting examples of the tensions between *emic* and *etic*. In each project, all our researchers face the tension from different angles.

Sometimes we deal with the *emic* dimension because we are musicians or gamers, because we have tattoos or due to our past work experiences.

But, at the same time, we deal with the *etic* because we are also outsiders to the routes and the lived experiences or because we are learning to decipher the language of research. This permanent tension about being insiders and outsiders, experts and novices, about the *emic* and *etic* not as binaries but as a fluid arena has become the basis to construct all our research projects and conceptual frameworks. As we proceed with our analysis, these two dimensions are enriching our interpretations and discoveries.

Expanding Second Language Research

Second language research is opening once again more spaces for participatory research, ethnographic studies in the communities, and other approaches to qualitative inquiry. As the field continues to veer in that direction, revisiting the *emic* and *etic* dimensions of research will be paramount. These dimensions, always in tension, should serve as a reminder for seasoned and formally-trained researchers that the real understanding of the social phenomena we study lies in how these dimensions complement and guide the meanings of our research studies.

References

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