Emic-Etic Approach

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Emic and *etic* have been used in various fields such as linguistics, social science, research methods, and cross-cultural psychology. Emic and etic were originally coined in 1954 by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike, from (phon)emic and (phon)etic respectively, to refer to two complementary ways of analyzing behavioral data. Berry (1997) then adapted the use of emic-etic to cross-cultural psychology. Subsequently, researchers engaged in cross-cultural psychological work have employed these two epistemologies, and scholars use these two different approaches to the study of human systems, psychology, and cultural differences.

Emic approaches focus on behaviors and cognitions that are meaningful to the object of concern. In other words, emic refers to categorizing behavior from the perspective of the insider in ways that are meaningful to the people producing that behavior. Etic approaches focus on developing objective, scientifically-determined, observation-driven units of analysis; etic refers to categorizing behavior from the perspective of an outsider in ways that are applicable to different systems and can be used to compare them (Smith & Sluekin, 1979).

Emic-Etic Approach in Cross-Cultural Psychology

For centuries, the field of psychology has attempted to understand the relation between behavior and cultures. There are two critical approaches in understanding human behavior and cultures: an etic perspective and an emic perspective. The etic approach is based on universal comparisons of behaviors that can be generalized across different cultures. Thus scientists who use quantitative hypothetical-deductive methods may choose to use the etic approach in their studies. Researchers adopting the etic approach may focus on the observations of outsiders and their primary goal is to judge the validity of an experience.

Researchers using the etic approach usually examine more than one culture or language at the same time, and because they may use brief interventions, etic approaches are an effective means of providing a broader perspective on behavior while meeting practical demands. Within the etic approach, concepts or classifications are known in advance (based on prior research or theory). Etic concepts are judged against criteria external to the culture, absolute, and directly measurable. Researchers with an etic perspective emphasize objectivity and validity (Oerter, Oerter, Agostiani, Kim, & Wibowo, 1996), but may not perceive all aspects of a situation as a part of a larger cultural setting. Etic data are obtained from controlled cross-cultural research, but may comprise only partial information.

Conversely, the emic perspective presents an alternative approach. The emic approach is based in a belief that unique values and norms of a given culture are indispensable to understanding behaviors meaningful to indigenous members of the society. The emic approach tends to be culture-specific and applied to one culture or language at a time or over a sustained period of time. Because of this focus on culture-specific research, within this approach scholars claim that concepts are discovered rather than predicted and viewed against criteria which are relevant to the internal functioning of the system. The emic view thus perceives cultural components as interconnected and functioning within a larger structural setting. Scholars within the emic approach tend to perceive culture as a whole rather than dividing it into parts.

Scholars who adopt an emic approach also focus on the meanings of behaviors within a specific culture. For example, an emic approach may indicate that the meanings of a behavior such as eating are culture-specific and cannot be universal. Moreover, the emic approach is consistent with qualitative research methodologies wherein members of the society or insiders, not quantitative data, become the primary sources of validity of a particular experience (Chen, 2010). Indeed, these terms, qualitative and quantitative, have been viewed in opposition to each other, resulting in a long-standing controversy over the efficacy of the two perspectives and the relation between the two terms. In fact, there have been several shifts in the debate about its dichotomous versus symbiotic nature, and the controversy has had an impact on the meanings of behaviors in cross-cultural psychology (Chen, 2010).

These ongoing debates over the etic vs. emic approach led scholars to equate etic and emic to different disciplines, such as scientific versus subjective and formal versus informal methodologies, sometimes leading researchers to criticize each others' perspectives. The etic perspective has been dismissed for its assumption of cultural universality or similarity and the tendency to minimize contextual factors. On the other hand, emic perspectives are criticized for being overly culturally specific, with limited generalizability to a larger population (Kim, Triandis, Kağitçibaşi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994).

Yet not all researchers condone this separation, and many have argued for further examination of these two approaches to evaluate how they could help each other. For instance, Pike argued that the relation between etic and emic could be symbiotic and the two perspectives could be equally valuable. Pike also believed that etic and emic perspectives examine the same phenomena from two different positions. Similarly, Patricia Greenfield argued that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive because etic approaches work well in testing hypotheses and emic approaches serve well in an exploratory study. Or these two perspectives may be connected to each other when etic methods serve as an entry point to an emic perspective. Within this context, one approaches phenomena across cultures from a common theoretical foundation, leading up to the study of specific aspects in different cultures.

Both John Berry and Harry Triandis expanded Pike's view on etic-emic approaches. Berry, an internationally recognized scholar of cross-cultural psychology, noted that researchers' choice of etic or emic perspectives has consequences in their research methodology. Specifically, in attempting to incorporate these two perspectives in research, Berry proposed a framework that highlights the essence of both etic and emic perspectives. In other words, scholars can design a study which can explain a behavior across cultures (i.e., etic perspective) and at the same time understand how this behavior is meaningful to a particular culture (i.e., emic perspective). Harry Triandis, author of *Individualism and Collectivism* (1995), believed that researchers with an etic perspective typically begin with a concept or instruments based in their own culture such as Caucasian White or Hispanic, in other words, coming from their own cultural or emic perspective (Kim et al., 1994). Because the researchers might come from a culture different from those of participants, researchers should be careful about the validity of concepts or instruments within or across cultures (Oerter et al., 1996).

Thus, to date scholars have advocated for a convergence of the two approaches through engaging in what Berry referred to as parallel emics, wherein modifications are made to the external criteria or categories (imposed etics) to develop instruments within each culture independently. Once indigenous assessments are created for each culture, cross-cultural comparisons can be made. Concepts that appear as universal across cultures are then referred to as derived etics, whereas concepts that vary across cultures are considered to be culture-specific. With the increasing information that behavior may be universal and still be culturally related, the etic and emic

perspectives may coexist in the same behavior. These two perspectives often interact in theory, research, assessment, and practice.

SEE ALSO: Emic; Etic; Universals

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