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Lett, James (1996) Emic/Etic Distinctions. In *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. David Levinson and Melvin Ember, eds. Pp. 382-383. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

The neologisms “emic” and “etic,” which were derived from an analogy with the terms “phonemic” and “phonetic,” were coined by the linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954). He suggests that there are two perspectives that can be employed in the study of a society’s cultural system, just as there are two perspectives that can be used in the study of a language’s sound system. In both cases, it is possible to take the point of view of either the insider or the outsider.

As Pike defines it, the emic perspective focuses on the intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society (e.g., whether the natural world is distinguished from the supernatural realm in the worldview of the culture) in the same way that phonemic analysis focuses on the intrinsic phonological distinctions that are meaningful to speakers of a given language (e.g., whether the phones /b/ and /v/ make a contrast in meaning in a minimal pair in the language). The native members of a culture are the sole judges of the validity of an emic description, just as the native speakers of a language are the sole judges of the accuracy of a phonemic identification.

The etic perspective, again according to Pike, relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for scientific observers (e.g., per capita energy consumption) in the same way that phonetic analysis relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that are meaningful to linguistic analysts (e.g., dental fricatives). Scientists are the sole judges of the validity of an etic account, just as linguists are the sole judges of the accuracy of a phonetic transcription.

Besides Pike, the scholar most closely associated with the concepts of “emics” and “etics” is the cultural anthropologist Marvin Harris, who has made the distinction between the emic and etic perspectives an integral part of his paradigm of cultural materialism. Pike and Harris continue to disagree about the precise definition and application of emics and etics (Headland et al. 1990). The most significant area of their disagreement concerns the goal of the etic approach. For Pike, etics are a way of getting at emics; for Harris, etics are an end in themselves. From Pike’s point of view, the etic approach is useful for penetrating, discovering, and elucidating emic systems, but etic claims to knowledge have no necessary priority over competing emic claims. From Harris’s perspective, the etic approach is useful in making objective determinations of fact, and etic claims to knowledge are necessarily superior to competing emic claims. Pike believes that objective knowledge is an illusion, and that all claims to knowledge are ultimately subjective; Harris believes that objective knowledge is at least potentially obtainable, and that the pursuit of such knowledge is essential for a discipline that aspires to be a science.

As is apparent, the debate over emics and etics raises a number of fundamental ontological and epistemological issues. It is not surprising, therefore, that controversy continues to surround even the definitions of emics and etics. Although the terms are part of the working vocabulary of most cultural anthropologists, there are no standard definitions that have won universal acceptance. A survey of introductory textbooks in anthropology reveals that the terms “emic” and “etic” are glossed in highly disparate fashion. The situation is even more obscure outside anthropology, where the concepts have been widely diffused and widely reinterpreted. The terms “emic” and “etic” are current in a growing number of fields--including education,

folklore, management, medicine, philology, psychiatry, psychology, public health, semiotics, and urban studies—but they are generally used in ways that have little or nothing to do with their original anthropological context.

Despite that diversity and disagreement, it is possible to suggest a precise and practical set of definitions by focusing on emics and etics as epistemological concepts. From that perspective, the terms “emic” and “etic” should be seen as adjectives modifying the implicit noun “knowledge.” Accordingly, the distinction between emics and etics has everything to do with the nature of the knowledge that is claimed and nothing to do with the source of that knowledge (i.e., the manner by which it was obtained).

Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the members of the culture under study. An emic construct is correctly termed “emic” if and only if it is in accord with the perceptions and understandings deemed appropriate by the insider’s culture. The validation of emic knowledge thus becomes a matter of consensus—namely, the consensus of native informants, who must agree that the construct matches the shared perceptions that are characteristic of their culture. Note that the particular research technique used in acquiring anthropological knowledge has nothing to do with the nature of that knowledge. Emic knowledge can be obtained either through elicitation or through observation, because it is sometimes possible that objective observers can infer native perceptions.

Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers. An etic construct is correctly termed “etic” if and only if it is in accord with the epistemological principles deemed appropriate by science (i.e., etic constructs must be precise, logical, comprehensive, replicable, falsifiable, and observer independent). The validation of etic knowledge thus becomes a matter of logical and empirical analysis—in particular, the logical analysis of whether the construct meets the standards of falsifiability, comprehensiveness, and logical consistency, and then the empirical analysis of whether or not the concept has been falsified and/or replicated. Again, the particular research technique that is used in the acquisition of anthropological knowledge has no bearing on the nature of that knowledge. Etic knowledge may be obtained at times through elicitation as well as observation, because it is entirely possible that native informants could possess scientifically valid knowledge.

Defined in that manner, the usefulness of the emic/etic distinction is evident. Answers to the most fundamental anthropological questions—including the origins of humanity, the characteristics of human nature, and the form and function of human social systems—are part of the worldview of every culture on the planet. Like all human beings, individual anthropologists have been enculturated to some particular cultural worldview, and they therefore need a means of distinguishing between the answers they derive as enculturated individuals and the answers they derive as anthropological observers. Defining “emics” and “etics” in epistemological terms provides a reliable means of making that distinction.

Finally, most cultural anthropologists agree that the goal of anthropological research must be the acquisition of both emic and etic knowledge. Emic knowledge is essential for an intuitive and empathic understanding of a culture, and it is essential for conducting effective ethnographic fieldwork. Furthermore, emic knowledge is often a valuable source of inspiration for etic hypotheses. Etic knowledge, on the other hand, is essential for cross-cultural comparison, the *sine qua non* of ethnology, because such comparison necessarily demands standard units and categories.