

CASE STUDY

Etic and emic approaches

The neologisms 'emic' and 'etic' derive from analogy with the terms 'phonemic' and 'phonetic.' They were coined by the American linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954), who suggested that there are two approaches to study of a society's cultural system, just as there are two approaches to the study of a language's sound system. In both cases, the analyst can take the point of view of either the insider or the outsider.

As Pike puts it, the emic approach focuses on cultural distinctions meaningful to the members of a given society (for example, whether their culture distinguishes between the natural world and the supernatural realm). Only the native members of a culture can judge the validity of an emic description, just as only the native speakers of a language can judge the accuracy of a phonemic identification.

The etic approach, again as Pike defines it, examines the extrinsic concepts and categories meaningful to scientific observers (for example, per capita energy consumption). Only scientists can judge the validity of an etic account, just as only linguists can judge the accuracy of a phonetic transcription.

British anthropology's etic perspective, developed between 1850 and 1870 by Lewis H. Morgan, Edward B. Taylor and then James G. Frazer, was based on the so-called 'comparative method.'

Criticisms were brought against this cognitive style – which opened the way for participant observation – in Britain by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and in America by the German ethnologist Franz Boas (1858–1942), who had emigrated to the United States. Boas, the founder of cultural anthropology, criticized the work of Frazer on the grounds that it focused only on certain aspects of the societies studied, atomizing them and separating them from the global context. Boas' ethnographic fieldwork conducted after 1880, first among the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island in the Pacific Ocean and then among the Eskimos, profoundly influenced Robert E. Park and the early period of the Chicago School.

Outstanding representatives of the new methodological climate brought about by the ethnographic 'turn' were two American anthropologists of a psychological bent who had received their training from Boas: Margaret Mead (1901–78) and Ruth Benedict (1887–1948). In contrast to the atomistic approach of their British colleagues – who still adhered to a colonial perspective and sought to analyze the function performed by a particular cultural element (a custom, a belief, a ritual or a myth, for example) within a society – Mead and Benedict adopted a holistic approach which conceived a culture as a complex and integrated system constructed around a dominant theme which characterized and distinguished one society from another. Mead (1935) lived for two years among the three peoples of New Guinea (the Arapesh, Mundugumor and Tchambuli), studying how their different societies produced differences of 'temperament', that is, differences in innate individual qualities. Benedict (1934) conducted fieldwork among the

Pueblos Indians of New Mexico, the Dobu living on the island of the same name off the south-western tip of New Guinea, and the Kwakiutl Indians, as her teacher Boas had done. Today most cultural anthropologists agree that anthropological research should gather both emic and etic knowledge. Emic knowledge is essential for the intuitive and empathic understanding of a culture, and also for conducting effective ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, emic knowledge is often a valuable source of etic hypotheses. Etic knowledge, on the other hand, is essential for cross-cultural comparison. It is indispensable for ethnology, because comparison necessarily requires standard units and categories.