



Identity and Reflexivity in A Cultural Group: The Case of Emic and Etic

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present notes from a study on the identity and reflexivity of a researcher within an observed cultural group using emic and etic perspectives. The cultural group under observation was male Arabs and the study used a coding system to note the thoughts and feelings of the researcher which were later analysed. The study found that the researcher perceived normality within the group because of his mental prisons. Further analysis of the notes taken during observation of the cultural group indicate bias in the researcher's original interpretations due to an occurrence. Further observation and study of the group would have enhanced confidence in the interpretations of the study.

Keywords: Qualitative research; Case study; Etic; Emic; Method; Insider; Outsider

INTRODUCTION

All qualitative evaluators are familiar with the terms Emic and Etic. Both terms are usually used in anthropology, which is the study of humans within societies. Other branches of anthropology study the norms and values of societies. By definition Etic is the researcher's perspective e.g. the researcher's perception of gender in Emirati. Emic is also the researchers perspective e.g. the researchers perception as part of the environment where the study was undertaken, which in this case was a coffee shop in a mall. The two perspectives influence the way in which researchers work and to demonstrate this study presents reflections of the researcher on the observed cultural group and the researcher carrying out the study [1].

CASE PRESENTATION

Identity is both an entity and an ongoing, dynamic process whereby individuals develop, evaluate, and re-evaluate their mental self-image in the context of others in their environment. Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process. The emic approach (insider view) seeks to describe another culture in terms of categories, concepts and perceptions of the peo-

ple being studied. The epic approach (outsider view) is where anthropologists use their own categories and concepts to describe the culture under analysis [2].

The research used certain guidelines to obtain the data from the observed cultural group. Coding is used to associate meaningful ideas with data of interest [3].

RESULTS

The location of the study was a coffee shop in Al Ain mall where young male Emiratis hang out. The study was undertaken in the evening on a Thursday which is the time and day when the coffee shop is usually attended by many of them. The relevance of the chosen group is that they are available for observation and carry on with their private business regardless of who else uses the coffee shop which is also well attended by tourists and residents alike.

The research study was able to distinguish between the observed group and non-participants due to their clothing and the language which they used to greet each other. The group's participants wore long white cloaks and head red scarfs and sandals. As a national dress this dress mode enabled the researcher to identify the participants of the group (Tables 1-3).

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Table 1: Etic (reflection on others).

Etic perspectives	
1	How, who, where and when?
2	Significance of identity
3	Identity Markers
4	Interpretation of identity
5	Demographic stereotype
6	Borderlines

Table 2: Emic (reflection on thyself).

Emic perspectives	
1	Procedures for etic and emic evaluation
2	Perspective of the observed group
3	Impact of borderlines
4	Interaction with the observed group
5	Perception of researcher
6	Socio-cultural barriers

Table 3: General exportations (expanded field notes).

General expectations	
1	Understanding of relevance
2	Positioning within group
3	Exploration of group facets
4	Reflection as an insider

The researcher's ability to identify the participants of the group was influenced by his local knowledge of the environment in which the coffee shop is based. He also deduction by clothing to determine who belonged to the group and who did not. The social class of the group within the environment used for observing them showed a power relationship which was implied. The demography of the observed participants was male, of Emirati nationality, young and wealthy.

The researcher being an expat did not fall under this demography and so felt excluded. More so as the gathering was a private meeting albeit in a coffee shop it was a closed society. Literature describes the process for comparing between emic and etic perspectives in comparative studies. The researcher needs to be aware of how they perceive the data to be collected and how they will analyse the data after collection and the goal of the research. This study used this theoretical approach for the study.

The observed group which was part of a larger group of coffee drinkers used a section of the lounge which was kept private by their identical dress mode. The researcher noted that as the coffee shop was a public place open for use by residents and tourists alike the observed group would have seen him as an outsider (coffee drinker who was not part of their private meeting). The researcher however saw the observed group as participants of his study and saw himself as a researcher undercover as a coffee drinker for the duration of the observation. Furthermore the researcher saw himself as an expat student doing what he was asked to do by his instructor. From the notes the source of the sentiments which influenced the researcher is his reality as to whom he really is. Being an expat student researcher in reality and a resident in the UAE for the last 18

years influenced how the researcher saw the observed group according to the notes. These according to the notes are the actual feelings of the researcher.

As the observed group was a private gathering defined by clothing, gender, ethnicity and language, the researcher felt he was an outsider and could not partake in the private meeting as he was not an insider. He therefore could not easily blend in with the group even if he approached them and asked.

The researcher was discrete in his observation so as not to arouse suspicion of his intention. This was done because he had not taken permission from the group to observe them and even though the research was not unethical because it recorded behaviour rather than utterances, he felt the observed group might not be willing to be observed if he had asked them. Attendees at the coffee shop however noticed that he had a notebook. This warranted the researcher an identity as a student or teacher.

From the researcher's notes, he reported that he felt like an insider and outsider at different points of the research. As a coffee drinker he felt as a participant of the group whilst as a researcher he felt like an outsider. The notes also reported that the researcher did not experience any linguistic barriers as he is fluent in Arabic. Neither did he experience social or political barriers as he was an observer. Furthermore as the site was a public place there was no barrier for the public who were also not being observed or partaking in the gathering by the group being observed [4].

DISCUSSION

The researcher's notes report that he has learnt the relevance and importance of understanding his identity as a researcher within the context of social groupings like gender, class, religion, ethnicity and age. This understanding is important for reflection and unbiased research output. Positioning within group was as a researcher and coffee drinker. The researcher reported in his notes that the site was a public place and as such various groups existed. However the groups relevant to this study were the researcher as a coffee drinker and the observed cultural group. The researcher did not see himself as a member of observed group but as a member of the public drinking coffee. The researcher did however select the observed group because he was fluent in Arabic and because it was a public place where he could remain unnoticed. The researcher consider himself a part of society having spent 18 years in the UAE but is not an Emirati. The researcher's ties with the culture are religious and linguistic. The researcher's views about the culture was not affected by the study.

Exploration of group facets were not sufficiently explored as the observation took place just under one and half hours. However the researcher reported in his notes that based on his observation the group was certainly made up of only Emiratis. This understanding stems from the observation as the researcher tried to empty his mind of his prior knowledge of the group which he knows from previous visits to the mall. The researchers understanding could be said to arise from visualisation using symbols of clothing. Reflection as an insider occurred because this assignment has taught the researcher about the different perspectives [5-8].

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to present notes from a study on the identity and reflexivity of a researcher within an observed cultural group using emic and etic perspectives. From the results the study was able to reflect on the observed group made up of Arab males as an insider and outsider using a coding system. The study shows that qualitative research is influenced by mental constraints and perspectives which should be declared to enable the study present a non-biased outcome. The researcher who carried out this study is better equipped to carry out qualitative research underpinned by relevant theories.

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