

The Agent and the Observer: Emics and Etics in Archaeology

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Human behaviour can be examined from both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ perspectives. Philosopher Warner Fite (1908, p. 489) noted that “there is no contrast more striking than that furnished by viewing a situation from within as agent, and viewing it from without as observer”. Furthermore, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960 (2013), pp. 186-187) contended that the process of understanding is a continuous one involving both the observer and the agent. Linguist Kenneth Pike (1954, p. 8) coined the terms ‘etic’, generalised observer classifications about linguistic data, and ‘emic’, specific agent-related patterns discovered within data. From the 1950s, historians and archaeologists have been interested in this difference. The philosopher-historian Robin Collingwood (1946 (2005), pp. 234-236) noted that the historian has the authority to select and criticise the historical data with which to construct history. Historians must thus recognise that they create “an imaginary picture” (Collingwood 1946 (2005), pp. 248-249) which must be examined and interpreted critically to reconstruct the past. History is thus written by the observer based on the actions of the agent. Since then, other specialists, including psychologists, sociologists, folklorists, epidemiologists, and archaeologists, use this classification as a heuristic tool to understand human behaviour (Franklin 2009, p. 1; Headland 1990, p. 15).

Archaeologists rely on material culture for their agent-generated data. As these items cannot speak, archaeologists require alternative methods of gathering data, but its accomplishment has been a contentious issue. Albert Spaulding (1953, p. 305) believed that it was possible, through typological classification, to discover “combinations of attributes favored by the makers of the artefact”. He proposed that intentionality could be demonstrated by mathematically calculating expected artefact attribute frequencies, and then comparing the expected frequency against the observed frequency (Spaulding 1953, p. 308). Spaulding (1953, p. 313) further suggested that archaeologists should think critically about the resulting data to infer a relationship between the artefacts and their makers. Archaeologist James Ford (1954, pp. 390-391) disagreed with Spaulding’s methodology, suggesting that chronological control and geographical positioning can

affect artefact variability, as shown by north-eastern Native American cord-marked pottery. Ford did not believe typologies to be anything other than hypothetical constructs. In response to Ford, Spaulding (1954, pp. 391-393) stated that if his methodology is followed correctly it would provide “historically useful units”. However, Ford continued to champion etic methodology. Working with anthropologist Julian Steward, the two examined arbitrary etic-based methodology (Ford & Steward 1954, pp. 49-50). In their example of fictitious Gamma-gamma housing styles, they determined that only observer-constructed, non-overlapping typologies were useful to demonstrate that artefact variability across time and space is cultural (Ford & Steward 1954, p. 52).

Interest in this debate continued into the 1960s. The historian Edward Carr (Carr 1961 (1987), pp. 8-11) examined the changes in the study of history through time. He noted the nineteenth-century historians’ penchant for assembling all empirical agent-generated ‘facts’ which allowed them to preference their favoured view of historic events. Carr (1961 (1987), pp. 27-30) maintained that observer-historians should use a reciprocal approach to writing history, by simultaneously learning and shaping their historical analyses as they uncover different agent actions. However, unlike historians, archaeologists must first, by necessity, collect their data (‘facts’) to be able to assemble typologies or apply ethnographies to the material record. Karl Heider (1967, p. 55) argued that archaeologists are unable to establish scientific etic typologies from indigenous emic ones, as the studied society is unobservable. Using Dugum Dani tools as examples, Heider (1967, pp. 56-57) shows how etic tool typologies of shape, size, and material do not correspond to Dani behaviour, and concluded that archaeologists would thus make incorrect assumptions about human behaviour based on the material record. Heider (1967, p. 62) suggested that, to surmount these etic/emic issues, archaeologists should use a wide range of ethnographic data.

As anthropologists investigated the application of etic/emic viewpoints during this period, their manner of use changed (Headland 1990, p. 13). The anthropologist Marvin Harris (1968 (2001), p. 582; 1976, pp. 330-331) noted that, as long as there is a clear distinction made between the etic (observer-discovered patterns) and emic (the agent's cognitive processes), etic statements were a vital tool for providing predictions about human behaviour. He believed that, by linking emic phenomena with etic conditions, etic statements could be made by anthropologists that could be judged scientifically (Harris 1968 (2001), p. 655; Harris 1976, p. 334). These conclusions have been challenged. Alan Howard (1968, pp. 524-525) argued that, rather than strengthening anthropology's links with science, Harris's narrow focus on etic methodology restricted anthropological research. He believed that emic data could provide hypotheses for testing nomothetic laws, which can, in turn, provide guidelines for further research. Harris (1968, pp. 530-531) responded to Howard by claiming that emics cannot answer questions like indigenous poverty, which is etic-related. Also critical of Harris's adaptation of the subject, linguist William Merrifield (1968, pp. 526-527) noted that Harris does not account for "variation, ambiguity, and poor performance" in his theory, which was common practice in linguistics. Harris's (1968, pp. 531-532) response to Merrifield focussed on the differences between anthropology and linguistics. Nevertheless, Harris's definitions of etic/emic distinctions have become the conceptual tool *par excellence* of the social sciences, including archaeology (Headland 1990, p. 14).

One of the first archaeologists to utilise the etics/emics tool was ceramics expert Dean Arnold (Headland 1990, p. 15). He compared emic linguistic pottery categories with external etic mineralogical analyses to understand the cognitive ethnomineralogical system of the Maya potters of Tikal (Arnold 1971, pp. 20, 22). Arnold (1971, p. 38) noted that, although all cognitive systems may not be clearly manifested in the material culture, the behaviour reflected in the "physical discriminations and contrasts" of the material record can be understood through careful archaeological analysis. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974, pp. 28-29) agreed that this was

possible. He illustrated this through examination of emic Javanese, Balinese, and Moroccan symbol systems relating to selfhood beliefs, as seen through an etic viewpoint (Geertz 1974, p. 43). The emic can thus only be viewed and analysed using scientific etic explanatory frameworks (Wylie 2002, p. 163). On the other hand, archaeologist David Thomas (1974, p. 11) believed that archaeology can only consider etic phenomena. To explain this, he maintained that emic models could not be scientifically tested nor identified in the material record. He thus disagreed with the results of Elman Service (1962, pp. 83-89), who reconstructed Shoshonean pre-contact patrilineal band arrangements based on emic phenomena. Therefore, to Thomas (1974, p. 18), only Service's etic interpretation was relevant to archaeology. Unlike Thomas, German prehistorian Manfred Eggert (1976, pp. 508-510, 521) believed that, while archaeological data could potentially reveal the cognitive system of prehistoric peoples, there was no current etic or emic methodology suited to the task.

The search for appropriate archaeological uses for etics/emics continued into the 1980s. Brian Hayden (1984, pp. 79, 84, 88-89) contended that "native typologies" provide archaeologists with useful data only "where native and archaeological interests overlap", as demonstrated by his investigation of Tzeltal Maya ceramic vessels' names. This task requires dedicated ethnoarchaeological research about emic categories prior to the creation of any etic typology. An important point by Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1988, pp. 85-86) is that archaeologists should avoid "the assumption ... that all social actors in a society share an undifferentiated and normative set of beliefs". The authors argued that archaeologists should use the contradicting emic viewpoints which arise to infer social practices, rather than the commonly used idealised etic typologies (Shanks & Tilley 1988, p. 86). One example of an attempt to apply such real emic details to archaeology is that of archaeologist Rhys Jones and geneticist Neville White (1988, pp. 51-57), who arranged to observe local Indigenous knappers working at the sacred Aboriginal Ngilipitji stone quarry. They investigated the emic knowledge of the local people, such as how cores were

selected, knapping techniques, tool types created, debitage distribution, and knapping-related words (1988, pp. 59-83). Jones and White (1988, p. 84) concluded that such ethnoarchaeological research provides hypotheses that, when compared to the archaeological record, can answer important behavioural questions that archaeology alone cannot answer.

During the 1990s, archaeologists became more cautious regarding the use of the etic/emic tool. Archaeologist William Adams and philosopher Ernest Adams (1991, p. 284) noted that, while emic typologies are relevant to the goal of reconstructing the mindsets of prehistoric peoples, it may not be possible to reach this goal using archaeological material. As shown by the Nubian Pottery Typology, Adams and Adams (1991, pp. 97-154) believed that only historical significance can be confirmed. In line with this view, Norwegian archaeologists Harald Johnsen and Bjørnar Olsen (1992, p. 430) believed it was important to remember that, as per Gadamer's theory, understanding is an ongoing, active process that changes with each interpretation by an observer. Accordingly, they called upon archaeologists to look at *how* to understand human behaviour, rather than at *what* human behaviour is represented (Johnsen & Olsen 1992, pp. 420, 432). J Scott Raymond (1995, pp. 231, 241), who classified the Upper Amazonian Sivia and Quimpiri ceramic assemblages to understand the societies which created them, cautioned that observer-generated classifications are unlikely to match those intended by the agent. For example, a decorated jar could well be "a door stop, a flower pot, or a beer storage vessel" or even a social signal, depending on context.

As the viability of this tool became less clear in archaeological contexts, interest in the subject waned outside of the field of indigenous archaeology. Roberta Dods (2004, p. 547) investigated the use of both scientific and traditional forms of understanding. Although archaeologists cannot often directly observe traditional emic cognition, as many cultures do not have living analogies, Dods (2004, p. 555) asserted that both viewpoints should be utilised if possible. Archaeologists

should thus form both etic and emic archaeological questions that have “integrity, internal coherence and results that can be ‘tested’”, based on emic patterns observed in the material record (Dods 2004, p. 554). When traditional cultures are extant, archaeologists must be aware of the etic/emic sensitivities involved, especially in regards to dispossessed peoples. Scandinavian archaeologists, Else Kleppe and Inga-Maria Mulk (2008, p. 1), demonstrated this in their discussion of museum collections housing Sami objects. Despite being academically assigned to the Sami, few artefacts are officially accepted by museums as belonging to them. Thus, the overriding etic viewpoints of Scandinavian politics render Sami prehistory “invisible” (Kleppe & Mulk 2008, p. 12). Kleppe and Mulk (2008, pp. 3, 15-16) encouraged their governments and the Sami to open up dialogue, with the aim of adding missing emic viewpoints to museum exhibitions.

Since then, archaeologists have continued looking at the issue of etic/emic typologies. Patricia Baker (2013, pp. 88-90) examined how mistakes can be made in artefact classification. She argued that modern, etic Greco-Roman medical tool classifications, such as surgical and toilet instruments, did not align with ancient, emic ones. In ancient times, tools often served multiple purposes that could cross the etic categories: tweezers, assigned to the toilet category, could be used to surgically treat ophthalmitis (Baker 2013, p. 90). Others have found such typologies to be irrelevant. German proponents of computerised typology in archaeology, Christian Hörr, Elisabeth Lindinger and Guido Brunnett (2014, p. 3), evaluated the relevance of etics and emics in this field. The authors asserted that, as typologies were hypothetical constructs based on archaeological questions, “there could not be any such thing as one correct classification”. Hörr, Lindinger and Brunnett considered such classifications to always be etic, with little influence on “everyday archaeological work”, so their computerised techniques do not include this methodology. Finally, doctoral student Sam Lin (2014, pp. 11-12) noted that the use of typology in itself reflects the archaeological inference of intent between past peoples and material culture. Although there is evidence of “intentional modification and design” by palaeolithic knappers, Lin (2014, pp. 12-13,

15-16) maintained that archaeological tools are end-products, having been through different modification sequences, representing multiple intentions, over an unknown timespan. As such, emic types are difficult to substantiate. However, she stated that etic units can be confidently used based on uniformitarian rules (Lin 2014, pp. 22-23). Archaeological consensus on this topic is rare, with proponents for both viewpoints. However, using emic methodologies to answer archaeological questions is far less common than that of etic typologies, although both should be used with caution.

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