

The Emic-Etic-Emic Research Cycle

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Introduction

This paper discusses a research approach that we believe is appropriate for IB researchers dealing with under-researched countries, from an indigenous perspective. We argue that combining emic and etic research approaches, in an emic-etic-emic cycle, is the best way to disaggregate contextual issues in IB research. We use the Leadership Effectiveness in Africa and the African Diaspora (LEAD) research project to explicate the cycle that we propose. The paper briefly discusses the nature of emic and etic research and outlines how these research approaches were used in the LEAD project. The focus of this paper is on a methodological approach, which provides both breadth and depth to IB research.

Over the past twenty years, management scholars have noted that management knowledge is severely biased toward “western” perspectives, and “while many business leaders have taken up the call to address the issues surrounding entrenched poverty in the world, management scholars have been slower to respond” (Bruton, 2010: 1). Similarly, Das et al. (2009) found that research papers published in mainstream economic journals were linked to level of development, and countries with the lowest incomes and weakest economies received the least attention. Scholars have also suggested that we need to understand management from an indigenous, or local, perspective as well as within the global context, and that we need to develop locally-driven management concepts and measures (Holtbrugge, 2013). We can achieve this understanding only if we do research in under-researched countries, and incorporate indigenous concepts and measures into our global research. We can then explain what is unique to some countries, and how countries compare on variables of interest.

Increased globalization makes it especially important to

understand the role of the context when conducting IB research, but the literature often does not sufficiently address the contextual factors (Teagarden, Von Glinow, & Mellahi, 2015). In historical terms, Birkinshaw, Brannen, and Tung (2011) noted that the IB field was founded on studies employing rich qualitative research, but more recently a trend toward positivistic empirical methods in the social sciences has led to quantitative methods becoming more the standard in the field. Scholars who have studied management in emerging markets have largely adopted an etic approach and used quantitative methods, and Shackman’s (2013) review of the international business literature found structural equation modeling to be the most widely used technique. Birkinshaw et al. (2011) argued that this evolution of the field has resulted in missed opportunities to better understand processes and contexts, and that qualitative methods can provide a grounded and deeper perspective. Similarly, Buckley, Chapman, Clegg, and Gajewska-De Mattos (2014) noted that emic approaches and qualitative methods can generate new conceptualizations and interpretations of the complex contextual factors involved in IB research and practice, especially in emerging economies.

This paper argues that cross-cultural studies should combine approaches to better understand the context in under-researched countries. The LEAD research project goes beyond the use of different methods, because we use the various approaches to build on each other. Some researchers (e.g., Greenfield, 1996) have recognized that selecting an approach depends on the stage of research. That is, the emic approach serves best in exploratory research, and the etic approach is best for hypothesis testing. We argue that the interplay between perspectives within the research process are especially valuable. We encourage researchers to consider using an emic-etic-emic cycle to further enhance understanding of management in different IB contexts. Figure 1 outlines the research process used in the LEAD project.

The Nature of Emic and Etic Research

There have been a number of papers through the 1990s, and more recently, discussing emic and etic research issues, notably a special issue on the topic (Elsbach, Sutton, & Whetten, 1999) and a paper on emics and etics in cross-cultural studies (Peterson & Ruiz Quintella, 2003). There are ongoing debates over the value of emic research versus etic research. Each approach has proponents and defendants, and opponents and detractors (e.g., Brannen, 1996; Jahoda, 1983). The discussion often focuses on which is the “better” approach. We contend that such arguments are misleading, because both approaches when used together are “better” than when used individually, especially in under-researched areas. One concern in the emic-etic debate is that the meaning of the terms is not always clear and they are not always used consistently. For our purposes, we describe the “emic” approach as beginning with a “blank page” and allowing research participants to define and explain the concepts of interest in their own words. In contrast, the “etic” approach uses definitions and explanations drawn from all the countries included in the research, and these are incorporated into a survey instrument that can be used in a large-scale study across cultures and countries. The etic stage allows for statistical tests for similarities and differences both within and between cultures and countries. Results of the etic stage are further refined through additional emic research. We believe that using emic approaches to develop etic ones, and exploring etic results through further emic research, provides a holistic look at research questions in under-researched areas. The combined emic-etic-emic cycle answers the calls for indigenous research in under-researched areas of the world while it also addresses researchers’ desire to compare and contrast management in different locations.

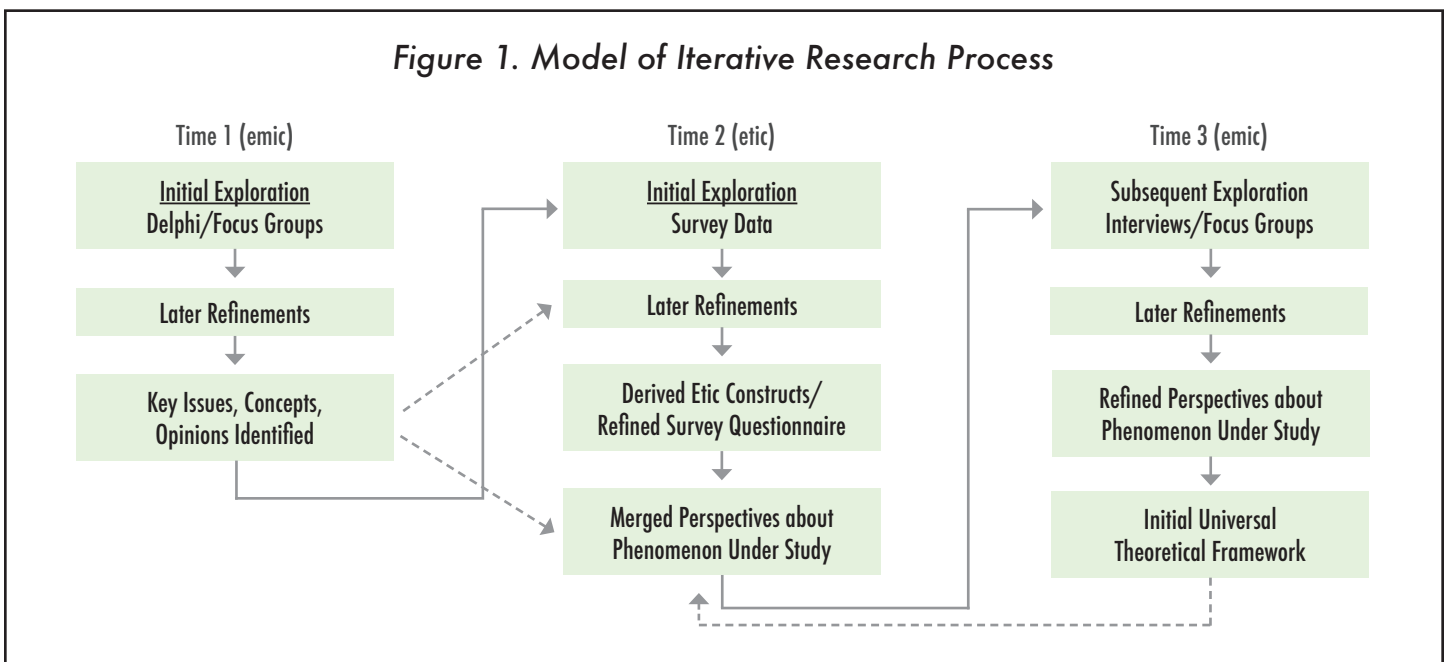
Using the Emic-Etic-Emic Research Cycle

Where little empirical research has been done, emic research is critical. We need to know how people in under-researched places view the constructs of interest; otherwise, researchers impose a particular view, developed elsewhere. While valuable, knowledge based on emic research alone often does not allow for statistical comparisons among groups. In order to more clearly understand how groups are similar or different, etic research across groups is also necessary. The LEAD project focuses on countries in Africa and groups that comprise the African Diaspora (people of African descent who reside outside of the African continent). These area are clearly under-researched; thus an emic approach to begin with was appropriate. The research approach was facilitated by having a cross-cultural team, in order to avoid as much as possible, researcher-imposed biases.

The research began with a Delphi Technique where “experts” (knowledgeable people) in leadership positions were asked to define, then refine, the details of the concepts to be measured (culture and leadership). The Delphi was followed by focus groups, consisting of lower-level managers, supervisors and employees, and students who responded to open-ended questions about culture and leadership. We selected the Delphi Technique to begin because we wanted participants themselves to define the concepts and we felt that initially this should be done by knowledgeable people in each country. The Delphi asked open-ended questions, and respondents’ answers were collated and returned to all respondents in as many “rounds” as necessary to obtain consensus.

Following the Delphi process, we wanted to get input from

Figure 1. Model of Iterative Research Process



people who would not be considered experts, and we felt the best approach would be to conduct focus groups. This allowed a group of people to discuss the same open-ended questions that had been used in the Delphi. As with the Delphi, we felt that this avoided the researchers imposing their own ideas, and that the results would reflect the thinking of the participants. We believe these two emic approaches – Delphi Technique plus focus groups – provided a valuable design for this research project where it was important to avoid researcher bias.

The responses from the Delphi and Focus Groups provided the basis on which to develop the etic phase of the research – a standardized questionnaire. This questionnaire is appropriate for use across countries and cultures, and at the same time it incorporates culture specific concepts developed in the emic phase. The questionnaire includes some established concepts and constructs but also reflects others identified from the Delphi and focus groups. We are, thus, using an etic approach that incorporates the results of the emic approach. To develop the questionnaire, results of the Delphi and the focus groups were content coded using a qualitative analysis software package. Three researchers then worked together on this content and developed a list of 60 items. These items were further revised, and reduced to a list of 36 items. Established constructs and measures were reviewed to see how well they covered the final list. Existing measures were selected, based on reliability, validity, and previous international use. Additional questions were developed for those concepts that were not covered by existing measures. The draft questionnaire, including existing surveys and newly developed items, was pre-tested. The initial questionnaire was quite long, and the items to be included were further refined and reduced by two researchers working together. The final set of survey items were reviewed by a third researcher for accuracy and completeness. The important contribution of this emic-etic approach is that the questionnaire includes Afro-centric concepts, which are not represented in established frameworks. New concepts included the role of gender, family, lineage and tribe, and religion; new effective leadership characteristics included the importance of honoring traditions and customs, education and knowledge, spirituality, wisdom, being bold and courageous, being a man, resilience, and having a strong personality. This sequential combination of an emic approach with an etic one allows us to incorporate ideas generated by research participants in several under-researched locations, and to translate these ideas into a broad cross-country examination of the issues.

The title of this paper uses the terminology “emic-etic-emic research cycle.” We propose that research should not conclude with etic results, but should proceed to an additional emic stage. For example, if being bold and courageous is considered an important variable in certain locations, we would pursue that finding with further emic research, asking questions such as “how is being bold and courageous important to effective leadership?” and, “what do you mean by being bold and courageous in a

leadership context?” Such an emic-etic-emic cycle allows one to achieve both depth and breadth in research. Each subsequent phase of the research cycle is informed by the results of the prior phase, and the final emic phase will provide theoretical grounding for, and ultimately influence, the final set of merged perspectives from the etic and emic phases. The project is currently collecting responses to open-ended questions on effective leadership from local managers (insiders) and expatriates (outsiders) in a variety of countries.

The focus of this paper is on a methodological approach, which we believe is particularly relevant for research in under-researched countries. In these countries, little is known of the context, and it is essential to incorporate indigenous concepts through emic research. It is also important to be able to make comparisons across groups and countries, using etic approaches. We suggest that by beginning with emic research and incorporating emic results into the etic phase of the research, one reaps the benefits of both. We also argue that continuing the cycle with a further emic phase provides even greater understanding of the phenomenon under study. An underlying premise is that researchers avoid imposing their own biases.

The LEAD Project in this Special Issue of *AIB Insights*

In this first paper for the Special Issue of *AIB Insights*, we set the stage for the other papers. This paper has explained our research approach and briefly outlined the LEAD research undertaken to date. We want to note that although this project has been underway for several years, it is still in a relatively early stage. Quantitative data is still being collected, and further emic research is envisaged. The team is seeking to expand the research to additional African countries as well as more of the Diaspora. Although some of the findings presented in the other papers in this Special Issue are based on relatively small samples, we believe that readers will find the discussions of these findings insightful.

The second paper in this Special Issue focuses on the team process that was used for the LEAD project. This process was and is necessary and advantageous to the type of research project described here. The research could not have been accomplished without effective management of the team and the team processes. It was, however, very much a learning experience, and the next paper discusses this, as well as the challenges, opportunities, and best practices that emerged over time. The other papers in this Special Issue summarize the results to date of the LEAD project. One paper looks at three East African countries, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; a second looks at two West African countries, Ghana and Nigeria. The other two papers look at the insider (local managers) and outsider (expatriate) views, first in a variety of African countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda), then in

Mexico, as part of the Diaspora. As noted previously, the results that are presented are early results, and only a small number of countries are included thus far in our findings. Our intent is to expand the research substantially, over the coming years; nevertheless, we are pleased to be able to share our results to date with AIB members and readers of Insights. Readers with an interest in our project and Africa generally will be interested in our book on these topics, *LEAD: Leadership Effectiveness in Africa and the Diaspora* (published by Palgrave) – information available at <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137591197>.

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