

THE INSIDER-OUTSIDER DEBATE

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This debate is a central one in modern ethnography, though one which some scholars now regard as irrelevant. Simply, 'insiders' are the people who are 'believers' or practitioners, or members of the community being researched, and 'outsiders' are the researchers, typically the academics, undertaking the research.

The terms **emic** and **etic** are sometimes used for insider and outsider, respectively, thanks to Kenneth Pike. The term emic is an abbreviation of phonemic, the meaning of a sound, or word, while etic is an abbreviation of phonetic, the structure of a sound.

First, to refer back to my qualitative methodology notes, Cantrill observed that,

The scientist is involved in making personal value judgements at nearly every stage of his work - in the setting of his problem, the selection of the aspects of the problem which he feels are crucial and should be investigated, the selection of the method he will use for his investigation, as well as the interpretation of it.¹

The German sociologist's Max Weber's concept of **Verstehen** is useful; it can be translated as to understand, but also,

1. To perceive and comprehend the nature and significance of, to know.
2. To know thoroughly by close contact with or by long experience of the phenomenon.
3. To grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by another.
4. To know and be empathetic toward.

Weber used the term to refer to the social scientist's attempt to **understand** both the **intention** and the **context** of human action.

But what about the intention and context of the researcher? According to Denscombe,

Ethnographers...are concerned that the conceptual tools they use to understand the cultures or events being studied are not, and can never be, neutral and passive instruments of discovery...we have no way of standing outside these to reach some objective and neutral vantage point from which to view things as they really are.²

As a result the '**insider-outsider**' problem has been recognised, in order to give a framework to the idea that the ethnographer has to stand 'inside' the phenomenon being researched, in order to understand it.

This leads to the additional question, though, 'Can one study one's self?' Or, it was phrased by Bill Swatos, Anglican minister and sociologist, 'can natives study themselves?' Swatos said he

1 Cantrill, Hadley, 'Foreword' in Payne, Stanley L., *The Art of Asking Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980 [1951], p. x.

2 Denscombe M., *The Good Research Guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998, p. 73.

couldn't study his own beliefs and wouldn't study Anglicanism. The response came from Geoffrey Haddon, who asked 'why can't natives study their own beliefs?' Hufford, argued that the researchers can study themselves as long as they are careful to distinguish between the scholarly voice and the personal voice.³

Tanya Luhrmann coined the term cognitive drift in order to describe the outsider's tendency to 'go native', to begin to share the insider's perspective.⁴ Luhrman was criticised by some of the wiccans she interviewed for her study for gaining their trust then misrepresenting them. As part of her research, Luhrmann was initiated into Wicca though subsequently she claimed categorically that she was not a witch. Jo Pearson reported that Luhrmann's primary aim was to discover whether those involved in the occult are or become 'irrational' in order to "believe" in magic,⁵ thus perpetuating the reductionist approach. Luhrmann has been criticised for failing to question her own "rational" stance. Susan Greenwood, in her following study, though, significantly retained the trust of her subjects.⁶ If, as Katherine Ewing maintains, 'going native' remains a major taboo in anthropology, the reverse situation is equally problematic. As Greenwood pointed out, 'if we refuse to acknowledge that the people studied may know something about the human condition that might also be personally valid for the anthropologist.'⁷

Jo Pearson, quoting Elizabeth Puttick, describes herself as "insider going outsider, going native in reverse", arguing that 'the insider perspective is at least as valuable as that of the outsider' and a combination of both perspectives, 'which denies the value of neither the religious community nor that of the academy' can only enrich scholarship.⁸ Pearson was a pagan who became an academic and studied her own community, and her work draws attention to the sometimes difficult, but often liberating, process that 'insiders' go through then they become 'outsiders' as a result of their studies.

Modern anthropology accepts that, to some extent, the researcher must strive to become an insider. As Evans-Pritchard, one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century, put it,

It is obvious that if the anthropologist is to carry out his work...he must learn the native language, and any anthropologist worth his salt will make the learning of it his first task.⁹

3 Hufford, David J., 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', *Western Folklore*, 1995, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 57-76.

4 Luhrmann, Tanya, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.

5 Pearson, Jo, 'Going native in reverse: the insider as researcher in British Wicca', in Elizabeth Arweck and Martin Stringer, eds., *Theorising Faith: the Insider/Outsider Problem* (Birmingham: University Press, 2002), p.102.

6 Greenwood, Susan, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology*, Oxford: Berg, 2000.

7 Pearson, 'Wicca', p.103

8 Ewing, K. P., *Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe* American

Anthropologist 96 (3) , 1994: 5571-583 in Pearson, 'Wicca', p.107

9 Evans-Pritchard, E.E., *Social Anthropology*, London: Cohen and West Ltd., 1967 [1951], p. 79.

Is it *necessary* to be an insider? The following is an example from the education of physics students:

To *really* understand is to have one's conceptions of phenomena changed. These physics students [who produced wrong answers to questions about gravity] hadn't changed their common-sense conceptions of gravity, but had placed alongside them a set of statements and formulae about physical phenomena that would see them through the exams. Their experienced world remained pre-Newtonian. To really understand physics, or mathematics, or history, is to *think like* a physicist, a mathematician or a historian, and that shows in how you behave. Once you really understand a sector of knowledge, it changes that part of the world; you don't behave towards that domain in the same way again.¹⁰

Is it desirable to be an insider? The following is a statement from a historian:

Even the great French historians Fernand Braudel once pronounced that history as a discipline "can't be understood without practising it".¹¹

By the same token, if insiders within a particular practice or belief-system, wish to comment on that practice or belief-system in line with another system (i.e. adopt an 'outsider's' view on it), they need to become insiders within the system of commentary – such as anthropology, or history.

From a cosmological point of view, are we all insiders in the cosmos? Can we stand outside the cosmos and look in, or are we fated to always be insiders. (See Manilius *Astronomica*, opening sections).

An extract from Nick's PhD Chap 1 (for full version and bibliography see General Information.

While pursuing a scholarly voice, though, I am aware of Kenneth Pike's distinction, first formulated in 1954 (Pike 1971: 5-7; Headland 1990: 15), between the two distinct modes of being, emic and etic. These are derived from the words phonemic, meaning a sound, and phonetic, the word or symbol used to represent that sound (McCutcheon 1999: 15). Pike himself defined an 'emic unit' as a 'physical or mental item treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behaviour' (Pike 1990: 28), as opposed to 'etic' units which are externally imposed or conditioned. Although there is no standard agreement over the two terms' precise definition (Harris 1990), roughly translated 'emic' means insider and 'etic' outsider (Pike 1971: 17; Harris 1990: 51; McCutcheon 1999: 17). However, it would be false to imagine the existence of a simple insider-outsider polarity, in which emic and etic function as mutually exclusive categories, for any individual may be a member of different emic subsystems, while any person in an emic situation is also bound simultaneously to be part of a real, etic, external world that is not, as the extreme reflexive position would hold,

10 Biggs, John, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 2nd edn., Maidenhead: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 2003, p. 37.

11 Cited in Evans, Richard, *In Defence of History*, London: Granta Books 1997, p. 11.

merely a personal projection (Pike 1990: 32, 34-5; see also Harris 1990: 48-9). It is important, in order to balance Hufford's personal and scholarly voices, to be able to take both etic and emic positions, a point made convincingly by James Lett (Lett 1990: 135-6). It may therefore be argued that individuals may adopt emic or etic stances at different times and in distinct situations, particularly in relation to a diverse discipline such as astrology. As Hill wrote of the Church of England, if one defines an insider as a 'member' who shares the group's definitions of its dogma then further questions are suggested: is the member lay or clergy, what is the level of commitment and what is their personal understanding of the official dogma? (Hill 1979: 11). These variables may ultimately render generalisation extremely difficult, if not meaningless. What is important, though, is that, fulfilling Evans-Pritchard's (1967: 61, 79) first condition for the anthropologist, I speak the 'native's' language; I understand the ways in which astrologers communicate. The paradox Smart noted in relation to phenomenological studies is of importance here: they must be value-free in the sense that the phenomenon is not subject to *a priori* judgements and the researcher's own subjective experience must be 'bracketed out', yet such an approach may actually evoke a 'value-rich' appreciation of the meaning of the religion being observed (Smart 1973b: 21).

There is, therefore, the question of the value which I, as an insider, may or may not attach to astrology. As Michael Hill wrote in his discussion of approaches to the sociology of religion, 'the more crystallised are the value-systems in the social phenomenon being studied...the more self-conscious becomes the problem of value in the observer' (Hill 1979: 6-7). Hill argued that one does not need to be a member of a group in order to understand it, and was critical of those 'insider' studies, such as those within Christian groups, which adopted the methodologies of social science but regarded the group's doctrine as a given. Yet, as Stark noted, 'the most important factor in creating a truly scientific study of religion' in the late twentieth-century was the entry into the field of 'persons of faith' (Stark: 1999: 54). I realise that, as an emic within astrology as a whole, if not within particular sub-groups, to an etic observer, I may well be characterised as a 'person of faith'. However, my study does not concern the veracity of astrological claims and only touches on the verdicts which have been made on those claims, both for and against, to the extent that they shape the literature on belief. Like Hanegraaff (1996: 8 n.26) I am investigating emic statements, but with a view to investigating to what extent they correspond with existing etic judgements.

Following Ninian Smart (1973a: 1), it is appropriate to set out certain autobiographical details. I have studied astrology since 1971. Between 1975 and 1984 I earned a proportion of my income by casting horoscopes for clients, from 1980-4 I taught the subject in adult education in London and since 1986 I have been paid to write popular books and features on astrology. I have served on the committees of a number of astrological societies, including a term (1994-9) as President of the Astrological Association of Great Britain. In terms of astrology as a whole, then, I am very much an 'insider' with an 'emic' perspective, and have been so in an institutional sense; that is, in terms of active involvement in societies and teaching, since 1978. However, although I tend to be treated as an insider within any group of astrologers, I may still feel like an outsider in terms of my inner 'emic' identity. I am not in accord with astrologers who read past lives in the birth chart, argue that classical modes of interpretation are superior to modern ones, marry astrology with counselling or routinely examine the horoscopes of their friends and colleagues. In addition, my identity is strongly shaped by involvement in other groups in which astrology may be regarded, from an etic perspective, as either a fringe activity or false and possibly offensive. For example, I have good friends who are materialist, atheists and sceptics, and

close family members who are 'born-again' Christians. I myself grew up in a strong Church of England background and have experienced Christianity in different forms. For me, the emic-etic, insider-outsider relationship is therefore not a polarity but a constantly shifting set of ideas and experiences which may vary with time and location. This complexity actually accords with Pike's own view: one can be an etic observer within an emic system, but no two etics will ever interpret the same emic phenomenon in exactly the same way (Pike 1971: 44-48).

However, such is the diversity of opinion within astrology that it may be argued that, if the differences between astrologers en masse are greater than the similarities, the very notion of 'astrology' as a single entity may be, as Steven Sutcliffe has said of the New Age movement (Sutcliffe 2003: 16), no more than an 'etic' formulation useful for outsiders and even for insiders, but with little relevance to the real situation.

While it may not be necessary to take such an extreme position, it is nevertheless the case that, within astrology there are different emic groups who may believe they have little in common with each other. The fundamental disagreement between Lee Lehman, who works from a primarily medieval perspective, and Glenn Perry, whose astrology is heavily based in theosophy and psychotherapy is a case in point (Lehman 2003, Perry 2003b). Thus, while in astrology I may be an insider, there are many groups within astrology in which I feel like an outsider. My own position has always, therefore, been to be supportive of some claims within astrology but critical of others.

My position in this process is simultaneously that of insider and outsider. Clifford Geertz's model may, in this respect, be a useful one. Observing the ontological difficulties that arise from the methodological formulation of polarities such as emic-etic, insider-outsider, and subjective-objective, he cites the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's differentiation between 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts, which may be linked by a graduated scale (Geertz 1999: 51). From Geertz's perspective, insiderness and outsidership then become questions of degree which may vary with time, place and mood. And we may all place ourselves on a scale between extreme positions. My relationship with the attitudes and concepts I am studying may therefore be summarised as 'experience-near'.

My perspective on astrology as a single entity is simultaneously emic and etic. Ultimately, in a world in which no perspective exists in isolation from any other, or from the world around it, any individual is likely to adopt a perspective which may be considered emic and etic at one and the same time. All astrologers, in other words, are at once members both of emic groups and of a society which adopts etic views of what astrology is, does or claims. Their attitudes and behaviour are likely to be complex and contradictory. To look for simple unifying characteristics which can explain 'belief' in astrology may therefore be a project with little chance of success. As far as Smart's (1973a: 11) claim that there is a dialectical relationship in the study of religions between the student and the object of study, my own critique of certain astrological claims is already well known. I have already been critically engaged with the subject matter of this thesis. As an example, I am known to be critical both of the argument that the Age of Aquarius is imminent (Campion 1990) and of what I consider to be poor standards of argument and scholarship in astrology in general (Phillipson 2000: 116).

My personal attitude to astrology is generally pragmatic and based on its usefulness. I regard the psychological models of 'natal' astrology, the practice of casting birth-charts for individuals, as more personally meaningful than any other contemporary equivalent. I have

found the application of 'horary' astrology, a divinatory use of astrology to answer precisely timed questions, analogous in its use to the I Ching or tarot, to be remarkable and, within the context of modern cosmology, inexplicable. My long-term interest, though, is in the study of 'mundane' (from the Latin *mundus*, world) astrology, the examination of solar and planetary cycles in relation to historical change.

Recent precedents for the participation of the researcher in the group - participant observation (Bryman 2001:2) - have been provided by Tanya Luhrmann and Susan Greenwood, who followed similar paths through their direct involvement in groups whose primary focus was ritual magic (Luhrmann 1989: 62-5; Greenwood 2000: 50-1). Both, though, entered the groups they studied as outsiders (even though Greenwood may be considered an 'insider' within the magical world as a whole) and then were obliged to cope with the issues they faced as a result of the fluid boundaries between their identities as insiders and outsiders. There are a number of important distinctions between their work and mine. The worlds of magic and witchcraft, which they investigated, are based around action; the groups tend to be closed to outsiders and therefore require a much greater degree of personal commitment than does astrology (Pearson 1998: 51-54). While astrology can be invoked in the service of magical ritual (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 88-91), in the form of the calculation and interpretation of horoscopes it is an essentially solitary and intellectual enterprise, the principle shared activity being the consultation between astrologer and client, and the only collective activity being attendance at public meetings or classes which are open to strangers. In a public sense, then the boundaries between insider and outsider status in astrology are porous and difficult to define. Also, whereas Luhrmann and Greenwood focused on activity, my concern is with the etics and emics of thought rather than of action, a distinction made by Lett (1990: 135), that is, with the manner in which astrology is defined externally and with the discourses astrologers use to describe themselves.