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Finding the emic in systemic design: Towards systemic ethnography

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Finding the *emic* in systemic design

RSD7: Models and processes of systemic design

October 24, 2018

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<https://systemic.design>



Objectives



- **Advance a conversation about emic vs etic perspectives in systemic design**



- **Provide a framework to analyze the perspective of a given systemic design project**



- **Test the framework via case studies**



- **Explore conclusions drawn from the application of the framework**

Context



- **Design is consciously empathetic (e.g., Kimbell, 2011)**



- ***But!* Systemic design work, at scale, tends to be steps removed from empathy...**

- By bringing the system into the room, do we suspend it from reality?



- **What are the risks of this removal?**

- Selection biases
- Lack of context
- Others?

Context

- **Etic vs. Emic**

- **Originated with Kenneth Pike (a linguist; Harris, 1976)**

- What are the *units* that make up behaviour?
 - Extending how we speak into how we *do*
 - Since extended from speech to orientations of research



- **Emic: *from within*.**

- How are researched events understood from the minds of the researched?



- **Etic: *from the outside*.**

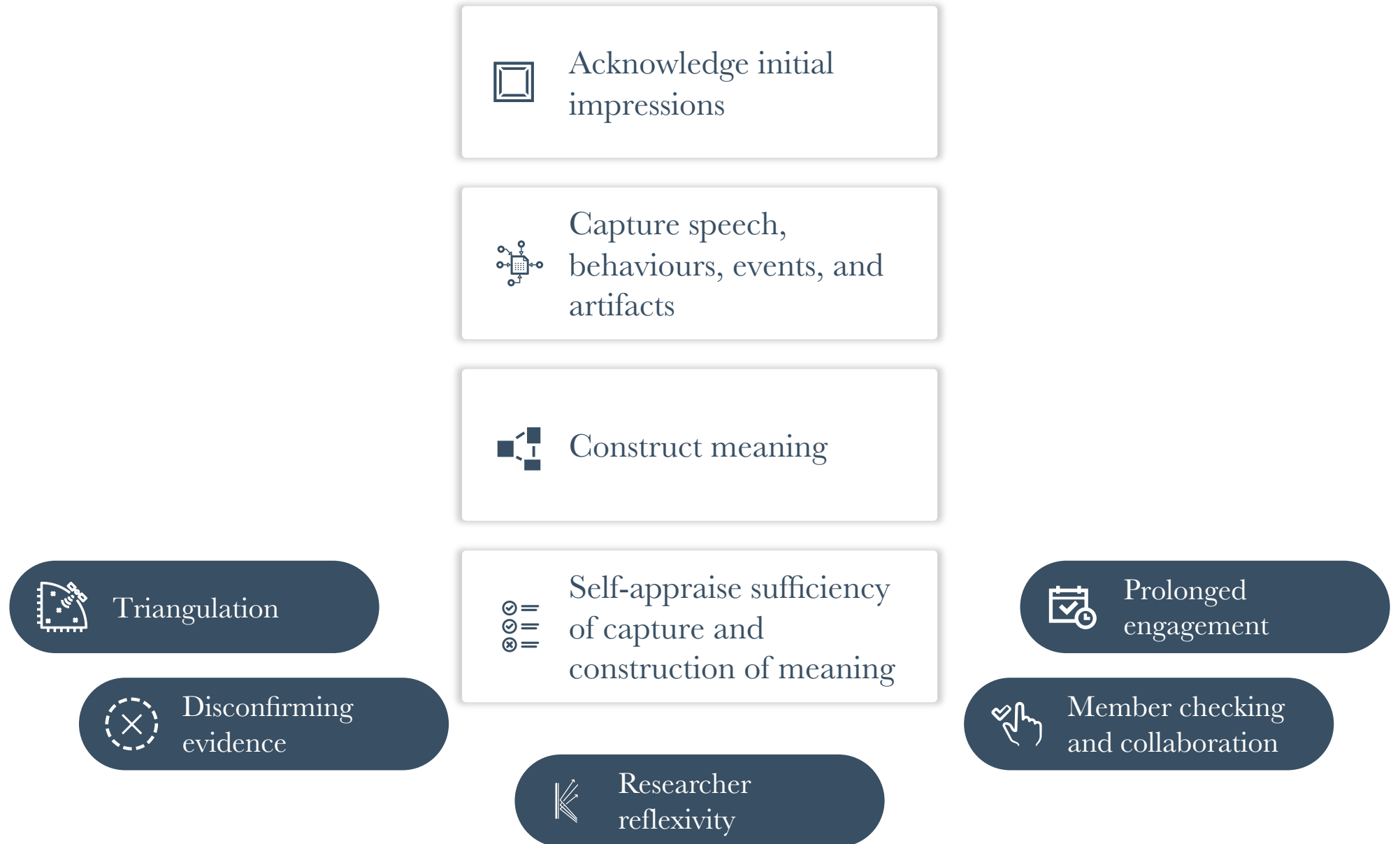
- How are events understood from an observer?

- **How might we enrich our emic/etic critique of systemic design processes?**

Developing a framework for emic evaluation

1. **Geertz (1973): what does emic *process* look like?**
2. **Creswell & Miller (2000): what do emic *principles* look like?**
3. **Hold up a systemic design project or proposal and compare it against this process and these principles**

A framework for emic evaluation



Testing the framework

- **Methodology**
 - Case studies
 - Phenomenological hermeneutics

Testing the framework: Public procurement at the University of Toronto (Ryan & Leung, 2014)

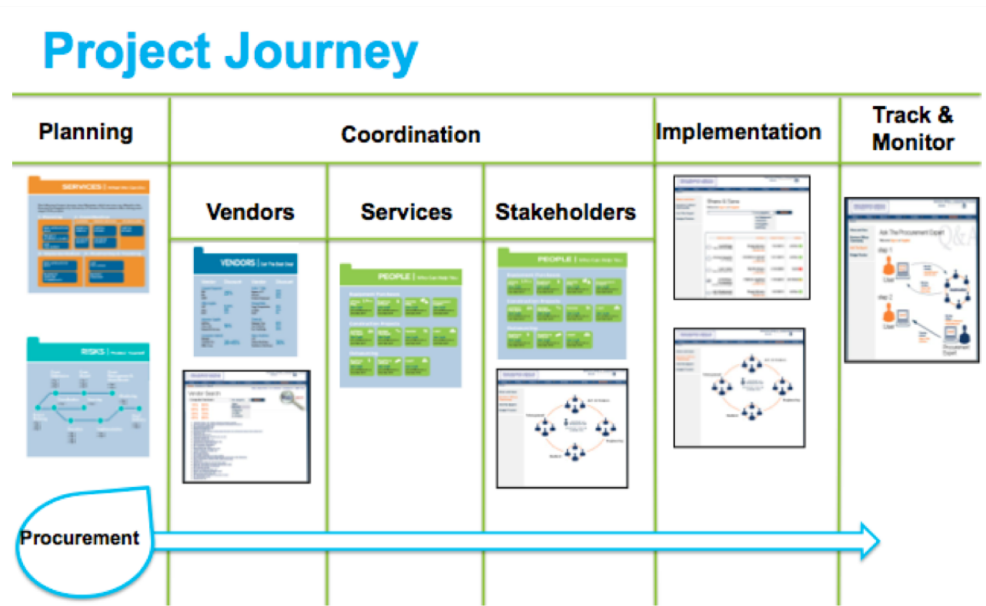


Figure 3. Procurement Journey Map



Figure 4. Prototypes of Procurement Fact Sheets

Testing the framework: Public procurement at the University of Toronto (Ryan & Leung, 2014)



- Stated objective
- *Tabula rasa*



- Team shadowing
- Listening
- Snowballing recruitment



- Synthesis into personas
- Reframed objective
- Co-creative journey mapping and prototyping



- Different stakeholders, different artifacts



- Planned transitions vs. when they were ready?



- 6 weeks of empathy
- 4 co-creative work
- 2 on strategy



- Not discussed



- Defer to the stakeholders



- Co-creative finding, framing, and solving

Testing the framework: Canadian National Youth Leadership & Innovation Strategy Summit (NYLIS)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



On April 29th and 30th, 2016, the inaugural National Youth Leadership and Innovation Strategy Summit (NYLIS) took place at the MaRS Discovery District in downtown Toronto.

Testing the framework: Canadian National Youth Leadership & Innovation Strategy Summit (NYLIS)



- Prep documents



- Self-reports & dialogue



- Data team → report-backs → Analysis and writing team



- Groups did not mix
- Only one type of data was collected



- The team was resistant to critical analysis



- *Two* days



- 200+ people from across industries/demographics



- Critiques were *acknowledged*

Discussion

- **Contributions:**
 - A framework for assessing etic vs. emic perspectives in systemic design
 - Assessing “emic-ness” *is* possible
- Intensivists and Extensivists

Limitations

- **Constructive, third-party case study analysis**
 - Case-selection bias
 - Interpretation is potentially errored
 - Nonetheless, the goal is not to establish a verdict for these cases, but to demonstrate the utility of a framework
 - Real-world application would be a better test
- **Literature review to establish framework was limited**
 - A systematic literature review might turn up more features of an effective framework

Discussion

- **Next steps:**
 - Necessity and sufficiency? Refining the criteria
 - Field testing
 - An index of emic systemic design methods

Conclusion

- **Simple tweaks (such as switching from self-report to participant observation or engaging in participant checking) can be simple-but-powerful improvements**
- **Starting a conversation about emic and etic practices, and their implications**
 - The “intensivist” and “extensivist” metaphors represent interesting mental models of different approaches

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(h/t to Noun Project artists)

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