# Finding the *emic* in systemic design

RSD7: Models and processes of systemic design

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# 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

"Finding the Emic in Systemic Design"
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Acknowledge initial impressions

Capture speech, behaviours, events, and artifacts

Construct meaning

Triangulation

Self-appraise sufficiency of capture and construction of meaning

Prolonged engagement

Disconfirming evidence

Member checking and collaboration

Researcher reflexivity

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# Testing the framework

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

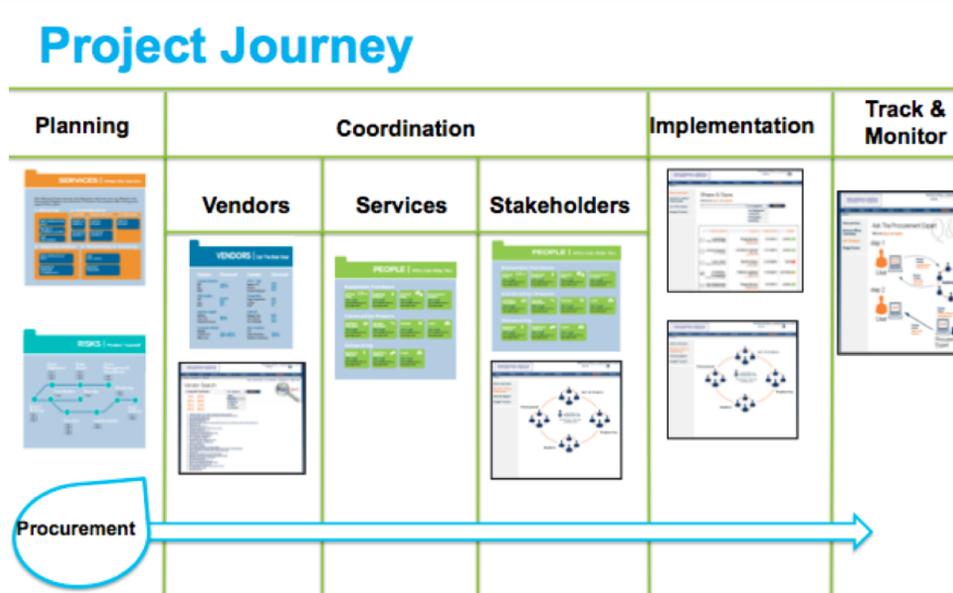# Testing the framework: Public procurement at the University of Toronto (Ryan & Leung, 2014)



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

- Co-creative finding, framing, and solving

- Defer to the stakeholders

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

# 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*

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# 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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