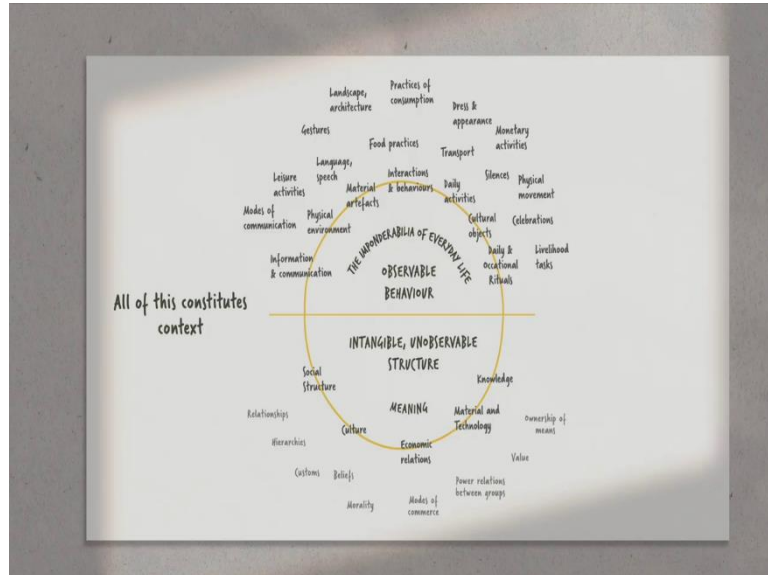


Fundamental Concepts (Contd.)
Module 2 Section 5
Lecture 12

We ended our last session with a discussion on culture, the contextual nature of ethnographic research, and what context might mean.

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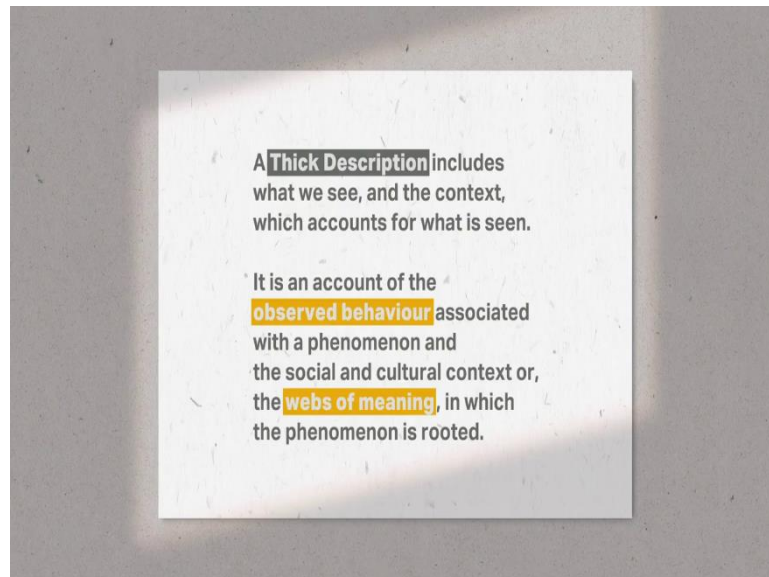
As we discussed, the context includes many layers, some are observable, and some are not. Our objective is to describe all of these layers, as the background against which our observations and interpretations take place

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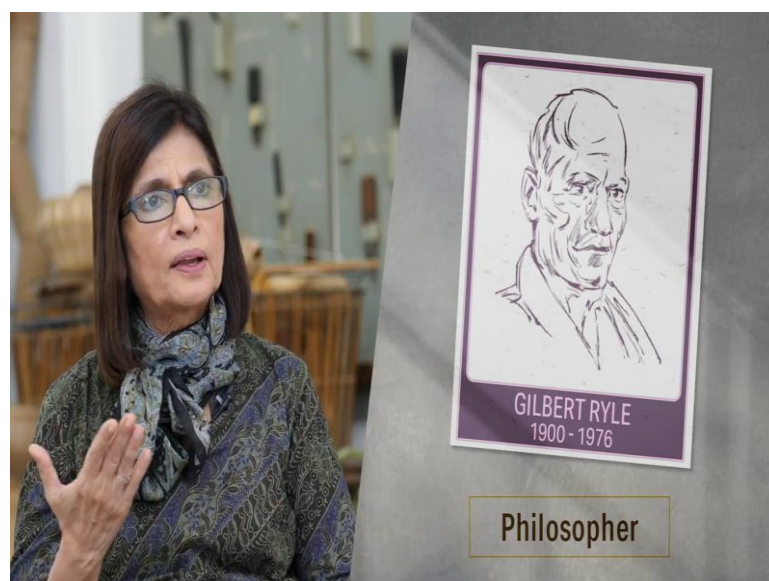
This makes ethnography a descriptive method of research. Geertz suggests that an ethnographic description ought to bring together the tangible and the intangible aspects of the context and draw connections between the two

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He calls this *thick description*. Thick description refers to a description that includes both observation and analysis. It includes our engagements with the context, and the meanings derived from these engagements. It is these meanings that provide depth or thickness to a description.

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Maybe we can better understand the idea by using an example that Geertz borrowed from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle asks us to consider the example of two boys, both rapidly

contracting the lids of one of their eyes like this.

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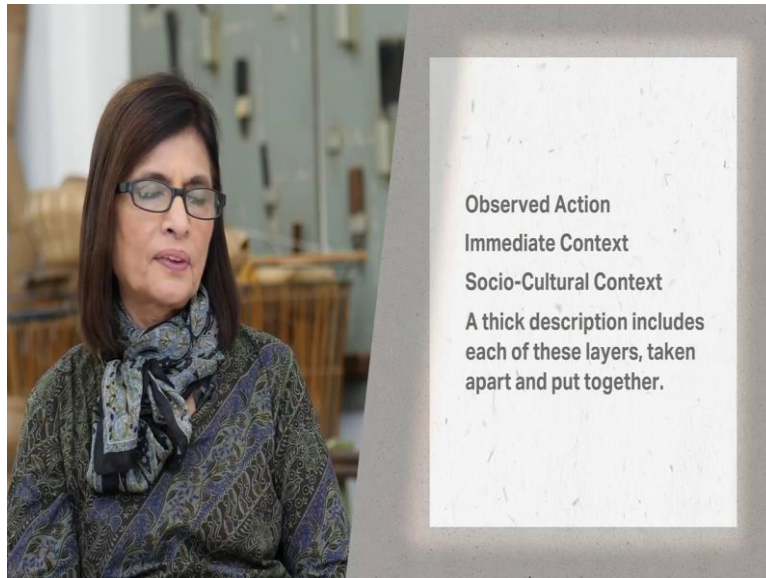


While one of the boys is twitching his eye involuntarily, the second one is doing it deliberately. He is trying to make a sign to a friend of his - he is winking! If we focus only on the movement of the eye, we may not be able to differentiate the involuntary twitch from the deliberate wink.

Ryle explains that the wink is different from the twitch because in winking, the winker is communicating, and doing so with some purpose. He is winking to someone, in particular, trying to hide the wink from others in the group. The wink is meant to impart a certain message, according to a socially established code that is understood in that group. All of these form the under-layers of the action of winking.

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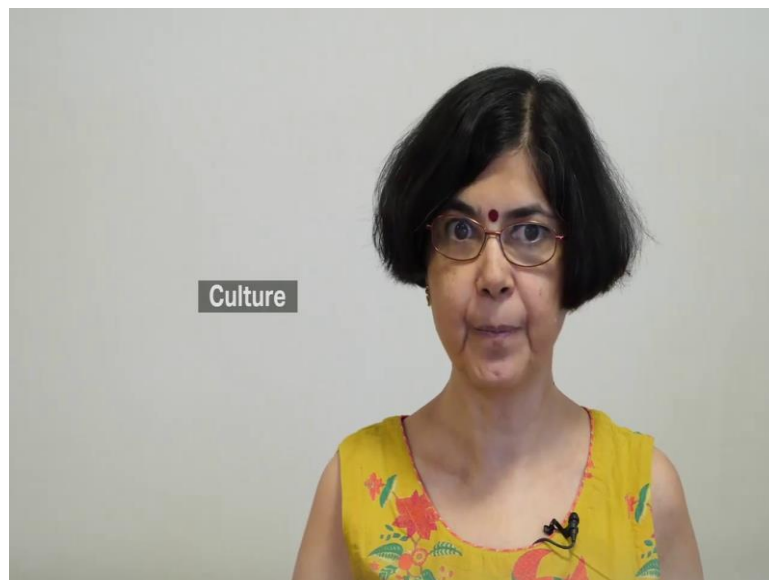
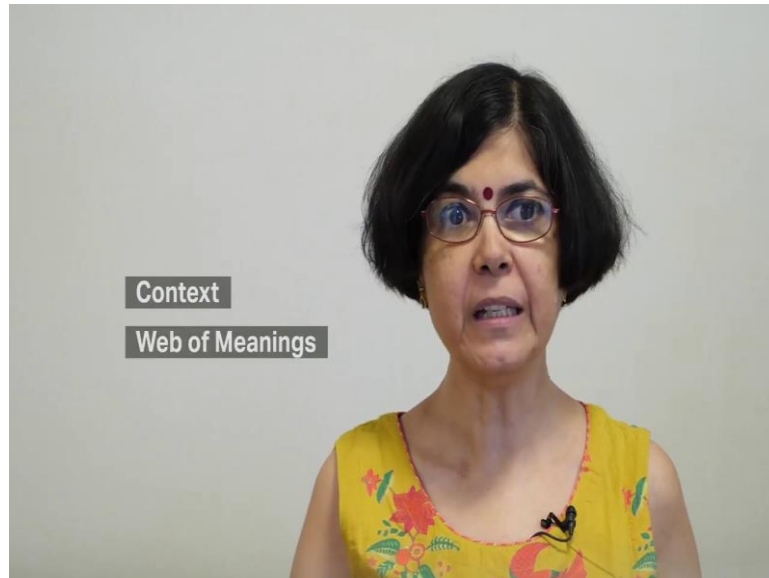
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The meaning of a simple action like a wink or a twitch is composed of the action, the immediate context in which the action takes place, and, the social and cultural context. When we see someone winking, we understand all of this as a single gesture. In constructing a thick description, we try to explore each of the layers that make up the gesture and its meaning. As you might have guessed, an understanding of culture goes hand in hand with creating a thick description. Let us bring in Prof. Rowena Robinson to deepen our understanding of these two concepts.

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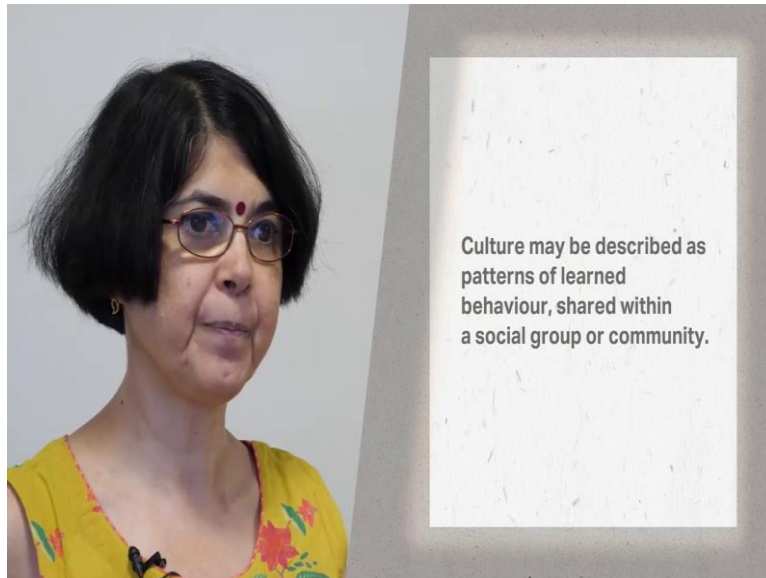




Prof. Robinson is a professor of sociology in the department of humanities and social sciences in IIT Bombay, and one of the advisors for our course.

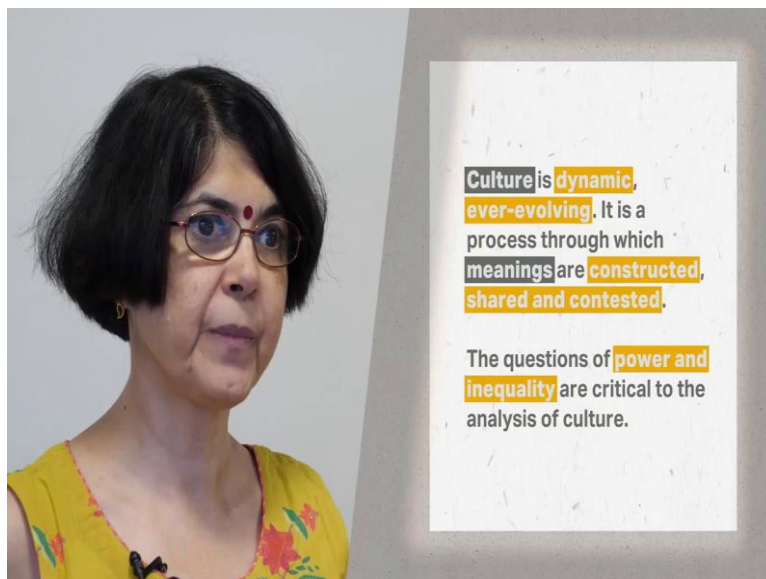
Professor Rowena Robinson: My name is Rowena Robinson, and I believe that up till now you have been studying terms like context and web of meanings. Now, I am going to talk to you a little bit about that term that we use so much in anthropology which is the term culture

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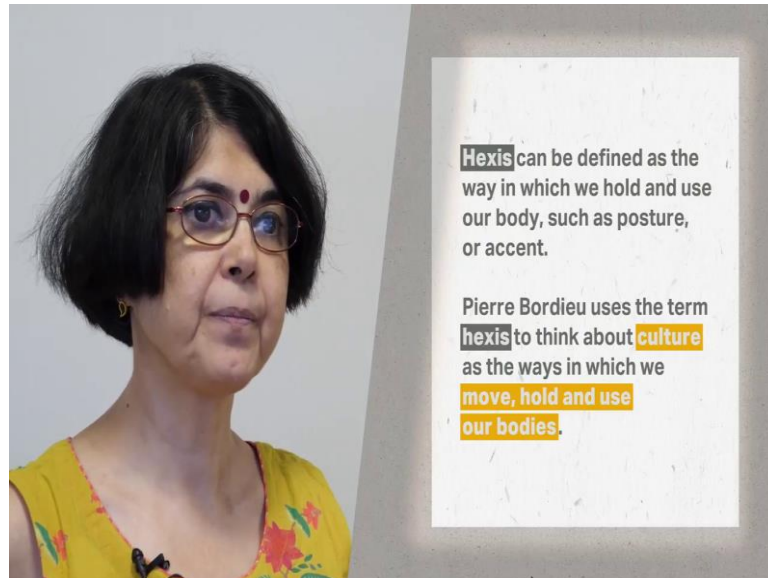
Culture may be quite simply described as patterns of learned behaviour, shared within a particular social group or community. From the start, therefore, anthropology has based itself on the idea that everyone has culture.

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Today, anthropologists think of culture as a process that is dynamic and through which meanings are constituted, shared and maybe even contested. Therefore, the question of relationships of power and inequality have become critical to the analysis of culture. Which group has the power to shape the culture values and beliefs of a society? Which group's cultural expressions are marginalised or devalued? Culture is historically constituted, shifting and processed. Culture is also embedded

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Pierre Bourdieu used the term Hexis. To think about culture as the way in which we walk, move our hands or our bodies, turn or shake our heads, our posture, our domineer or ascent. If culture is everywhere and belongs to everyone, and is in fact in our bodies, then it is the stuff of everyday life.

It is embedded in ordinary social processes. So, when anthropologist study culture ethnographically, they do not focus merely on extraordinary or historical events,. They are interested in the mandarin and the ordinary, the things that most people take for granted. To observe these, the ethnographer needs to live with the people she studies or remain in sustained direct contact and communication with them; to become familiar with them, as companions and neighbours so that they may continue with their activities unselfconsciously in front of her.

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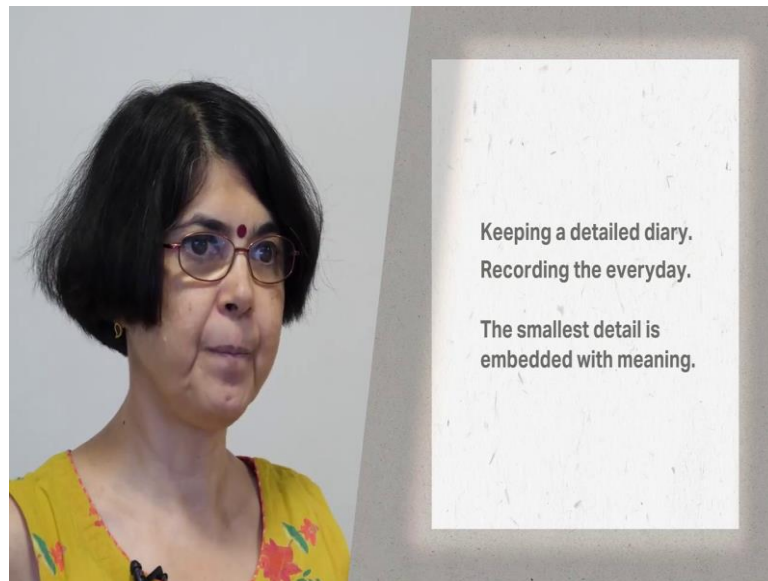


The little things, manrose of everyday living is what Malinowski famously spoke of as the Imponderabilia of everyday life. Why does a woman in this society laugh with her hand over her mouth? Why does a young a girl put a ponytail? While an adult woman has to bind her hair and cover her head? Why does one social group begin a meal with something bitter, and another with something sweet? Why do men shirts have buttons on the right and women's on the left? Why is the bathing area attached to the kitchen in this region? But the toilet far away and at a distance at the back of the house? What are the sounds that one hears from dawn to dusk on an ordinary village day?

Does the day begin with temple chimes, the sonorous sound of the Azaan or the tinkle of the bells on the fishermen's cycle as she does a round of the neighbourhood? What smells per the way the houses and feels as one walks the paths from works to home. At mid-day, does one get the sharp tank of mustard in the air or the full-blooded waft of coconut or the earthy aroma of maki ki roti.

Does one social group eats sitting at a table, while another in a circle or linear arrangement on the ground? Why in a community does a woman eat of the same plate left behind by her husband? While in another a family eats communally from a thal? It is important to remember that many of these small taken for granted aspects of everyday life will strike the ethnographer more forcefully in the initial period of fieldwork because of their unfamiliarity or strangeness. Time in the field will render them familiar and more innocuous.

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That is why it is important for the ethnographer to keep a detailed diary of observations from the very beginning of her observations. So that she does not lose sight of these aspects while often hold more relevance than she might have first imagined.

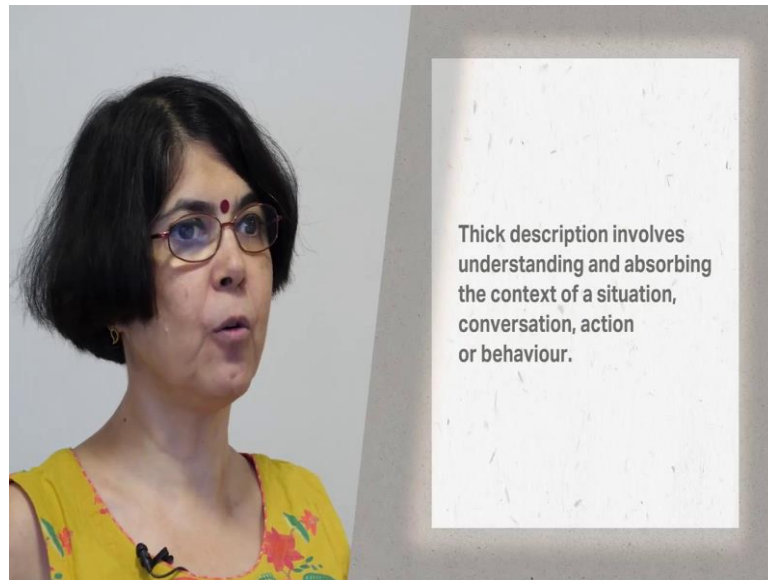
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Attending to these tiny inflexions of culture forms the basis for thinking about the ways they interconnect and form patterns. Behaviour in one social context has to be observed in relation to norms and behaviours in other context in order to attain a fuller picture of the society and culture attend.

This brings us to a more layered and complex understanding of ideas of masculinity and femininity in a culture of taste and distinction of purity and pollution of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of honour shame or structures and notions of privilege and power, status and class. This is precisely what thick description is meant to convey.

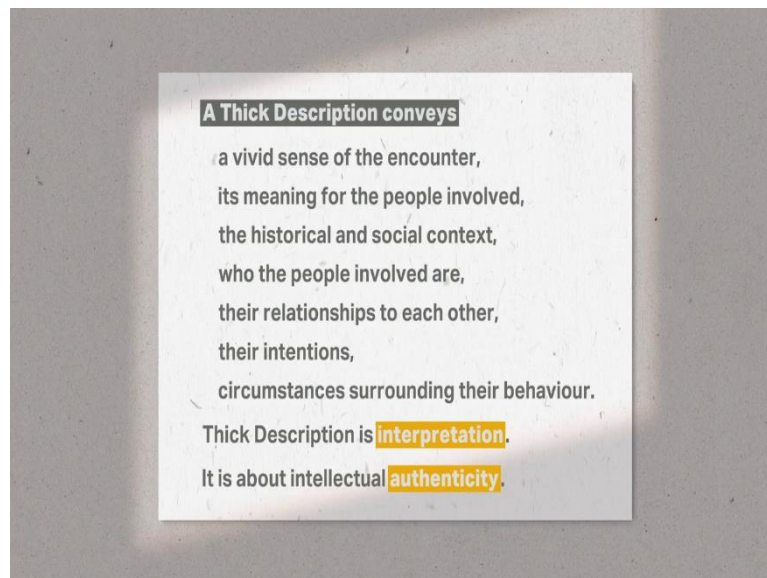
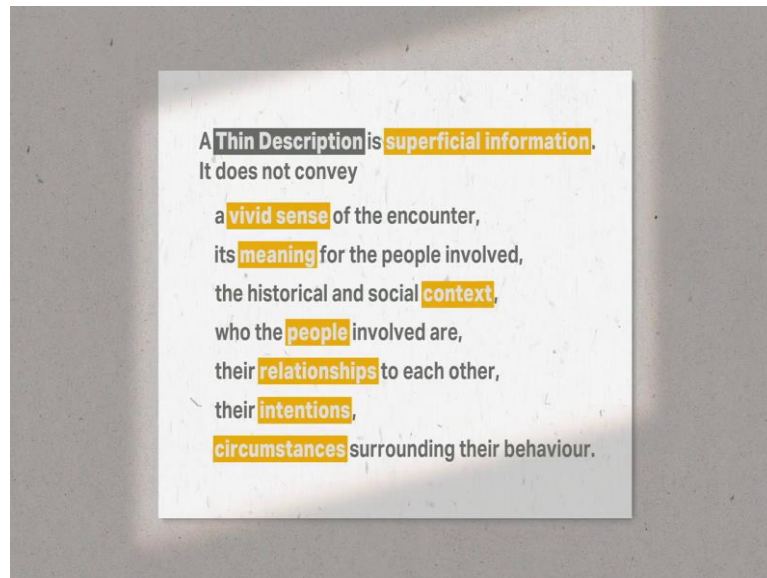
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The layers of meaning and embeddedness of thick description involve understanding and absorbing the context of a situation, conversation, action or behaviour. Geertz felt that what the ethnographer does is to give us her own interpretation or other people's interpretations of what they do or say or think.

Thus, for us the readers of ethnographies, to discern for ourselves the correctness or incorrectness, the validity or soundness of the author's interpretation, we must be provided with rich detail of the context which led to those interpretations being constructed. Because thick descriptions seem a vague concept and one that is not easy to pin down. Sometimes it has been defined by contrasting it to its opposite thin description. Thin description would be merely a collection of superficial information. Even if there is a lot of such information or numerous such facts which are put together.

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If the description does not convey to the reader, a vivid sense of the encounter or situation and does not analyse its meaning for the social actors involved, it is thin description. A description is also thin, if the account is not embedded in its historical and social context. And if we are not able to perceive who the people involved are and what their relationships with each other are, their intentions and the surrounding circumstances of what they say and of their behaviour or actions.

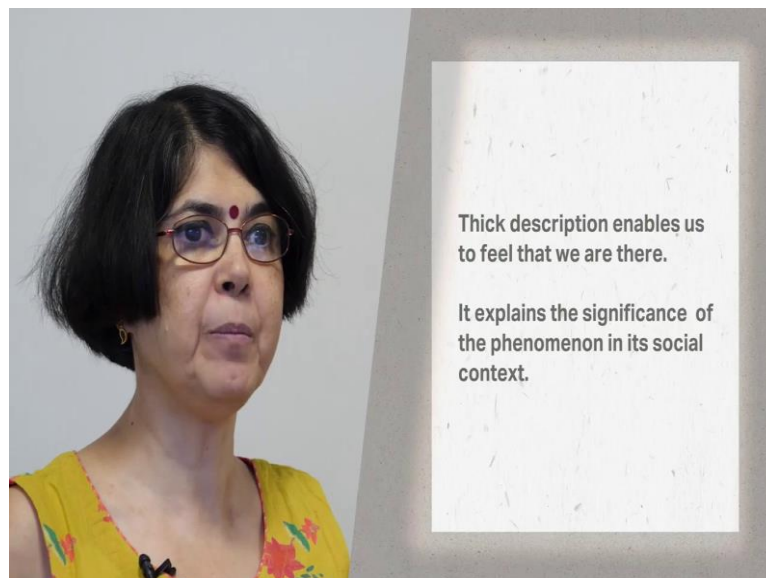
As you can see, describing what is thin description gives us a feel for what thick description might be and vice versa. Firstly what is clear is that the word description in thick description is inadequate. Thick description is not merely description. It is also interpretation. Secondly,

thick description is not merely about facts and information; it is about various similitude or authenticity.

This authenticity is intellectual so that we can appreciate the interpretations of the author. It is like cooking. We do not just eat the dish and try to imagine how it might be made? We do not just read the recipe, which would be like a thin description of the act of cooking. We are in the kitchen itself, and we see the cook and what ingredients are put together. The events of persons involved, perhaps one can say.

And why some of them are more important than others? In what quantities they come to be mixed. We get the aromas of the dish that arise as each ingredient is added and mingles with the others. We enter into the assembling of meaning by the author. The authenticity is also emotional.

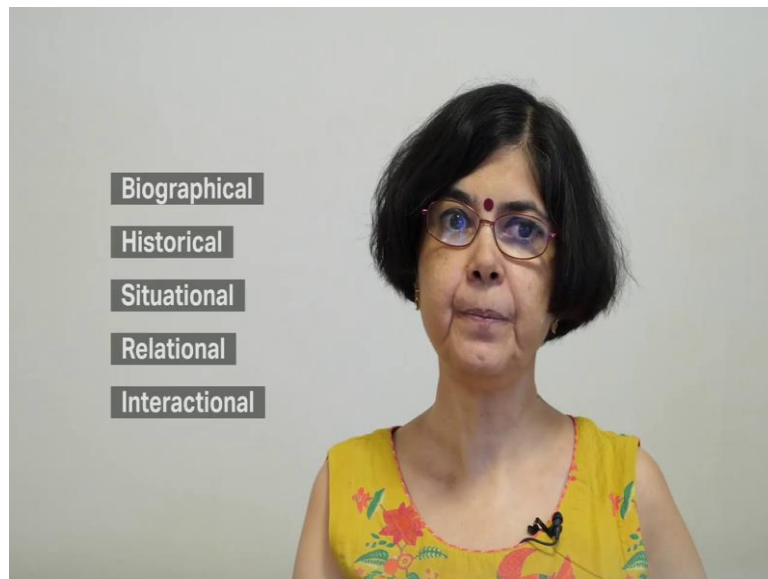
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Thick description should enable us to feel as in a theatre that we are there as events are unfolding. We can enter into the social actors' sentiments and motives, hear their voices and see their movements, behaviour and relationships with each other. We know what they wear and where they are? We become aware of if who is present and who is not. This is not a surface account of what is happening. It goes beyond the present.


It locates incidence information and situations in terms of past events, and the intersecting biography is of individual actors. This embedding of events and experiences in their social and historical context enables us to comprehend why a particular situation or series of incidence is significant in the social and cultural life of people and in what way? It has been argued by the sociologist Normann Denizen, that for a thick description to be thorough, it needs to capture all of 5 aspects.

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The biographical, the historical, the situational, the relational and the interactional. Let us examine how these elements are brought out in the following example. This is an incident from 1934 described by Doctor BR Ambedkar regarding his visit to Daulatabad fort in waiting for a visa.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"Our tour programme had not been announced and quite deliberately. We wanted to travel incognito, in order to avoid difficulties which an untouchable tourist has to face in outlying parts of the country. We had informed only our people at those centres at which we had decided to halt. Accordingly, although on the way we passed many villages in the Nizams State, none of our people had come to meet us.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

of our people had come to meet us. It was naturally different at Daulatabad. There our people had been informed that we were coming. They were waiting for us and had gathered at the entrance to the town. They asked us to get down and have tea and refreshment first, and then to go to see the fort. We did not agree to their proposal. We wanted tea very badly, but we wanted sufficient time to see the fort before it was dusk.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

time to see the fort before it was dusk. We therefore left for the fort, and told our people that we would take tea on our return. Accordingly, we told our drivers to move on, and within a few minutes we were at the gate of the fort. The month was Ramjan, the month of fast for the Mohammedans. Just outside the gate of the fort there is a small tank of water full to the brim. There is all around a wide stone pavement.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

is all around a wide stone pavement. Our faces, bodies and clothes were full of dust gathered in the course of our journey, and we all wished to have a wash. Without much thought, some members of the party washed their faces and their legs on the pavement with the water from the tank. After these ablutions, we went to the gate of the fort. There were armed soldiers inside.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

There were armed sildiers inside. They opened the big gates and admitted us into the archway. We had just commenced asking the guard the procedure for obtaining permission to go into the fort. In the meantime, an old Mohammedan with [a] white flowing beard was coming from behind shouting "The Dheds (meaning untouchables) have polluted the tank!"

They opened the big gates and admitted us to the archway. We had just commenced asking the guards the procedure for obtaining permission to go into the fort. In the meantime, an old Mohammedan with a white flowing beard was coming from behind shouting The Dheds meaning untouchables have polluted the tank.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

untouchables) have polluted the tank!" Soon all the young and old Mohammedans who were near about joined him and all started abusing us. "The Dheds have become arrogant. The Dheds have forgotten their religion (i.e. to remain low and degraded). The Dheds must be taught a lesson." They assumed a most menacing mood. We told them that we were outsiders and did not know the local custom.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

and did not know the local custom. They turned the fire of their wrath against the local untouchables, who by that time had arrived at the gate. "Why did you not tell these outsiders that this tank could not be used by untouchables?" was the question they kept on asking them. Poor people! They were not there when we entered [the] tank [area]. It was really our mistake, because we acted without inquiry.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

because we acted without inquiry. The local untouchables protested that it was not their fault. But the Mohammedans were not prepared to listen to my explanation. They kept on abusing them and us. The abuse was so vulgar that it exasperated us. There could easily have been a riot, and possibly murders. We had, however, to restrain ourselves.

The local untouchables protested that it was not their fault. But the Mohammedans were not prepared to listen to my explanation. They kept on abusing them and us. The abuse was so vulgar that it exasperated us. There could easily have been a riot, and possibly murders. We have, however, to restrain ourselves.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

however, to restrain ourselves. We did not want to be involved in a criminal case which would bring our tour to an abrupt end. One young Muslim in the crowd kept on saying that everyone must conform to his religion, meaning thereby that the untouchables must not take water from a public tank. I had grown quite impatient, and asked him in a somewhat angry tone,

We did not want to be involved in a criminal case which would bring our tour to an abrupt end. One young Muslim in the crowd kept on saying that everyone must conform to his religion, meaning thereby that the untouchables must not take water from a public tank. I had grown quite impatient, and asked him in a somewhat angry tone.

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DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

asked him in a somewhat angry tone, "Is that what your religion teaches? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan?" These straight questions seemed to have some effect on the Mohammedans. They gave no answer, and stood silent. Turning to the guard I said, again in an angry tone, "Can we get into the fort or not? Tell us;

Is that what your religion teaches? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan? These straight questions seemed to have some effect on the Mohammedans. They gave no answer, and stood silent. Turning to the guard I said, again in an angry tone. Can we get into the fort or not? Tell us.

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"Can we get into the fort or not? Tell us; if we can't, we don't want to stop." The guard asked for my name. I wrote it out on a piece of paper. He took it to the Superintendent inside, and came out. We were told that we could go into the fort, but we could not touch water anywhere in the fort;

DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

If we cannot, we do not want to stop. Guard asked for my name. I wrote it out on a piece of paper. He took it to the Superintendent inside, and came out. We were told that we could go into the fort, but we could not touch water anywhere in the fort. And an armed soldier was ordered to go with us to see that we did not transgress the order

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not touch water anywhere in the fort; and an armed soldier was ordered to go with us to see that we did not transgress the order."

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar
Waiting for a Visa

DR. AMBEDKAR WITH HIS FAMILY BOMBAY, 1934
FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

This example brings out all the 5 aspects that Denizen was speaking about.

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This is eminently biographical as well as historical. It tells us about the experiences of Ambedkar as he travelled in India as part of his movements against the untouchability and his political activities during the period of the freedom struggle. It lays were the situation of intense humiliation. He and his party faced when they used the public tank after the dust and stress of their travel.

And how the touch of the Dheds was perceived as polluting even for the Muslims. It captures, for instance, the interactions between Ambedkar's party and the old Mohammedan, the young Muslim and even the guard and their motions and internal turmoil wrote by these encounters. The relational aspects of untouchability are grippingly evoked by the narrative.

For those of you who would like to read a very engaging example of thick description in ethnography, refer to an article by Clifford Geertz.

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The article is called *Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight*. It is a rich and very enjoyable description of a cockfight in Bali, Indonesia. And there is a quiz that you can take to test your understanding of the text.

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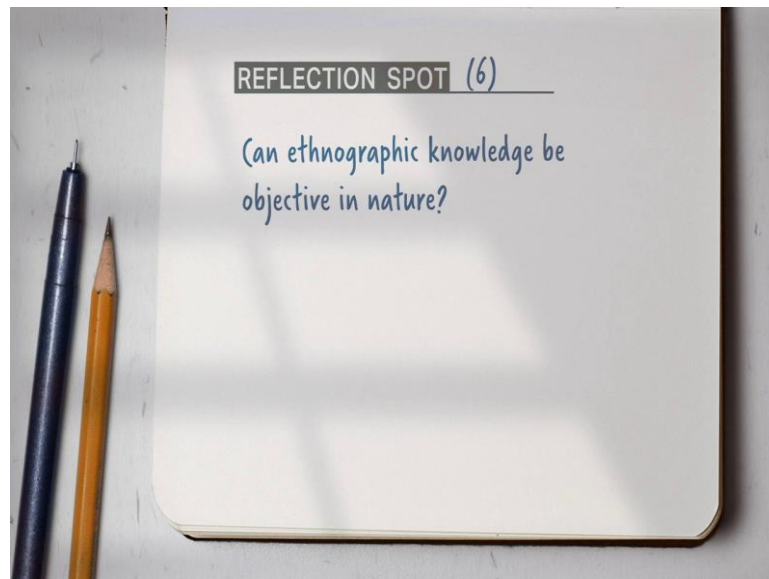
Let us get back now to our discussion of the fundamental concepts of ethnography. Our research is not a presentation of facts. It brings together multiple points of view, each of which might have their own perspective and interpretation of a phenomenon. Thus, ethnography is interpretive in nature.

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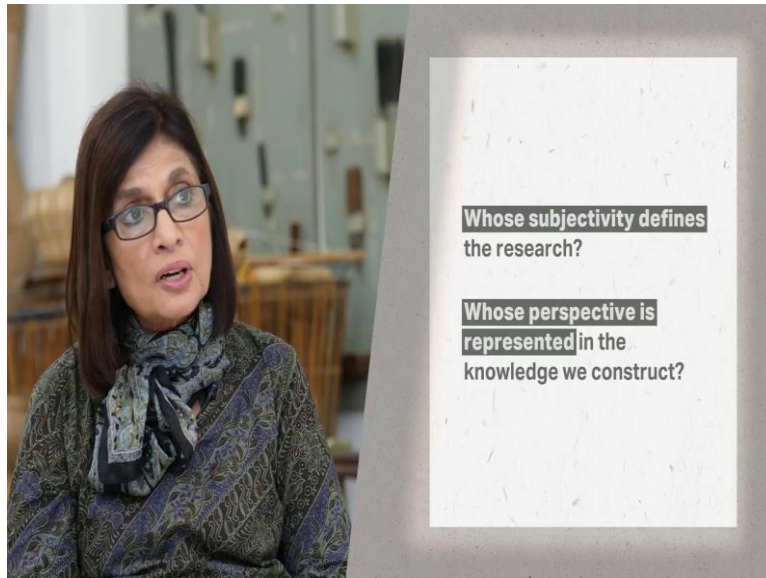
As we engage in fieldwork, we select what to observe and record. Some of this selection may be conscious, and some not. We may pay more attention to some events than to others. Or give more weightage to the perspectives of certain participants, over others. This makes ethnography a subjective form of research. And this raises an important question for us. If ethnography is simply our subjective interpretation of a phenomenon, can it be called research at all? Let us pause the lecture and ponder this question

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Is it possible, in ethnographic research, to have knowledge that is objective in nature? Think about this and write down your responses. Some of you may have said that objectivity is an essential characteristic of research. Others may disagree with this. It is an interesting question to consider and to be frank, not a simple one. In order to deliberate this question, we need to dig deeper into the meaning of subjectivity with regards to ethnographic research.

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What, or rather, whose subjectivity defines the research? Whose perspective is represented in the ethnographic knowledge we construct? Our research is not simply a presentation of our subjective interpretations. An ethnography is a play of multiple subjectivities. Our task is to bring together these varying and sometimes, contrasting perspectives. We try to make sense of them by interpreting them, exploring the meanings they convey, and weaving these into a cohesive narrative.

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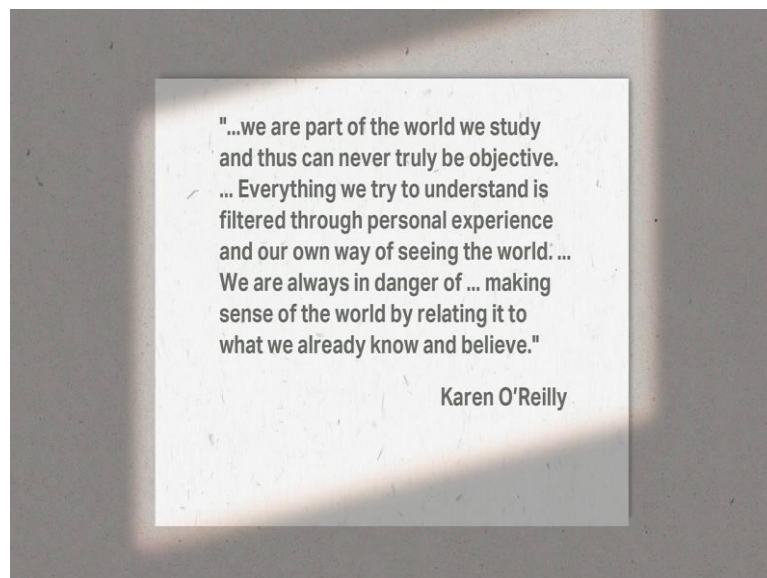


As Geertz has said, "that what we call our data.. are really our constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to". To use a metaphor, ethnographic knowledge is not a monolith that we come across while wandering around our chosen context, which we can pick up and take back as our 'finding'. It is instead like a patchwork quilt made of several small pieces, each piece representing a different perspective.

The ethnographer puts these together to construct a cohesive and complex narrative of the phenomenon. In that sense, the knowledge we construct through ethnography is the handiwork of the ethnographer. And so it is subjective and interpretive.

For this reason, we must be conscious of the role that our subjectivity plays in the research. This is what ethnographers often refer to as self-reflexivity.

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It is the practice of reflecting and being aware of our biases and letting this awareness filter into our research practice. It involves actively reflecting on our ideas and pre-conceived notions. Among the things we recognise is that the context changes when we are present in it. Basically, when we enter the room the dynamics have changed. It is just not possible to be a fly on the wall.

Applying this understanding to our practice can help us produce research that is more cognizant of the multiple subjectivities that form the context.