Accessing
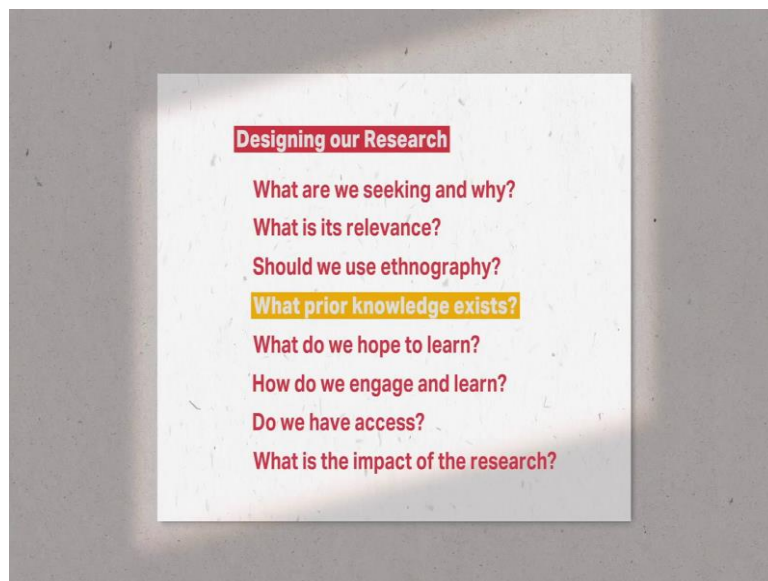**Existing Knowledge**
**Module 3 Section 4**
Lecture 17

Let us continue discussing the questions that guide us in designing our research. So far, we have determined our area of interest and its relevance to others. We have defined our research question and figured out that ethnography is the method for us. Next, we need to learn about the subject that we are going to research, from the knowledge that already exists about it.

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What do we already know and what knowledge already exists? Why do you think it is important to do this: to access existing knowledge about our subject?
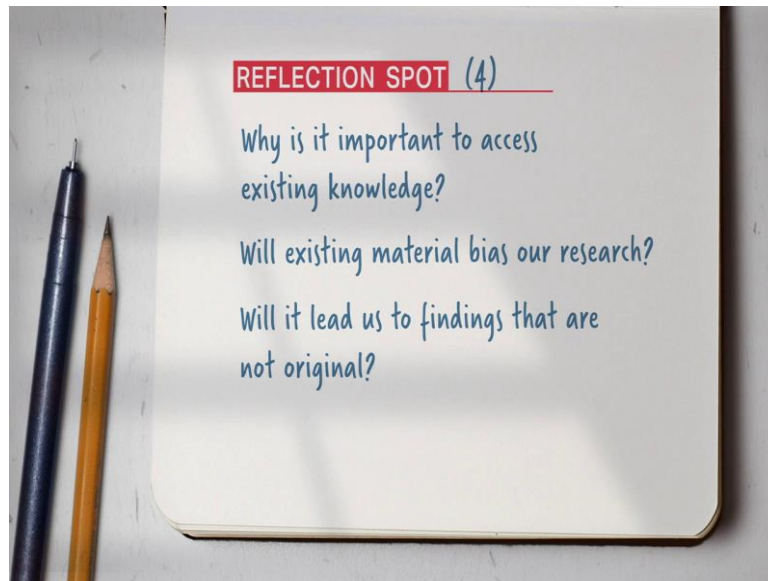
Can you think of one reason why it important to look into existing knowledge? And, is it possible that we may get biased by looking at existing material? Or maybe less likely to come up with something original? Take a minute and note down your answer. Let us consider some of the answers you might have come up with.

Some of you might have guessed that looking at existing studies first can tell us if the research we want to do has already been done. Or some of you might have said that it can help you see what about your research topic has been explored and what has not. And there might be some of you who feel that we should limit the time and energy spent on this task because it might lead us to repeating existing information in our studies. So, what is the

correct answer here? Well, there is a great emphasis placed on existing knowledge in ethnographic research.

This is because, as some of you guessed, it helps us learn from the experiences of other researchers. We can identify what aspects of the subject have been already studied. Knowing what has already been done in the area, we can avoid reinventing the wheel and focus on new and unexplored aspects.   And contrary to what some of you may have thought, existing work can play an important role in our study, in helping us identify new directions to research.

Existing studies offer insights and raise new questions which inform our way of looking at the subject. Some of these questions may drive us to further develop our existing research question, making it more nuanced and refined. Studies done by others can also help us come up with ideas on designing our research - what tools to use, what questions to focus, etc.

For all these reasons, many researchers begin their research design with a study of existing knowledge. We begin, most often, by tapping into our own knowledge. We often have some latent and informal knowledge about the subject of our interest.

It may have come from previous readings, encounters and experiences and it may be partial and subjective, even incorrect in places. In tapping into this, we are able to gather together what we know and do not know about the subject. And importantly, by noting down our existing knowledge - biases, gaps and all - we are able to articulate and acknowledge some of our assumptions before we begin. And we look at knowledge shared by others about our subject, or related subjects.

This process is called *secondary research*, because it relies on secondary sources, that is, on others' experiences and research

The most common way of doing secondary research is by doing a literature review, or a review of existing literature on the subject we are interested in. A literature review is often defined as reading everything one can, everything that has been written and published related to the subject of one's research.

That might sound daunting, but with the application of a little thought, and a little process, it is not too gigantic a task. A simple way to go about a literature review is to think about the themes or sub-themes that make up the research subject and start by looking for material

related to those. Or we can list the smaller questions that constitute our research question, and look for studies that have tried to answer questions similar to them. For instance, we may undertake a research that centres around the use of mobile phones for professional and livelihood purposes among women in small towns.

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The themes for this research may include employment opportunities for women.

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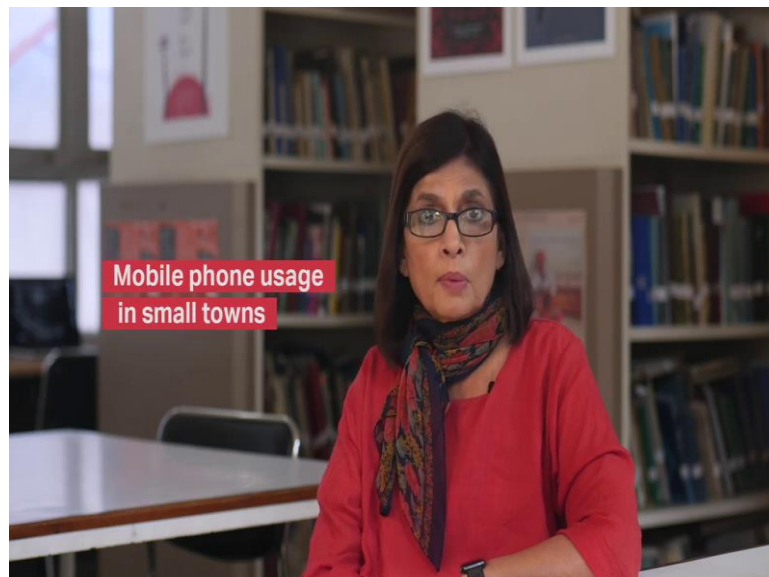
Mobile phone usage in small towns.

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Availability of mobile phones for women.

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Usage of mobile phones for networking and livelihood and so on. We just said a minute ago that a literature review is often defined as reading everything about the given subject. But this is not entirely possible. It doesn't mean that we leave out subjects or studies, but that we refine (define?) our selection. We can, for example, prioritise those studies which are situated in regions or cultures that are similar to our research context.

So if our research is situated in small towns of India, we can look at studies located in South Asia, and in developing countries, and in other cultures where the social, cultural structure may be similar to our studies.
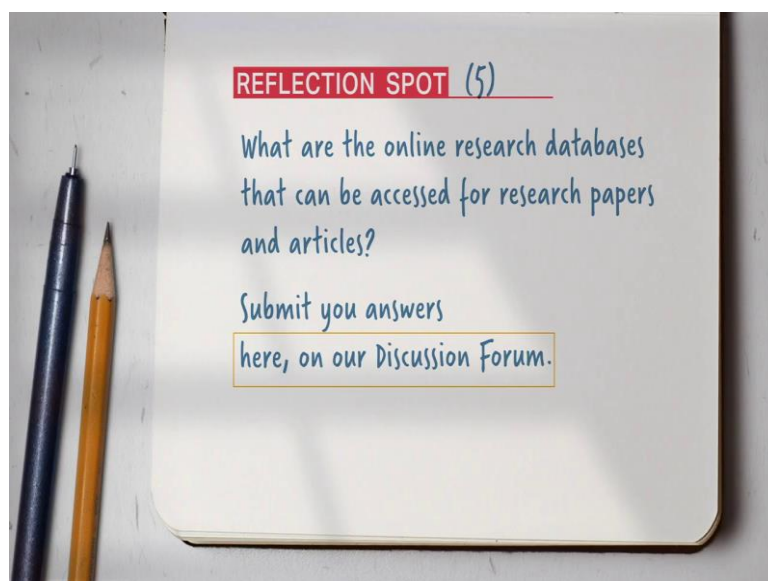
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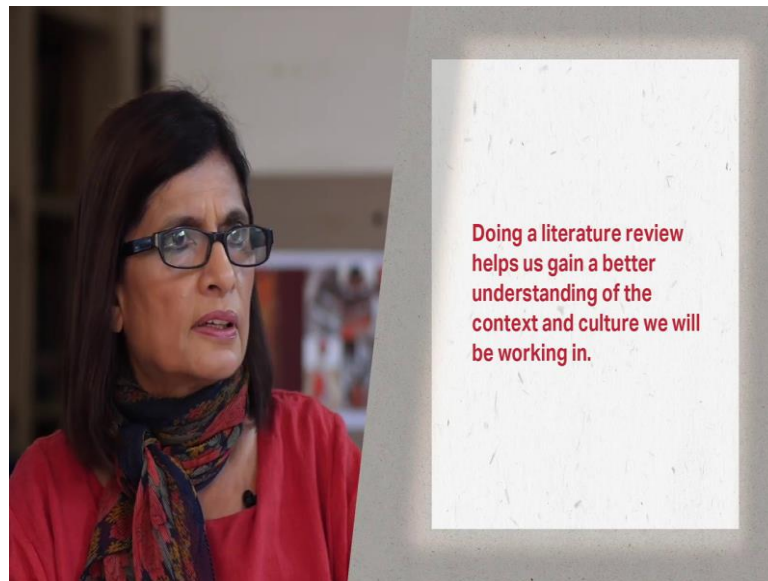
In doing this, we gather context-specific knowledge about our chosen subject, and also learn the intricacies of the cultures we are going to be immersing ourselves in. There are challenges that we can avoid if we are well informed about our participants' culture, before entering fieldwork. By being better informed about our participants, their cultural beliefs and social norms, we are less likely to make incorrect inferences from our observations.

And less likely to upset them by unacceptable behaviour. Reading ethnographic studies related to our subjects is a bit like reading a travel guide before we go on a trip. It helps us plan our time there, know the basic rules of the culture, learn the phrases we might need, and gain some idea of what to expect.

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Can you think of any online research databases where you could access existing research papers and articles? Write down the ones you can think of and share them on the discussion forum with your peers.

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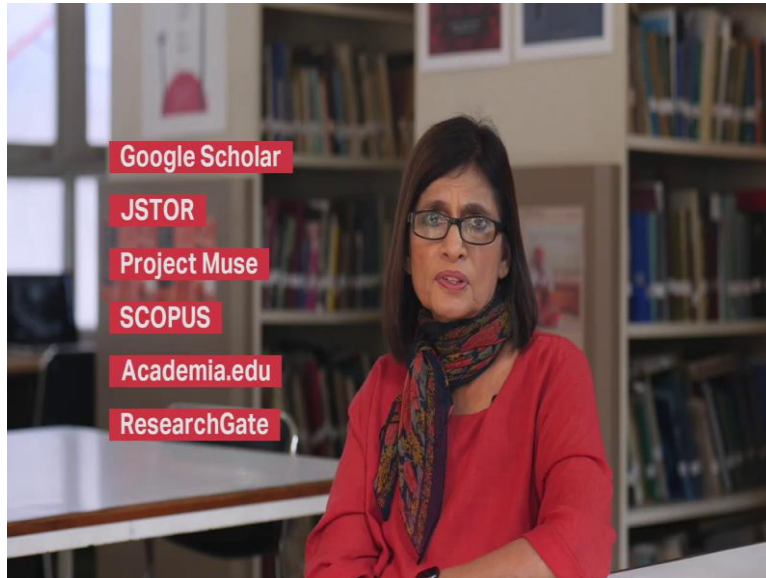
There are various authentic research databases you can search for papers on related work. Many of you may have mentioned Google scholar. Then there are JStor, Project Muse and SCOPUS, where some papers are open access and others which you can access through your institution. And Academia.edu and Research Gate are two portals where you can access a wide range of papers after signing in.

So, having learnt about our subject and the context through various sources and having refined our research questions some more, we return to our list, and the next question on it.

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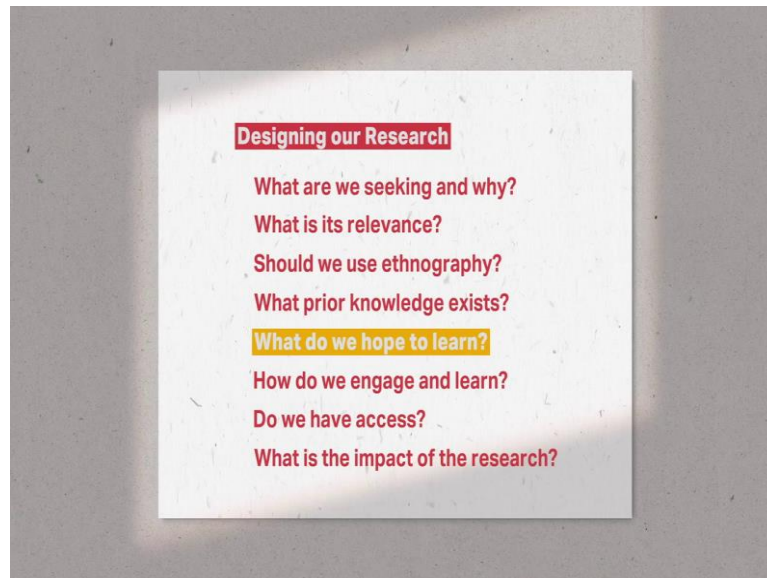
What do we hope to find through this research? Based on our secondary research and our own prior knowledge, we may propose to arrive at some new knowledge through our research. For example, we find that there is a lot of work done in designing visual symbols for healthcare in rural India. However, there is little research about how people respond to these symbols or how they interpret them. Through our research, we could hope to find how these symbols are read by their intended audience and whether they have the desired impact.
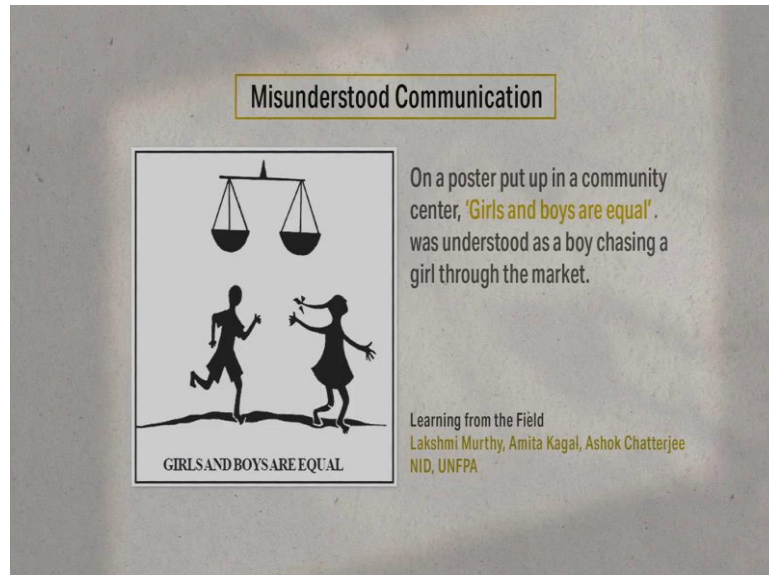
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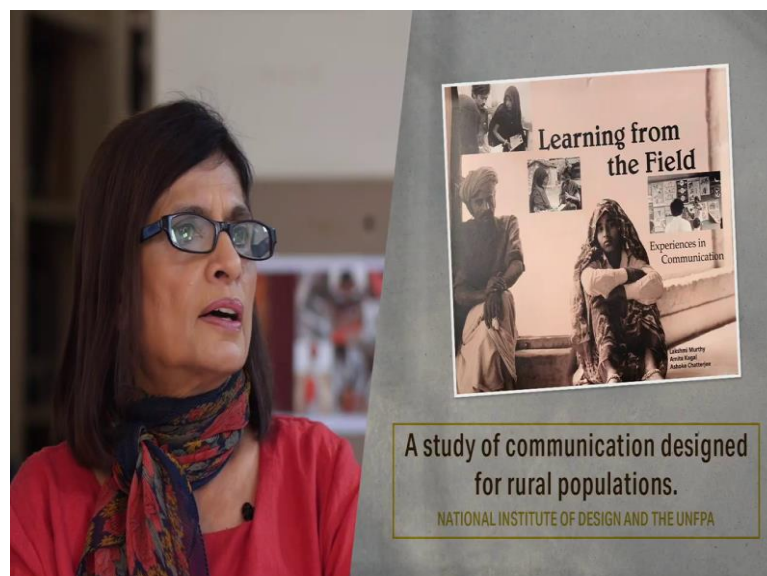
There is actually such an example: a team from the National Institute of Design collaborated with the Family Planning Foundation and the Government of Rajasthan to develop communication material to popularise contraception among the rural population. Before

starting their design explorations, the team wanted to understand the prospective audience's understanding towards the existing communication material and their perceptions around contraception. They realised that the material that was being used, was more often than not, designed in urban centres like Ahmedabad or Jaipur.

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It was based on urban sensibilities and as an urban understanding of signs and symbols. It was simply not understood in the very different context of the rural population.(Refer Slide Time: 08:57)
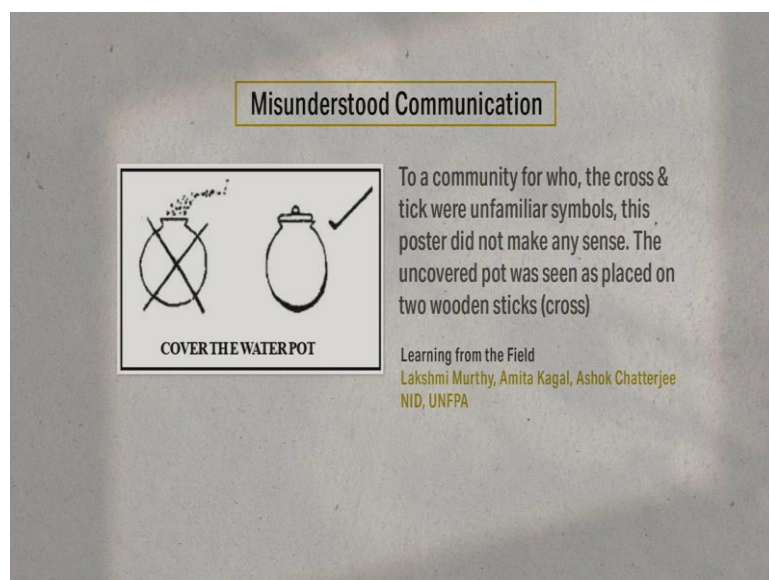
For instance, many of the signs showing what *not* to do used the cross mark over the image of a figure doing that activity. These signs were not interpreted in the same way by most users because the cross mark did not have any meaning for them. The designers realised that they

needed to learn the visual language of their participants- the signs, symbols and markers that they used and understood. And so, their research was designed towards accessing this particular knowledge.