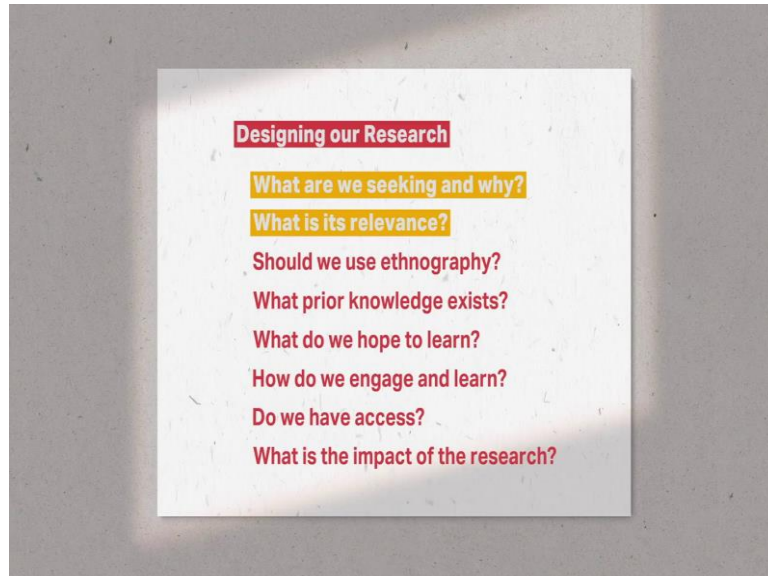


**Case Studies: Research Question and Applying Ethnography**  
**Module 3 Section 6**  
**Lecture 19**

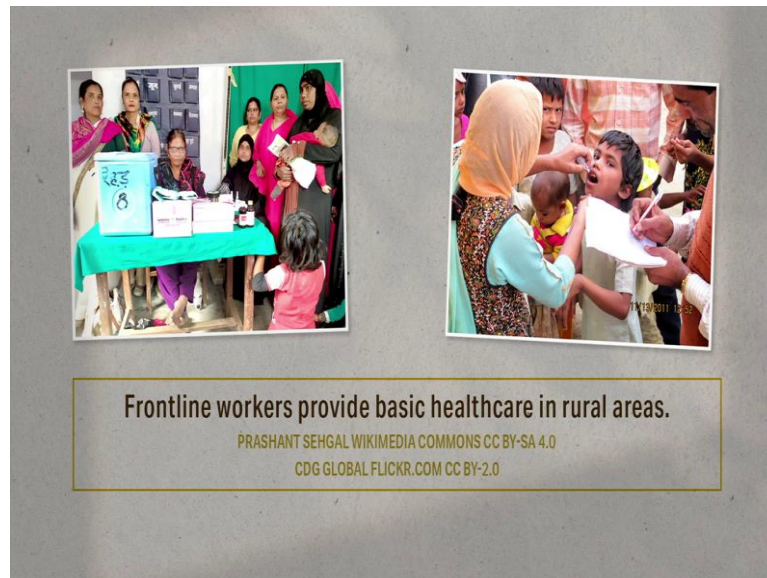
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So far, in this module, we have been discussing the various questions that we should consider as we design our research. Let us now bring in examples of some research projects, and how they addressed some of these questions. The first of our questions was about the nature of knowledge that we are seeking. We know that in order to articulate this, we need to define a research question.

Our first example focuses on the research question framed by a design team working on a healthcare project. This process helped them understand the nature of the problem their design was trying to address.

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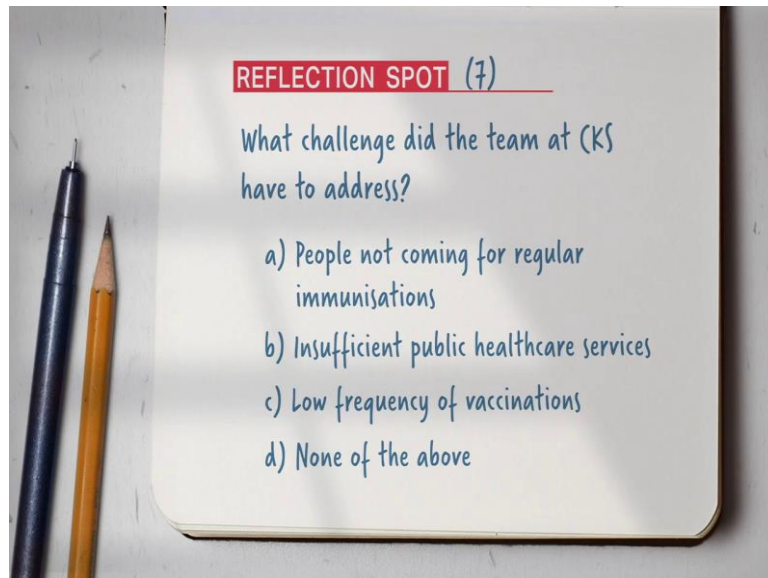
The state of Bihar has a vast and dense network of public health centres. The government employs many healthcare workers who go from village to village, administering vaccines to new-born children and pregnant women. However, the frequency and regularity of vaccination is low, and many people do not get their regular dosage of vaccines. An international NGO working on improving healthcare services in developing countries wanted to work on this problem.

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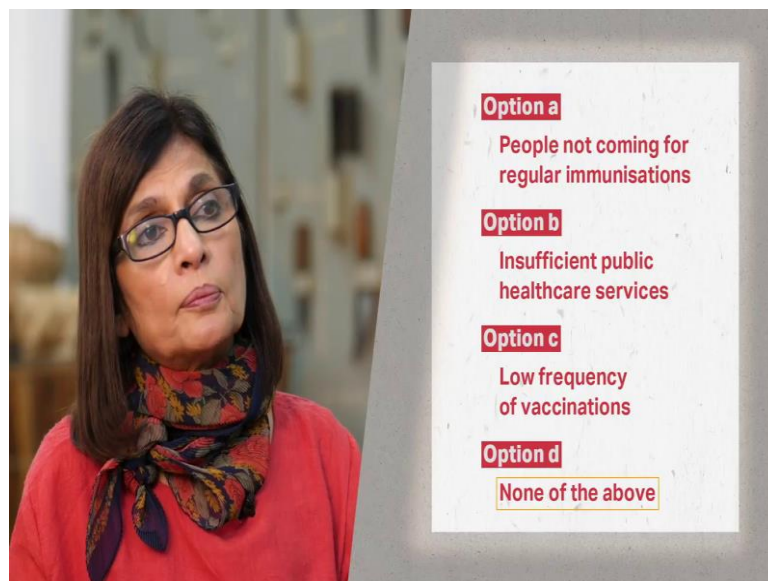
They approached a design consulting firm based in New Delhi, the Center for Knowledge Societies or CKS, and asked them to design interventions for improving vaccination services in the state. Let us pause a moment to reflect on the nature of this problem.

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In your opinion, *what is the challenge that the team at CKS has to address?* Select an answer from the options on the screen.

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Let us discuss your answers. Some of you may have selected option a). This may or may not be correct. We cannot tell unless we actually look into the matter. The same is true for option b). There may be sufficient healthcare services in the state, but people may not be accessing them for reasons we are unaware of. Some of you might have selected option c).

It is true that the frequency of vaccinations is low. That is the problem that the NGO wanted to address. But this is only a symptom of the problem. What causes low frequency of vaccination when there are enough vaccines and a large network of healthcare services? This

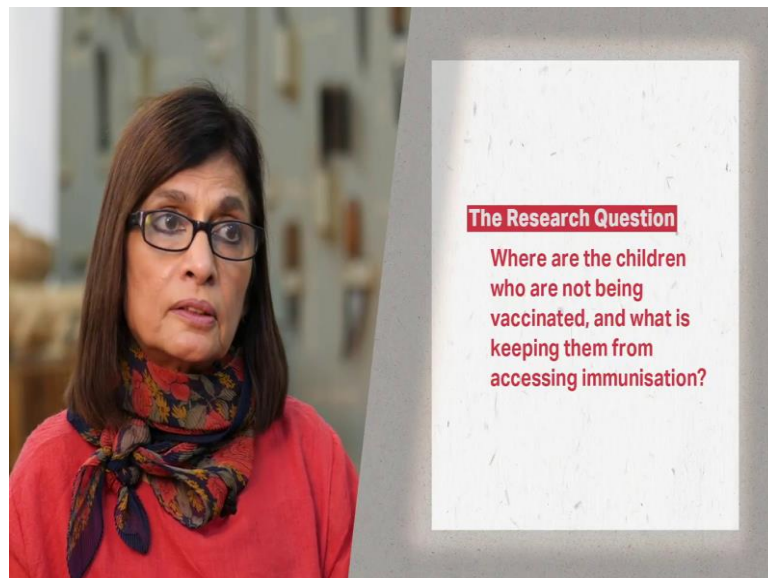
is the questions that the designers and researchers at CKS had to address.

The team at CKS realised that the brief they had been given was too vast and vague for them to address directly or effectively. So they carried out some groundwork.

They began by reading up on vaccination in poorer districts of India. They interviewed experts in public healthcare and maternal and child health. They visited rural and peri-urban public healthcare centres from where public vaccination drives are managed and deployed.

They conducted observations and interviews with ground-level healthcare workers to understand the scenarios in which they work. All of these inputs helped them to understand the nature of the problem. And thus, they were able to go beyond the brief they had been

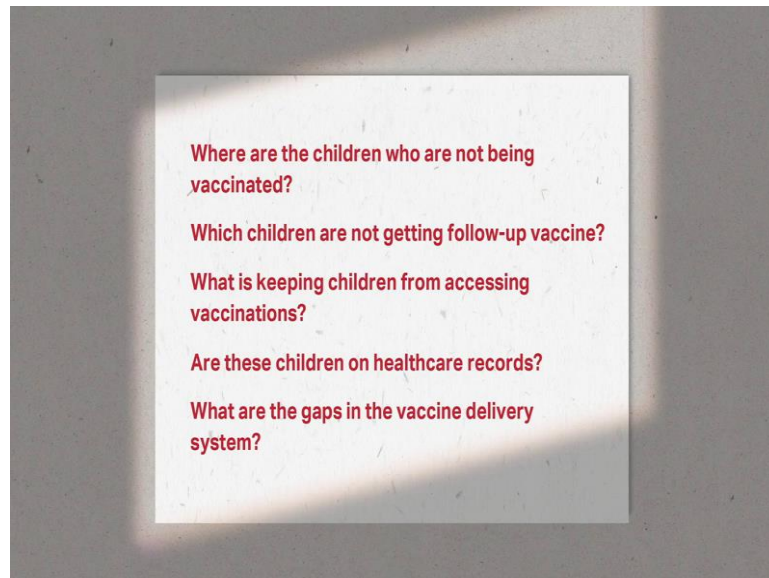
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The research question they came up with was, "where are the missing children?" which translated into "where are the children who are not being vaccinated?"



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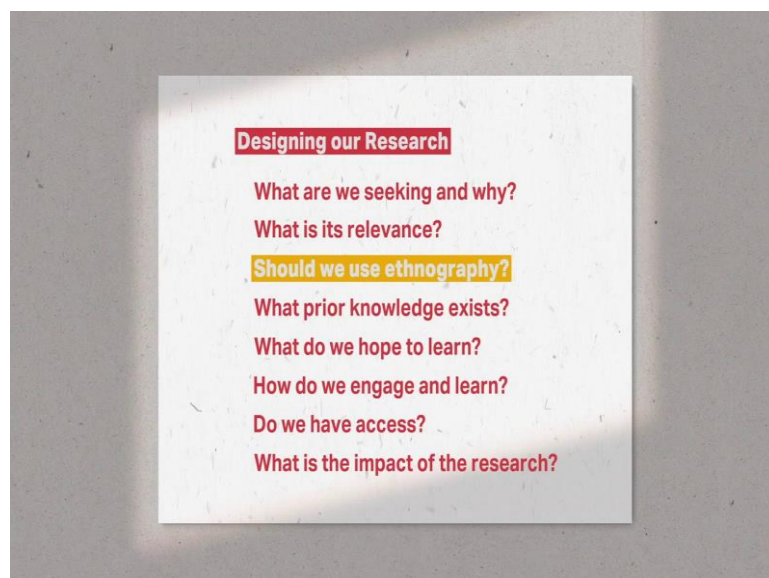


This question was broken down by the team into a set of sub-questions. And by exploring these sub-questions, the team was able to understand the causes and the factors, that is, the 'why's and the 'how's of low vaccination rates in the state.

And this study led them to design interventions that addressed the *causes* of low immunisation.

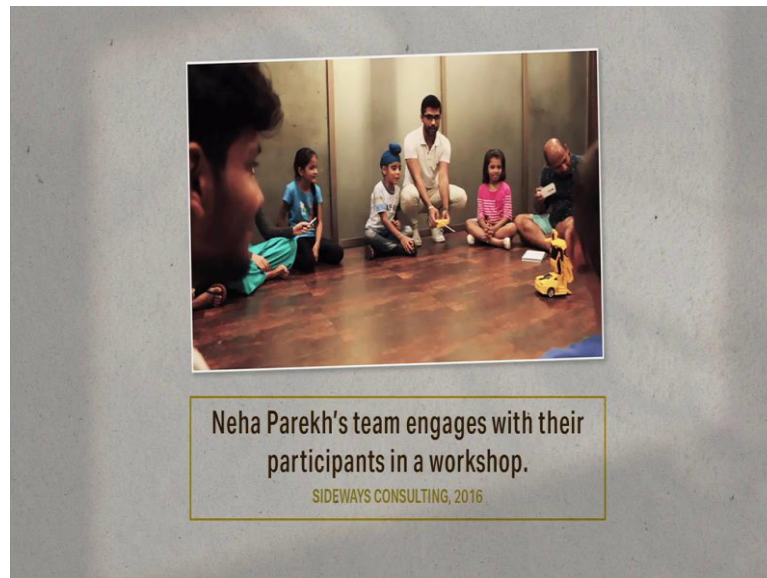
For those of you who might be interested in learning more about the research and design process that the team followed, and the interventions that they designed, you can access their report [here](#). And as always, there is a quiz to help you revise and reflect on what you learnt.

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Let us move ahead now, to another aspect of designing our research. One of the questions we had posed to ourselves was: how do we know if ethnography is the method we need for our study? Let us take two examples here, each from application-focused fields: design and brand strategy. In the first example, a designer decides to use ethnography as part of a toy design project.

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Designer Neha Parekh was given a brief to design a low-cost toy that would appeal to lower-middle-class and middle-class children of primary school age, living in cities. As you can see, this brief does not suggest very much! Neha decided to redefine the brief.

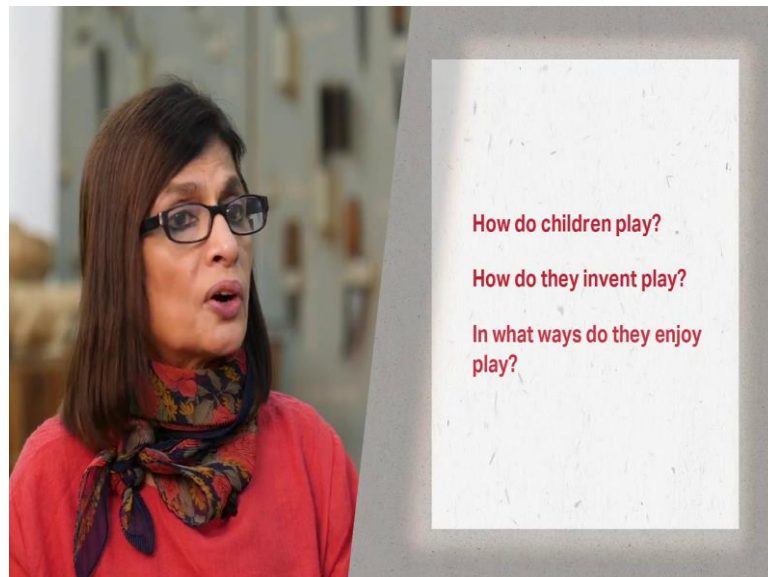
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She started with expanding the focus of her study, from looking at toys, to explore, all 'play-

like activities' among children. Before she got down to designing, she wanted to understand what playing means to children.

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*What are the multiple ways in which children play?*

*How do they invent play-like activities?*

*In what all ways do they enjoy playing?* As you can tell, her questions revolved around an activity and the perceptions associated with that activity

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You may recall that these are two of the areas where an ethnographic study is most suitable. Moreover, it was important for Neha to investigate the subject of play by observing it as it



happened. And so, she chose ethnography as her primary research method.

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She and her team spent time with children in their homes, and in playgrounds. They observed them as they played games, invented new ones, and interacted with playmates. The ethnographic method enabled her to carry out observations of the activity of 'play', and these observations fed into her understanding of the activity, its many aspects, and the meanings it held for children. This helped her identify aspects of playing that she might not have otherwise thought of.

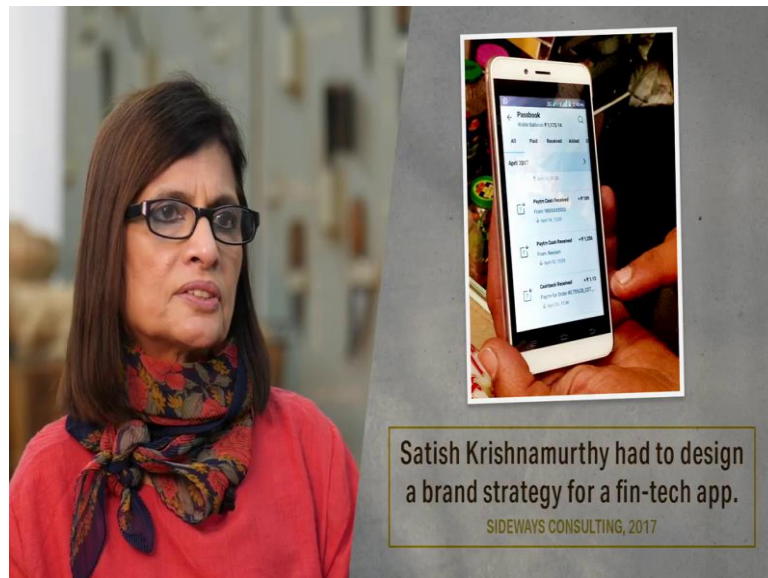
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Such as, the role of play in building relationships among children, and between children and adults; the many ways in which children used their bodies and imaginations to create fun situations; and the desire of parents for toys and games to be educational for their child. These insights eventually led her and her team to design several new games and toys. The second example towards this question is from the field of brand strategy.

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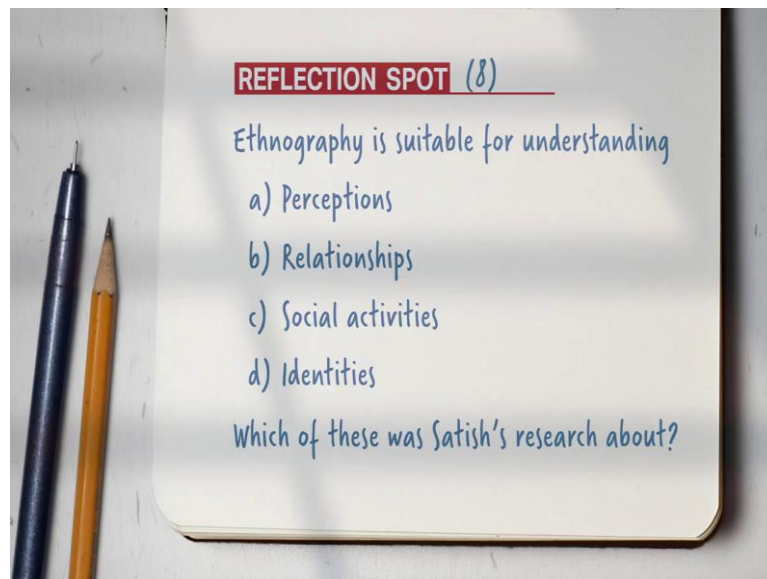
Satish Krishnamurthy, a brand strategist at Sideways Consulting, was asked to come up with a branding and marketing strategy for a new fin-tech app that would allow small shop owners to accept cashless and card-less payments from their customers. While the question itself was quite pointed, it required him to understand a rather large set of activities.

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He needed to understand the various kinds of financial transactions that take place in different kinds of small retail shops. This was quite a huge range of transactions to understand. And given that personalised fin-tech apps are relatively new, there wasn't much existing research that he could fall back on. Without the support of existing research, he would have to learn for himself, through on-ground engagements and observation. So he chose ethnography as the research method. Let us pause here a moment.

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You might remember, we had listed out four broad areas that are suitable for exploration through ethnography. In choosing ethnography, Satish would be exploring one of these. **Was Satish's research about any of these four areas? If yes, which ones?**

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Some of you might have said that none of these areas necessarily falls in the domain of Satish's brief. Others may have selected option c). But the brief given to Satish is all about financial activities.

What is the social activity here? Some of you have selected option b). But does Satish need to focus on interactions between shop owners and their customers?

Well, options b) and c) are correct. Let us understand how. Satish's research is about the financial activities of people in retail stores. He needs to understand what kinds of transactions take place at these shops, and, what is the nature of those transactions. Using ethnographic methods, he can observe these activities. And importantly, buying and selling is as much a social activity as it is a financial one.

A lot of what happens in a shop is social. People exchange greetings, ask questions to each other. Shopkeepers often advise customers and influence their buying decisions. And there is bargaining and haggling too. All of these are social activities and interactions. And they can be observed closely by using ethnographic methods.

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And did some of you select option a)? Is this a situation where Satish is trying to understand people's perception of monetary transactions in a shop? Let us see. By using ethnography, Satish was able to observe transactions at the shops, in the context in which they were carried out. He followed up these observations with interviews with shopkeepers and attendants.

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This helped him make sense of the shopkeepers' business and their relationships with their customers. He was able to understand what they thought of as a profitable and efficient transaction. And what kinds of transactions were unprofitable for them. In short, he learnt of the shopkeepers' perceptions of their customers, their transactions, and their business.

So yes, this was a study where the researcher attempted to understand people's perception of phenomena they were involved in. And so, ethnography was the correct choice here. All of these insights and learnings fed into the strategy he finally designed for the fin-tech company. He outlined kinds of businesses and shops the app should cater to, and what existing challenges it should try to address.

We hope that these examples give a fair idea of how we may articulate our research question, and where we may use ethnography as our research method. In our next section, we will take some more examples, addressing other questions on our list.