Understanding Ethnography
Module 3 Section 7
Lecture 20
Case Studies: The Value of Existing Knowledge

We move ahead to another set of case studies, the question that this address is that of Existing Knowledge.

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How can we bring existing knowledge into our research? And how does this enrich our research design and fieldwork? Let us refer to an example we used before- that of CKS.

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The team had started with a brief to address low rates of immunisation among young children, in Bihar.

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This brief referred to many subjects: rural healthcare, immunisation, perceptions of health and illness, childhood illnesses, and infant mortality. The designers and researchers working on the project had to plan their secondary research to make sure they were efficient while doing justice to the task. So they carefully designed the kind of material they needed to study.

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They referred to qualitative and quantitative studies on development indices in different parts of the country. From there, they learnt about the nature and spread of illnesses among infants and children. This informed them about the problem they were supposed to address. They referred to reports that described ongoing interventions in policy and design of healthcare services. From these reports, they were able to foresee some of the challenges that they might face. And also learnt of important principles that others had followed in addressing similar briefs.

This proved valuable in designing their project. Some of these reports they referred to were about projects that had used alternative medicine, or community systems, to improve the health of rural populations. Ideas such as these broadened the team's understanding of what may be possible in their own project. In this manner, before going for fieldwork, the team was equipped with considerable knowledge.

And this helped them frame their research question, design their fieldwork, and articulate the objectives of their design intervention. Their readings had alerted them on what to observe on field. And their improved understanding of ground-level situations helped them have more relevant conversations with their participants.

Let us take one more example. A design student interned with an NGO that ran rescue and rehabilitation programs and shelters for children living on the street. Each of these programs and

shelters had an open door policy which meant that children could come and go as they pleased. However, the organisation wanted children to stay at the shelter for longer. This way, they could be better cared for, kept safe from some of the dangers of the street, and eventually be motivated to enrol into schools.

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The task of the design student was to learn if there could be a more effective way of engaging with the children, that would make them stay on in the shelter, and to help design the interactions between the organisation and the children. The subject was new to the student. She began fieldwork without doing her secondary research. She did not build sufficient background knowledge on the subject.

As a result, she entered the field with many assumptions, several of them unacknowledged. She assumed that since material care like medicines, food, shelter was being provided by the NGO, then those who needed it would come to access it on their own. She was surprised to observe that often, children who needed medical care would refuse the healthcare services offered at the shelter. Or that children often chose to forage for food on the streets or the railway platform, rather than come to the shelter.

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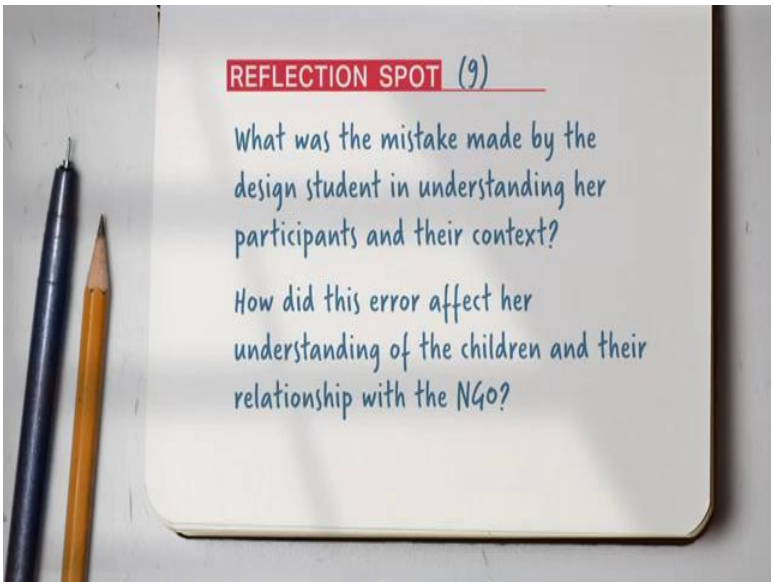

Let's pause and think for a moment. W***hat mistake was she making in her understanding of her participants and context?*** It is quite obvious that she made a mistake in skipping the literature review or secondary research. But how did this error affect her understanding of the children and their relationship with the NGO? It is likely that the notions she went with were relevant to her context. But not in the context of her participants.

She had not familiarised herself sufficiently with the psychological and social context of the 'street' and the people who live there. So she was unprepared for the behaviours and choices, she saw her participants making. The difficulty she faced in comprehending the behaviour of her participants had a strong impact on her work. It led her to question the very purpose of the NGO's operations and her own project.

She wondered if it was the manner of the childcare workers that kept the children away, even though the organisation offered material care to them. It was then that she reverted to reading and talking to people who were familiar with the subject. From these, she learned that children living on the street have a very complex relationship with the very idea of care. Children living on the street are often marginalised and ill-treated by adults from mainstream society.

This makes them apprehensive about accepting care from adults who do not belong to the community of street-dwellers. This is because, in the child's view, these people are members of

the same society that mistreats them. This shift in her understanding came from secondary research. And it led her to shift the very focus of her project.

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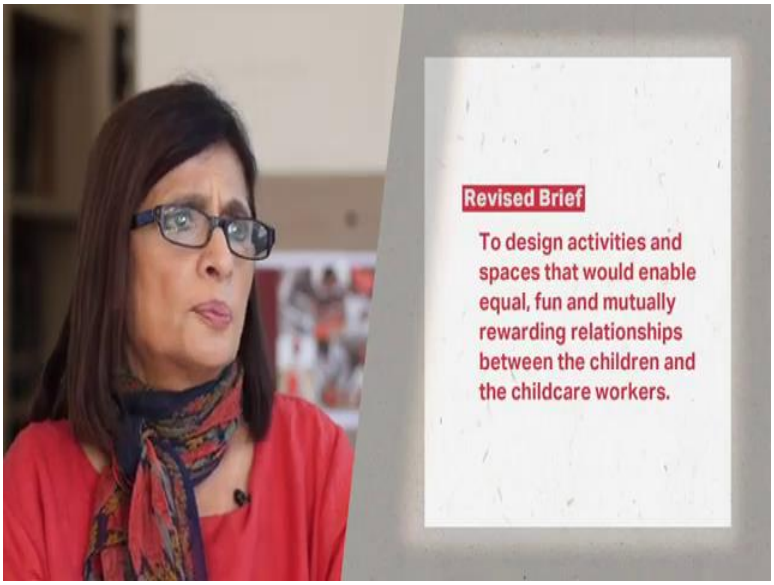

Her project now became about designing activities that could facilitate fun, equality and sharing between children and child care workers. Each of these examples show the value of secondary research. Bringing existing knowledge to bear upon the design of our study can help us better understand our participants, their perceptions and their context.

In the case of design projects, it can help us define the purpose and scope of our interventions. In the next section, we will discuss some examples that show us how we may plan our primary research.