Understanding Ethnography
Module 3 Section 8
Lecture 21
Case Studies: Identifying Places and Activities

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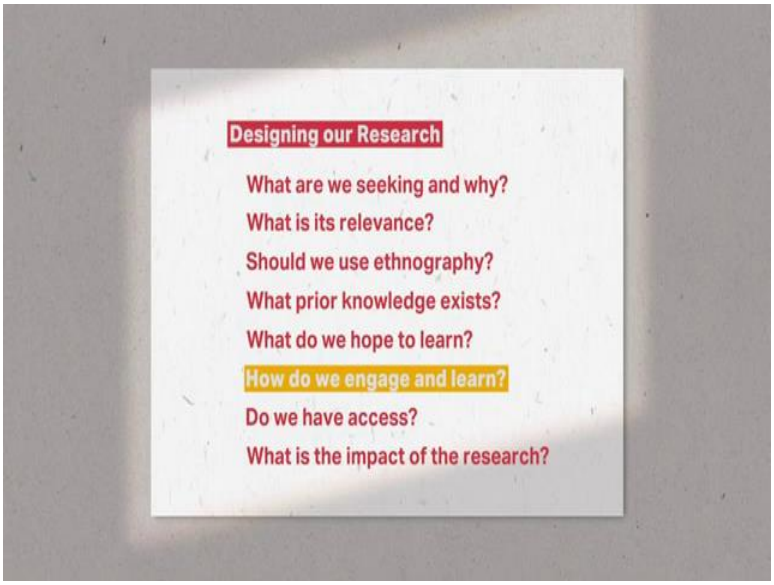

The examples in this section refer to an important - and exciting - question on our list. This question is most relevant to how we plan our fieldwork: what people, locations and activities to engage with, and what tools and methods to use. You might remember that there are two aspects to this question.

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The first one is: ***Who are our participants, and what are the activities and sites of our research?***

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For this, let us return to Neha Parekh's project on designing a low-cost toy for children.

We learnt earlier how and why Neha settled on the ethnographic approach for research into play and play-like activities. In designing her research she chose to look at the various locations outside of schools where children carried out such activities

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This brought within her ambit, ***homes***, ***playgrounds***, common areas such as ***corridors*** and ***stairwells*** in apartment buildings, and neighbourhood ***parking lots***.

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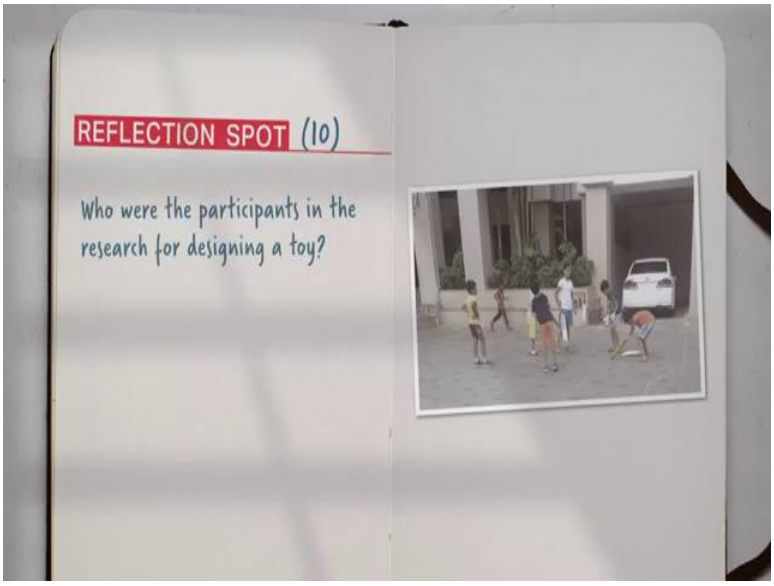

And, ***who do you think were the participants in her research? Think for a minute and note down your answers.*** All of you may have guessed that the children playing in these places became the participants of her research. But those of you who recalled our earlier discussion on the diversity of participant groups may have a more detailed answer.

Let us have an overview of Neha's various participant groups. Check how many of these *you* thought of. Besides the children, Neha's participants included people who were influencers and collaborators in playing. These were the playmates of her primary participants - friends from school, tuition and neighbourhoods.

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Among playmates, she also included adults -like parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours, and so on. And older children who some of the kids looked up to. Neha also included in her research people who might not play with the children but who either supported or inhibited the children's play.

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So she interviewed the children's primary caretakers - mothers, fathers, grandparents and other adults. Each of them shared their observations with her. I hope you thought of these different sets of people as participants in a toy design project. Now reflect on this again and ask yourselves why these various people may be considered as participants in a study and how does it help the researcher?

By speaking to these people and observing these spaces, Neha identified particular times of the day, which were interesting with respect to children's play patterns. (Refer Slide Time: 02:49)

These included the hours after school and before dinner. And during school vacations, the afternoon time, when adults rested and children were restless. These places, people, activities and times defined the design of Neha's primary research.

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We see that there were many diverse locations, ranging from the intimate to the public, that formed the context of this research. There was also a great diversity in her participant groups. Her brief had been to design for primary school-age children from the urban middle class. However, she was aware that this was not a homogenous group.

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She wanted to understand the differences in play patterns among children of different genders, ages, economic classes, and with different family compositions.

Some of her participants lived with grandparents and parents. Some were single children living only with their parents. Others were surrounded by siblings and cousins. Children of different age groups revealed different patterns of play and choices of games - both made up and bought from a store. (Refer Slide Time: 04:03)

Children from different genders often chose games that were specific to their genders. And just as often, they also broke out of those choices to play games that were traditionally considered unsuitable for them. Children living within large families were influenced by several different adults - their parents, grandparents, and older siblings. And children who did not have siblings often sought others to join in their games. This resulted in elders or children from the neighbourhood becoming their playmates.

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And so, in looking at a diverse range of participants and locations, Neha learned about the many different ways in which children understood and invented 'play'.

She learnt of the wide range of factors that matter to children in 'making play', and how they access play and enjoyment in different situations. There is one other kind of diversity that we need to talk about. We had talked about the importance of looking at the same site or location across different times of the day. Often a space changes drastically as the day progresses. We find such an example in several cities in India India but let's go to Ahmedabad and look at Rani no Hajiro, a locality in the old city.

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During the day, it is a bustling jewellery market and also a parking lot.

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In the night, after the market closes, the space transforms. The closed shutters of the jewellery shops become backdrops for street food stalls, and the parking lot transforms into open-air eateries. It becomes a khau galli, a food court of sorts, with groups of people thronging the various stalls for late-night food and revelry.

In this manner, one particular site may be many different sites. It may host a wide range of people and activities and change meaning as its purpose changes. Neha's project and the example of Rani no Hajiro, gives us an idea about how we may plan our fieldwork to learn from a variety of people, places and activities.

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Now we come to the second part of our question: how to learn from these people, sites and activities? We had earlier spoken about the tools and methods we may use for learning from our participants. Let us discuss a bit more about that. Our choices of tools and methods to observe and record is based on a number of different factors ranging from the comfort of our participants to the availability of time and resources for the study.

Among these parameters is the nature of information that we wish to access. Let us take an example to show how different tools and methods can be used together to create rich and detailed ethnographies. Say we are conducting a study of the economic conditions of small scale farmers. We want to learn about the impact of changing economic policies on their lives and livelihoods. We could learn from the farmers and farm workers by having conversations with them.

We could listen to them speaking about their ways of living, and about the changes that have come about over the years. We learn from them through listening to heir narratives and observing their expressions. Here, audio or video recording becomes a great way to ensure that we present their narratives in their voices. Their words, the tone and sound of their voice, the phrases they use, all of these may be recorded and represented using audio-visual tools.

To make these narratives more accessible for those who may not understand the language of our participants, we can provide translations. In addition to spoken narratives, we could learn a lot by observing the objects that make up their environment. Household objects and gadgets purchased

in times of prosperity tell the story of those times.

The changes in built structures indicate the changes in economic conditions and aspirations. Similarly, farm equipment may tell the story of how farming activities have changed over time. By using visual recording techniques such as photography, drawing, or video, we can present the rich stories that these objects and environments tell.

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Let us do a small activity here. Here are pictures from a kitchen in a household. The pictures tell us something very particular about the household, and about the members of the house

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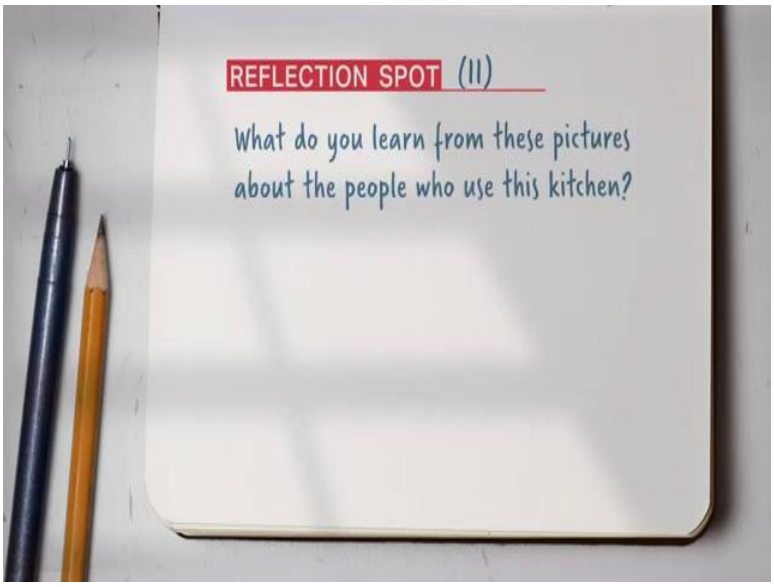

Can you note down what you learn from these pictures about the people who use this kitchen?

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? A little bit of background information may help: these are images from an ethnographic research into kitchens and practices of cooking. The household is that of a middle class, urban, nuclear family.

So, what did you learn from these images? Some of you might have noted the wide hatch that connects the kitchen with the sitting room area. You might have guessed that it ensures convenience and ease of serving food. That is certainly so. Another image is of a number of vegetables, chopped, and stored in the fridge. You might guess that this is to make the task of cooking easier and quicker. Again, to make the process more convenient. These answers are certainly correct. But there is more here than meets the eye. Let us look at these images again.

The hatch in the image is much bigger than what is required for passing trays of food. Why does it need to be so big? The researcher asked this question to Akhila, whose kitchen it was. She explained that when she is preparing a meal for her family, or for guests, she ends us being stuck inside the kitchen while people chat away in the sitting room. So, when remodelling their home, she asked for the wall between the kitchen and sitting room to be opened up. Through this wide hatch, she could freely interact with people while she cooked.

And the chopped vegetables have a similar purpose. Chopping vegetables can be the most time-consuming part of cooking. And for someone who is cooking three meals a day, every day, that takes up a lot of time. So, once or twice a week, she chops all the vegetables she might need

for all meals and stores them away. When she has to cook any meal, she can simply take out the chopped vegetable, toss it in the pan, and have a meal ready in no time.

Akhila has designed her kitchen space and practices to minimise the time she spends in the kitchen. This, of course, tells us about how efficiency and time are important for her. But it also points to the tediousness of the task of daily cooking. This is not something we could have understood if we hadn't experienced the space and seen her cooking practices. Nor would we have understood it completely if we hadn't spoken to her.

Observation and interviews are both important in ethnographic research. Each adds a new layer of understanding to our knowledge of our participants. Together these pieces of audio and visual information can help us construct a richer understanding and a textured description of our participants' lives. These were examples from different projects, showing us how we can plan our fieldwork. One of the key factors, as you can tell, is diversity.

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We learn from a diverse set of the people, places and activities. And we try to use a variety of tools and methods.The greater the variety, the richer our research is likely to be. Having identified who we want to learn from, we need to figure out how we may access them. Towards this, we do some homework; we gather some knowledge of our participants' culture and society before we approach them. We will share some examples of this in the next section.