Understanding Ethnography
Module 3 Section 9
Lecture 22
Case Studies: Access and Impact

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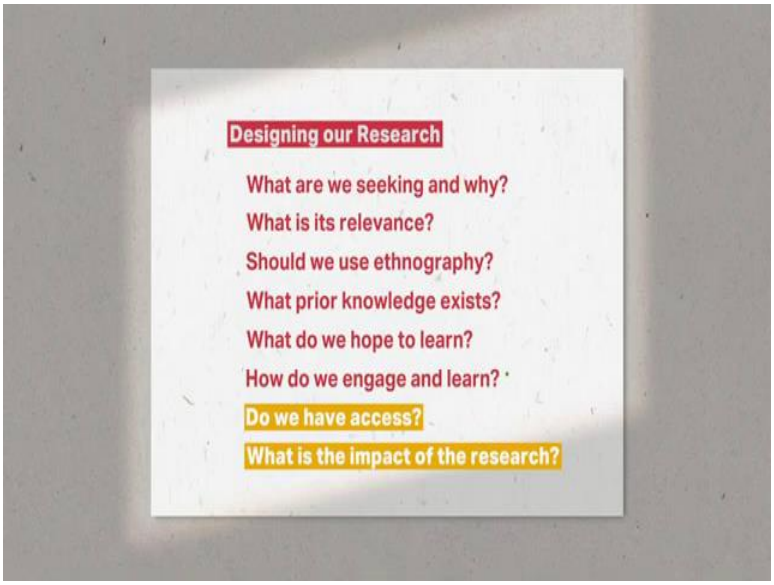
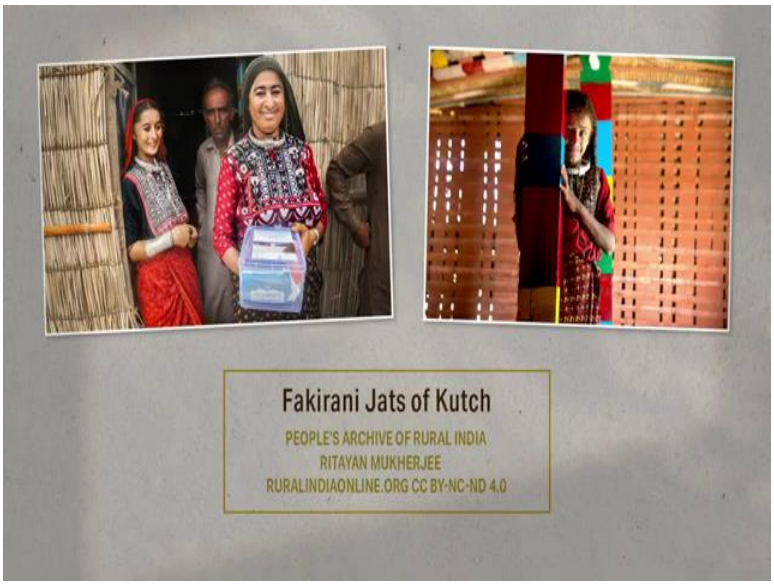


The question of how we engage with our participants, and how our research may affect them are extremely important for us to consider. In this section, we will discuss some examples that highlight the importance of these questions and how we may address them. One of our questions is about having access to the participants we want to engage with. There are times when we recognise that we may not gain access to the persons we want as participants in our research even though we have identified them, and they are important to our study.

Let me give you an example.



I was to document mud houses of the Fakirani Jats in Kutch, especially houses made of reed grass but the project got nipped in the bud during my initial pilot study. I was taking pictures of the house and speaking to the womenfolk. All of a sudden I was accosted by a male member of the group who threatened to break my camera and hurt me if I approached any of the women. What do you think happened here?

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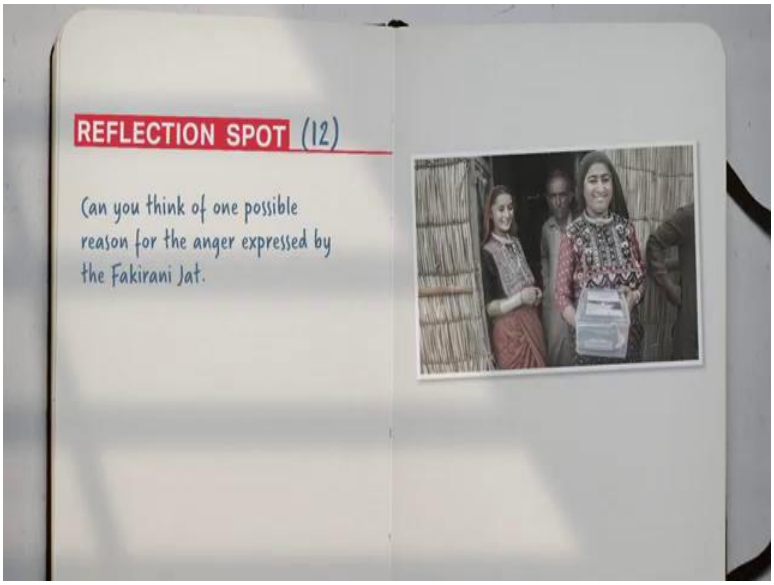

Note down one possible reason that may have caused him to react with so much anger against me. Some of you may have written I violated some societal rule which forbids outsiders from

speaking to womenfolk. Others may be of the opinion that my camera and the photographs I was making bothered the man. You are right. When the man confronted me, I was taken aback. I realised that I had unintentionally violated the social rules of the group, where the women were not allowed to interact with outsiders.

Doing so, I had placed myself at risk, and perhaps also risked the well-being of the women I had tried talking to. In carrying out fieldwork in unfamiliar spaces and cultures, we might offend our participants without meaning to.

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This happens because we are not always aware of the social and cultural ways of that context. One of the objectives of prepping for fieldwork is to sensitise ourselves to the norms of the context so that we are not causing harm or offence to our participants. This understanding should filter into the tools and mediums we use and the ways in which we engage with the context. How could I have done this differently?

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First, I could have read up on the community or spoken to someone who knew them well. I should not have used my camera as soon as I arrived. If, for instance, I had not been using a camera, I might have seemed less intimidating, and it could have made my initial engagement with the community smoother.

Instead of taking pictures of the womenfolk, I could have had conversations with the men of the group. It is possible that through these dialogues, and with time I would have been allowed to access the women. Conflicts such as these often arise because of differences in cultures, socio-economic positions and belief systems.

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Some of these differences may translate into inequalities between us and our participants. For example, people from urban communities often view rural cultures as less evolved. As a result, people from rural communities may be wary of an urban outsider spending time in their environment and exploring their context.

In this manner, inequalities can wedge a distance between researchers and participants, and hamper an equal and open engagement. The conflicts we face might be quite stark when we come from drastically different backgrounds, as my experience with the Fakirani Jats shows. But they can be just as complex when the differences are implicit and not as pronounced.

A researcher learnt this when she interacted with a few urban middle-class couples. In a particular incident, she visited the home of a young, married couple in Chennai. She was interested in learning about cooking practices in different cultures across the country. She spent time with the woman of the house as she cooked dinner, observing, asking questions and so on. As dinner time approached, the participant asked the researcher if she would be staying for much longer. The researcher sensed a barely perceptible discomfort in her voice and was confused by it. So far, they had, had a warm and carefree conversation. However, careful to not overstay her welcome, she politely took leave of the couple.

On her way out, she asked her co-researcher, who belonged to the same region, what the reason for this discomfort might have been. He explained to her that the couple belonged to a particular

section of the upper caste. This community is known to be uncomfortable sharing food with people from certain other castes. The couple probably wanted to avoid the question on caste, on which dining together would have depended. And so, they were keen that the researchers leave before dinner time.

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The differences between us and our participants get emphasised as we engage with them closely, often in their intimate spaces. This can sometimes create conditions of vulnerability on both sides, particularly when interactions erupt into conflicts.

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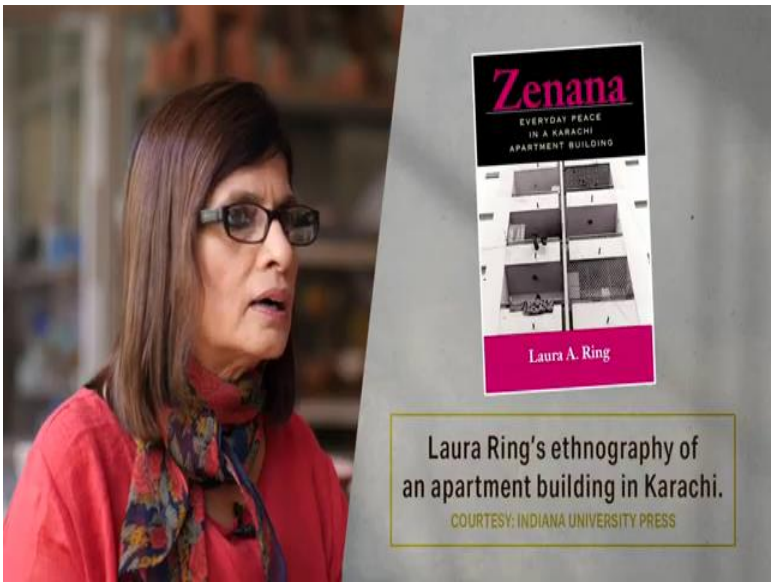

. Let's look at an example from the work of Laura Ring, a cultural anthropologist and librarian living in Karachi. Karachi, Pakistan's economic capital, is home to a number of ethnic groups.

Since the late 1960s, violence between these different groups has marked the history of the city. In spite of the violence, or beside it, life continues among its residents. As a resident of the city, Ring wanted to explore the processes of everyday peace that enable life to go on, in spite of the fears of violence. In order to explore this subject, Ring decided to undertake an ethnographic study in the apartment building in Karachi, where she was living with her husband and child.

The focus of her study came to be the daily lives of women in this building. She developed warm friendships with some of her neighbours, and with others, there was a polite cordiality. However, as an American, she was occasionally viewed by some of the residents as an outsider and a more privileged outsider at that. The unexpressed resentment against her outsider-ness and her perceived privilege erupted in a moment of a small crisis.

One night, a minor fire broke out in the building, and everyone had to be evacuated. As Ring and the other women, residents stood huddled outside the building, waiting for the fire to be put out, an older neighbour suddenly blurted out, gesturing angrily at Ring. The old woman was blaming Ring for causing the fire, saying that it was the AC in *her* apartment that must have caused the electric wires to ignite.

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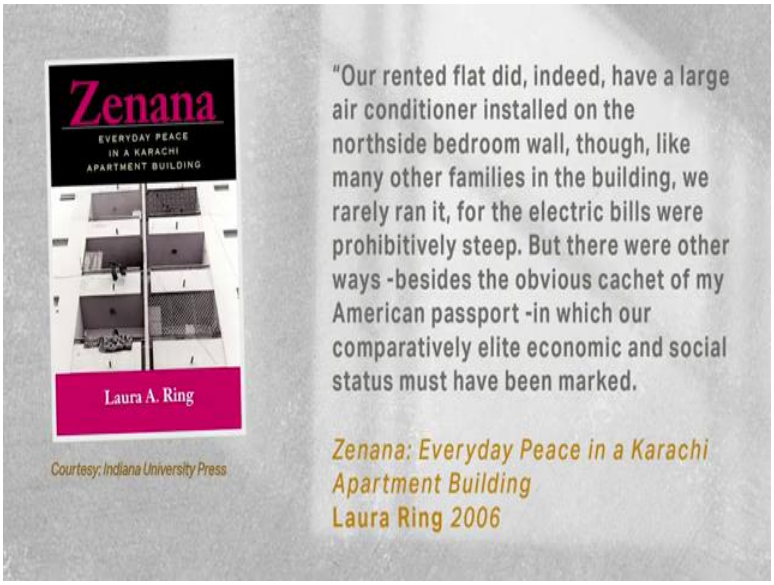

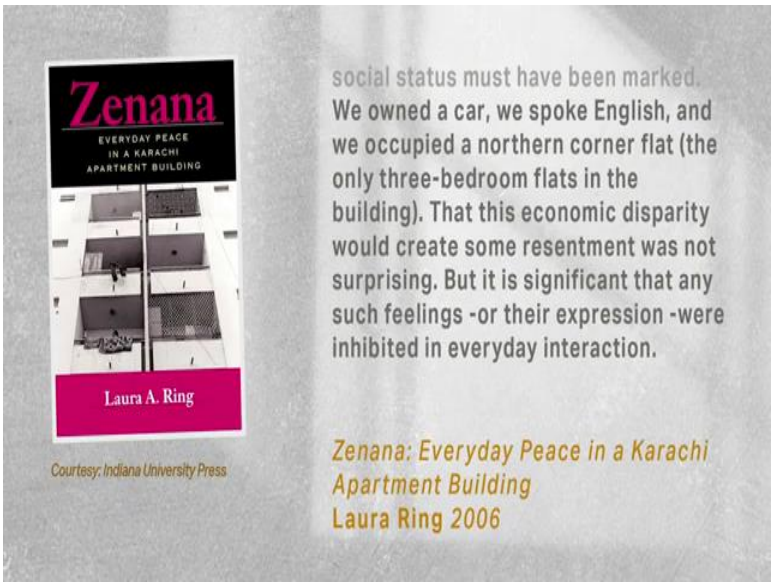

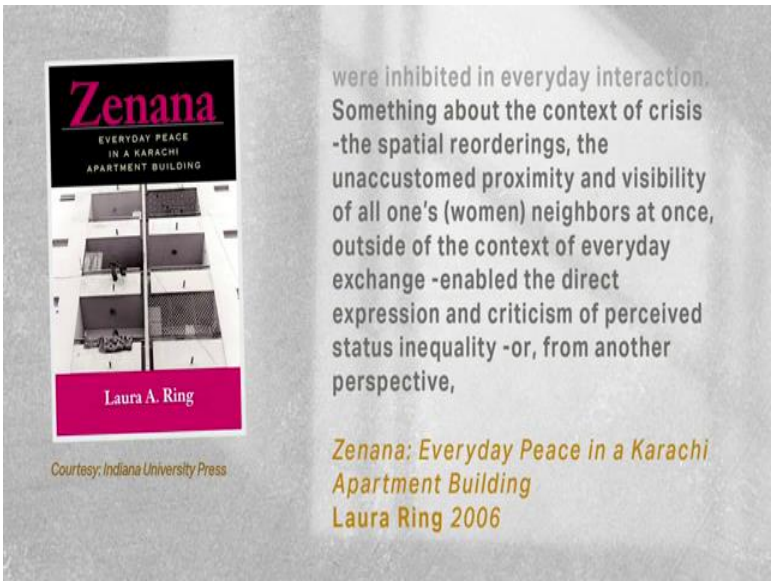

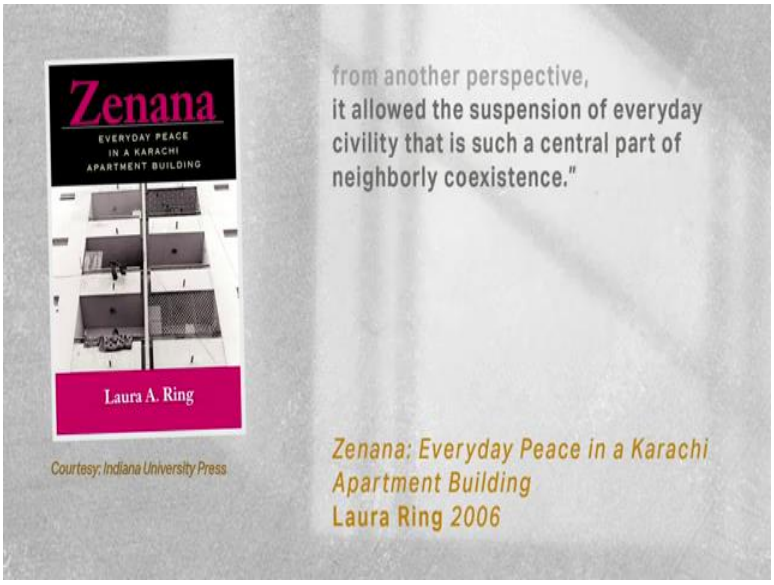

Our rented flat did indeed have a large air conditioner installed on the north side bedroom wall, though, like many other families in the building. We really ran it for the electric bills were prohibitively steep. But there were other ways besides the obvious cachet of my American passport in which our comparatively elite economic and social status must have been marked, we owned a car, we spoke English, and we occupied a northern corner flat.

The only 3 bedroom flats in the building. That this economic disparity would create some resentment was not surprising, but it is significant that any such feelings or their expression were inhibited in everyday interaction. Something about the context of crisis, the spatial reordering, the unaccustomed proximity and visibility of all ones neighbours at once, outside the context of

everyday exchange enabled the direct expression and criticism of perceived status inequality or from another perspective, it allowed the suspension of everyday civility that is such a central part of neighbourly coexistence.

Ring saw the old woman's accusation as an expression of resentment, against the disparity between Ring and many of her neighbours. As a researcher, she analysed and made sense of the resentment she faced. But at the same time, she was also affected by it on a personal, individual level. To be affected is not a failing on the part of the ethnographer. It is, instead, an acknowledgement of our humanity. It shows that we are not disconnected and distant from our participants.

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We may be different from them, but being conscious of this difference, and making sense of it can help us bridge it. It can guide us through the complicated nature of these relationships with greater understanding and empathy towards the other.

Often, it helps us understand the underlying dynamics of the community we work with. For instance, understanding why the young married couple did not want the researcher to stay back during their mealtime revealed the subtleties of how caste segregations play out in urban Indian society.And, it can help us see different dimensions of ourselves. Laura Ring, for instance, was able to see that she was perceived as being more privileged because of her identity as an

American, even though her lifestyle was very similar to that of her neighbours.

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In a nutshell, the ethics of fieldwork are intrinsically related to the practice of learning from the field. Being ethical and respectful towards our participants helps us engage with them and understand them. Through these engagements, we understand ourselves better, which is really, the aim of ethnography.

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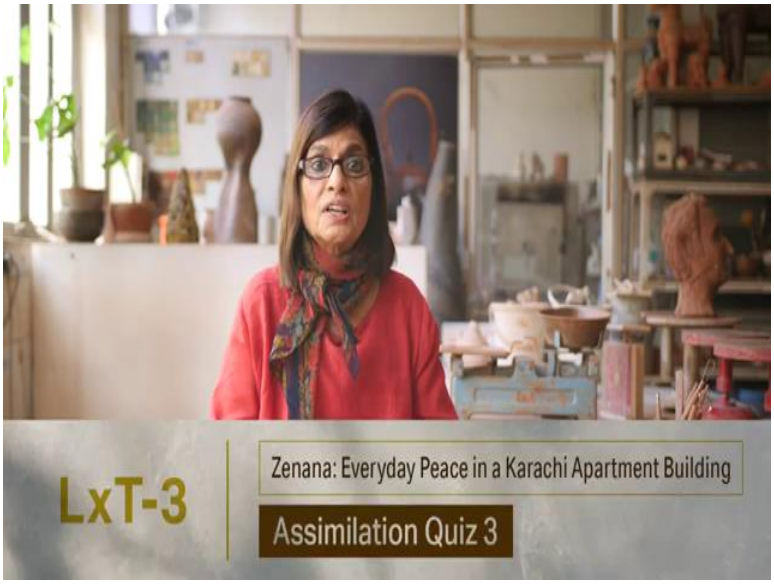

For those of you who would like to read some more about Ring's relationship with her participants, and this particular experience of hers, we suggest you read a chapter from her book, Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building. And do take the quiz that follows, so you may recall and test your understanding of the text