

**Understanding Ethnography**  
**Indian School of Design**  
**Lecture No. 24**  
**Access: Not Just Consent**

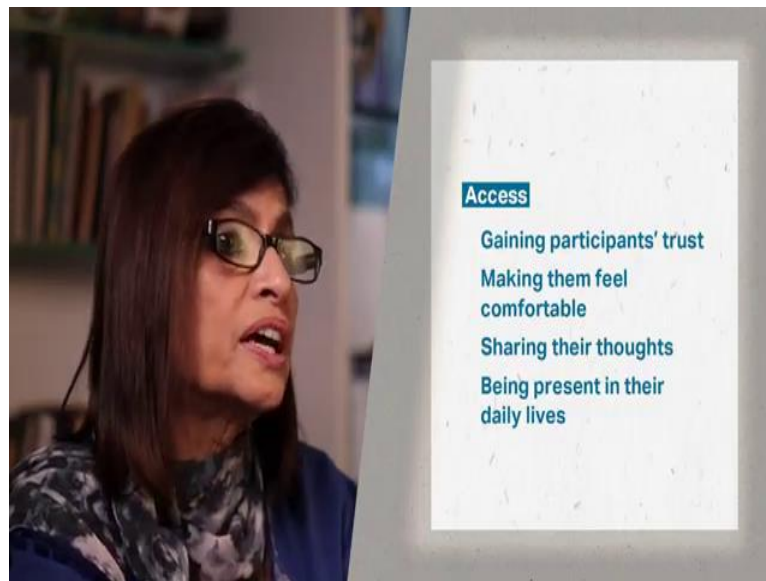
Hello there, welcome back. Here we are again, ready to go into the field. In our last module, we discussed access.

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By access, we meant gaining permission and consent from people to participate in our research. We also spoke of access in terms of the availability of time and whether we will be able to enter the context and observe the phenomena we wish to learn about. Now that we are in the field, the term takes on a whole new meaning

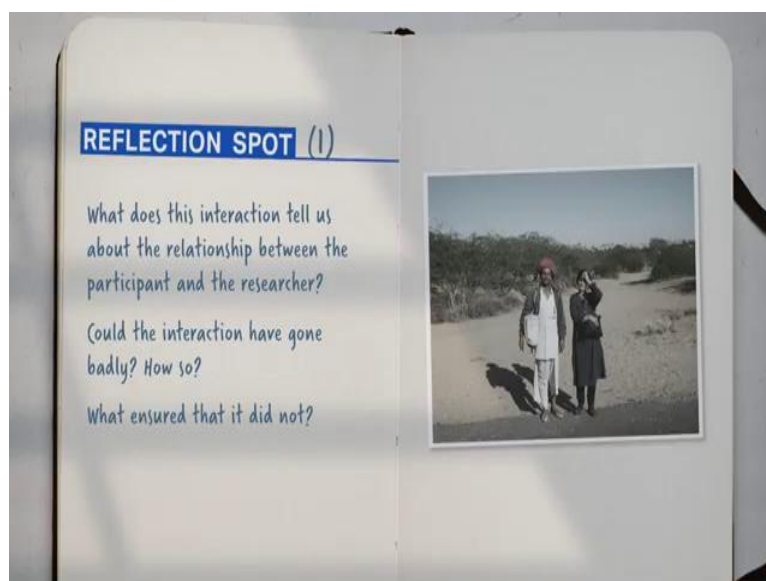
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Now access means to be accepted by the participants, in a way that they are comfortable with us being around them and that they feel like sharing their thoughts with us without feeling like we are there to take something away from them. What does this kind of access look like? Let me share with you an incident from my fieldwork in Rajasthan, while I was working with the Kaavad storytellers. Let us watch this short clip of my interaction with storyteller Kojaram.

Let us pause here and reflect on the brief introduction we saw in this clip.

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*What does this interaction tell us about the relationship between the participant and the researcher?* I would also like you to consider *how this interaction could have gone badly?* And *what ensured that it did not?* Some of you might have noticed the element of fun in this engagement. Some others might have guessed that the conversation reflected a spirit of sharing between the storyteller, Kojaram, and me, the researcher. Both of these answers reflect that the relationship between us was a comfortable one.

He did not feel compelled to answer my curiosity. These qualities made the conversation interesting for both of us. But this same conversation could have easily gone wrong. If I had not known Kojaram too well, I might have felt compelled to simply accept the answer that he first gave. Or, Kojaram could have taken offence to my rebuttal of his answer.

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Instead, the conversation became an interesting and engaging one for both of us. This is because the interaction was supported by a relationship of trust and equality. But such a relationship does not just come about on its own. It takes time and hard work to build.

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Gaining access to our participants is equivalent to gaining their trust. In asking for their time and their trust, we are asking for something enormous. Let's look at ourselves; we don't invite everyone home. We take our time getting to know people, meeting first in public places such as offices, cafes, and so on, getting to know them better over time. We have to trust them before we can let them 'in'. The same is true for our participants.

This particular moment in the research occurred at a stage in the research where we had spent a considerable amount of time getting comfortable with each other. The beginning of our relationship had not been as warm. When I first visited the Kaavad makers in Bassi, I was viewed with suspicion. The artists and their families wanted to know why I was there. With all these questions I was asking, about how the Kaavad is made, they wondered whether I was I going to start my own Kaavad factory.

Even the simplest questions I asked, which I thought we're non-threatening, were perceived very differently by them. And the situation got no better when I told them I was doing a PhD. So what will *we* get out of *your* PhD? they asked. At one point, I showed them my ID card to prove the validity of my research. They rejected that too, saying, anyone can print an ID, that is no proof of anything.

So, when we begin our practice in ethnography, we may think it is only we who are facing these problems. And we may even doubt our own abilities to engage with people. But let me say, it is not uncommon to face such challenges. It happens to researchers all the time.

Experienced ethnographers too, when starting work with a new community, may face difficulties in gaining access.

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Why do you think this is so? Let us discuss this in our next section