Understanding Ethnography
Indian School of Design
Lecture No. 25
Challenges of Access

There are some common reasons for the difficulties we face in accessing our participants. Let us discuss some of these and how they may affect our fieldwork.

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It is possible that there are stark, social, cultural and economic differences between researchers and participants. In such cases, the researcher can appear to the participant as someone from a different world. Sometimes, researchers are economically better off than their participants, or are more educated, or speak a language that participants do not understand. These qualities, and the differences they create, can make the researcher seem intimidating to the participant.

Research engagements may well take place in spite of these differences and the inequalities. But they may not be the most comfortable and open of engagements. An awareness of social-economic differences could cause hesitation or unease to the participant and the researcher. It may therefore influence their behaviour and ours. The participants may either resent or feel overwhelmed by our presence.

They may second guess the answers, or give us responses that they think will impress us. Or, they may agree with us, simply to avoid confrontation. Or worse, they may just want to antagonise us. In either case, we may not learn very much from them, or hear narratives and

thoughts that really matter to them.

Sometimes, the differences may not be social or economic in nature, but in the beliefs and values that each of us holds. There may be ideological differences between our participants and us on religious matters, social practices, or political leanings. In such cases, we need to be careful about how we respond to their opinions, ideas and beliefs. We must also be conscious of how we present ours. We need not lie to them and agree for the sake of an agreeable engagement.

However, we must give them room to express themselves. We must listen to them and understand where they may be coming from. This is more likely to help us learn from them, than glossing over a contentious topic or judging them for their beliefs.Our participants' behaviour towards us is almost always determined by their perception of us. When we are new to the field, their perception is most easily defined by our appearance- our gender and age, how we dress, how we speak and so on.

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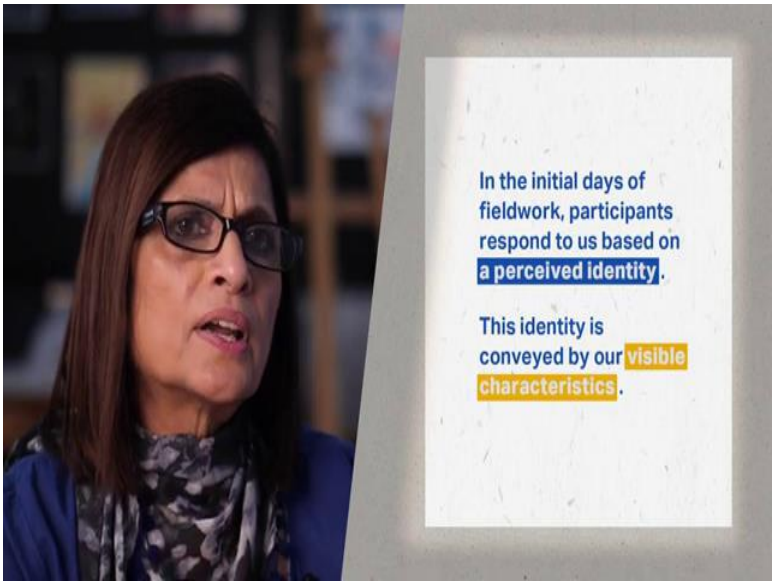

All of these convey our social, economic and cultural position, which makes up our identity. It is this perceived identity to which participants respond when initially interacting with us. Depending on how they relate to our identity, they may reveal certain things to us and conceal others. They may explain certain things, and also expect us to understand others without explanation.

In short, the research engagements we have are determined to a large degree by how others relate to us and our presence in their space. Let us take an example to understand this some more.

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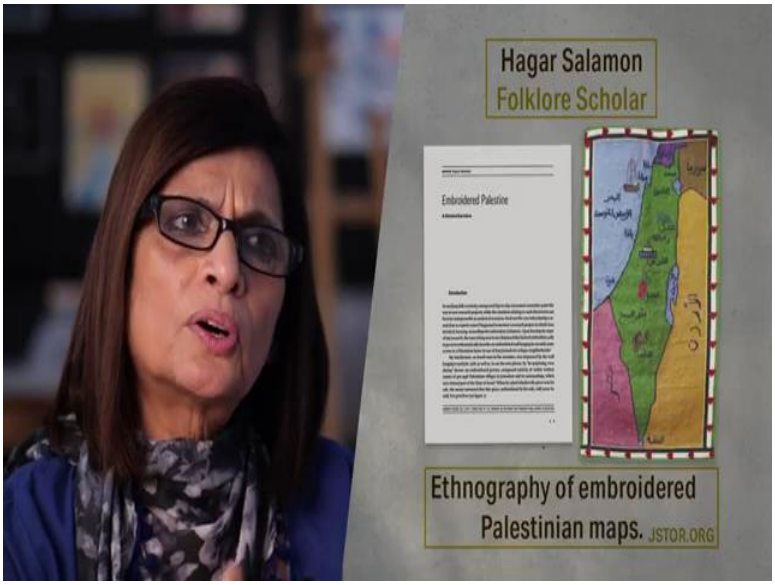

This example is from the work of the folklore scholar Hagar Salamon. Salamon is an Israeli Jewish woman

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She wanted to learn about embroidered Palestinian maps and their representation of Palestinian territory before its occupation by Israel. Her research associates on the project were two young Palestinian women. As part of her research, she and her associates interviewed Palestinian women living in Jerusalem. When speaking to Salamon, her participants often spoke about the pain of losing their homes and villages. They spoke about their anger and the anguish of being rendered exiles in their own land.

In contrast, when speaking to the Palestinian researchers, the participants spoke of the importance of a shared culture and history. And the necessity of keeping it alive through practices such as the embroidering of maps. Let us reflect for a moment on Salamon's experience

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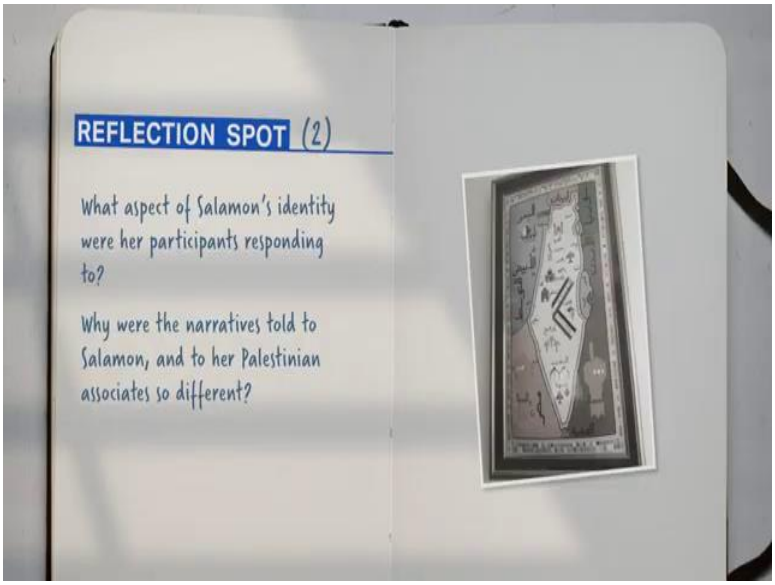

In your opinion, ***what aspect of Salamon's identity were her participants responding to?*** And ***why were their narratives so different for Salamon, and for her Palestinian research associates***? Many of you may have said that the participants were reacting to Salamon's identity as an Israeli person. That is absolutely correct. But were there also other aspects of her identity they may have been responding to? Some may have said that she was a woman researcher. Others may have said she was a Jewish person. All of these are aspects of her identity.

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Every person has multiple identities. Salamon was a woman, an Israeli of Jewish descent, and a researcher. And consciously, or otherwise, her participants were responding to each of these

aspects. Chances are, they may have spoken quite differently to an Israeli man or to an Israeli soldier. This is also an assumption on our part. In responding differently to Salamon and her research associates, her participants were responding to their nationalities.

They may have believed that it was important for an Israeli researcher, to learn about the pain of displacement and exile faced by Palestinians. Whereas for the Palestinian researchers, they may have assumed that they would obviously be aware of this narrative. So, to them, the participants wanted to convey the importance of keeping the Palestinian culture alive. This experience of Salamon raises another question for the practice of ethnography.

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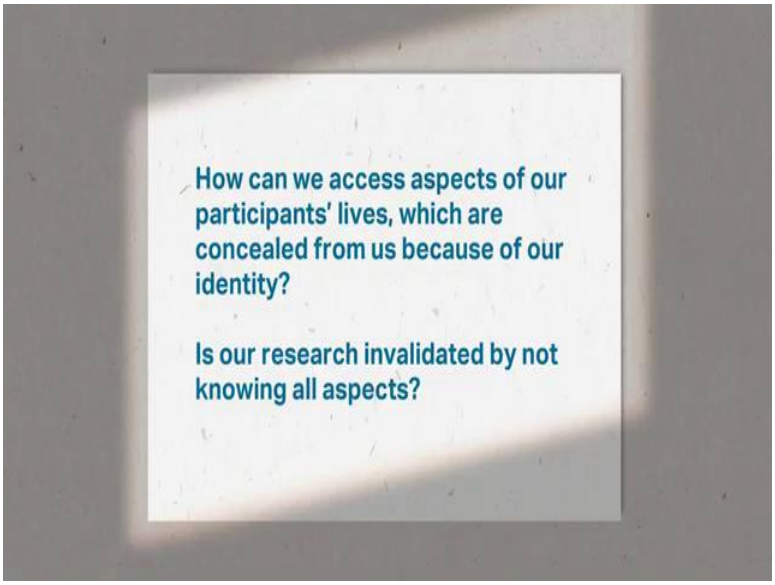

How can we try to access those aspects of our participants' lives, which are not revealed to us because of our identity? And is our research, therefore invalidated by not knowing all aspects? These are very valid questions and require some thought. The primary thing that these questions point to is the subjective nature of ethnographic research. As we have emphasised in earlier discussions, the same topic may reveal different things to different researchers because of who they are.

This does not mean that one study is any more or less valid than another. However, it does push us to consider how we may access different aspects of our participants' lives and various phenomenas in their worlds.

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One of our major sources of learning, then, is the experience and knowledge of others. And so we refer to existing studies that have examined similar topics or contexts. Tapping into different sources of knowledge or learning from the findings of others is also an important way to check or triangulate our findings. We can use others' findings to rethink what we have learnt from our interactions with participants.

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We also learn from the knowledge of various participants who occupy different positions in the community.

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We often refer to these people as our key participants. This is a relationship that plays a pivotal role in any research, and we shall soon discuss it in greater detail.There is another way in which researchers try to access multiple aspects of the participants' world.

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They do their fieldwork in teams made up of a diverse set of people. So, individual researchers maybe let into different areas in the participants' world. For instance, studies that are about healthcare, or the body, often employ a mix of male and female researchers. The reasons are quite simple. Some participants are likely to feel more comfortable talking to men about their health and bodies. And some, to women. So, in a diverse team, some researchers may access some participants, based on things they share in common.

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But let us return to our discussion on the challenges of engaging with the other, and gaining their trust. So far, we have discussed that differences of various kinds between participants and us can hamper the building of equal and open engagements. But sometimes, regardless of

differences and similarities, participants may feel unsure about the researchers' intentions. Imagine if someone comes up to you wanting to know all about your life. You may wonder why they are so interested in you. You may suspect their motives. Participants feel this way too.

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They may wonder if we are informers! Or agents of the police, the government, perhaps an NGO! Or they might think we are sympathisers who can bring them monetary support. They may wonder why we are seeking information about them. And what are we going to do with it? And what impact could it have on their lives? These are valid concerns. Often, ethnographers have been strongly criticised for operating from a position of power.

So it is important that we examine our intentions thoroughly, to see if they are fair and favourable to all. If we are sure that our research will not bring any harm to our participants, we need to convey this to them.

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Because as long as they cannot understand our intentions or rationalise our presence, they cannot trust us. This lack of trust keeps them from being transparent and introspective in conversations with us. And it can be quite frustrating when, in spite of all our efforts and good intentions, we find our participants to be distant, polite, and mildly suspicious. So how do we address their fears and doubts? Let us discuss this in our next section.