Understanding Ethnography
Indian School of Design
Lecture No. 26
Building Rapport

In our last section, we spoke about the nature of challenges we face in accessing our participants and gaining their trust. Here, we shall discuss how we may overcome those challenges.

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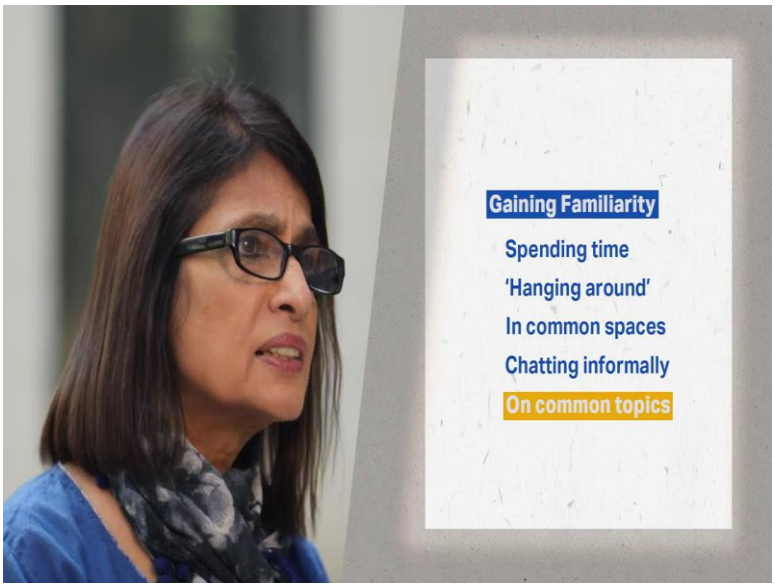

To begin with, we try to become a more familiar face to our participants, by being present and spending time in their context. We spend time and hang around in their common spaces; we have informal conversations with them about topics of general interest. In these ways, we make ourselves familiar to them without being too familiar too soon or intimidating them in any sense.

Only then, when they find our presence non-threatening, can we begin to establish a comfortable relationship. This process of building trust takes time, effort.

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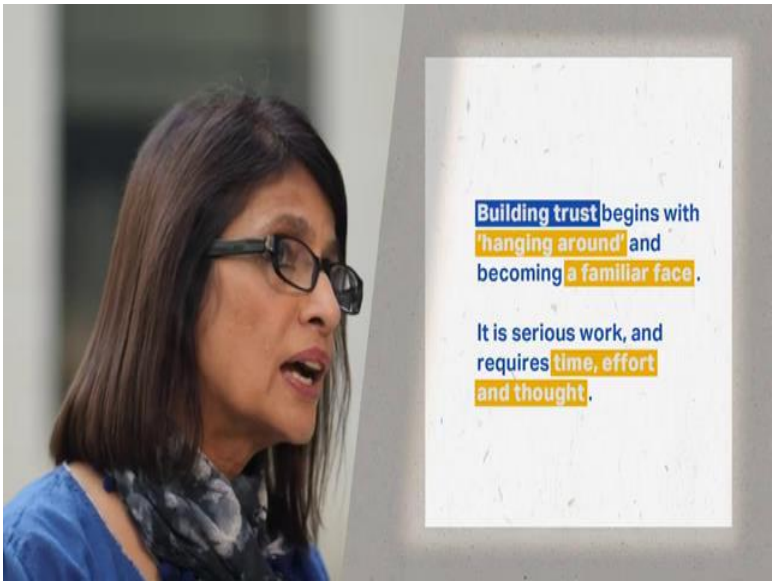

While 'hanging around' and simply being present might not seem like very serious work, it actually is an important part of immersing ourselves in the context. It is through spending time in their common spaces that we become familiar faces in their worlds, learn about them and give them a chance to learn about us. Sometimes we are helped in this endeavour by particular members of the context.

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Someone who is familiar with the context, someone who is a member of the community or known to them can vouch for the researcher, and based on whose 'word' they might be accepted in. These are people we refer to as key participants. Like we said earlier, we may not take someone home when we have barely met them, but we may allow a complete stranger

into our house if they come with a friend who we trust.

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A key participant can be thought of as the researcher's ally on the field. They help us by ***answering our basic questions about the context***, introducing us to some of its beliefs, practices and mores. They ***introduce us to others in the field*** who are knowledgeable about various subjects. They might also ***introduce us to particular settings or people in the context*** which we may not be allowed to access on our own.

Key participants also ***help us interpret our observations***, or bring an insider perspective to our understanding of observed phenomena. They are often aware of the cultural and historical background of phenomena that we observe, and bring this knowledge to our research.

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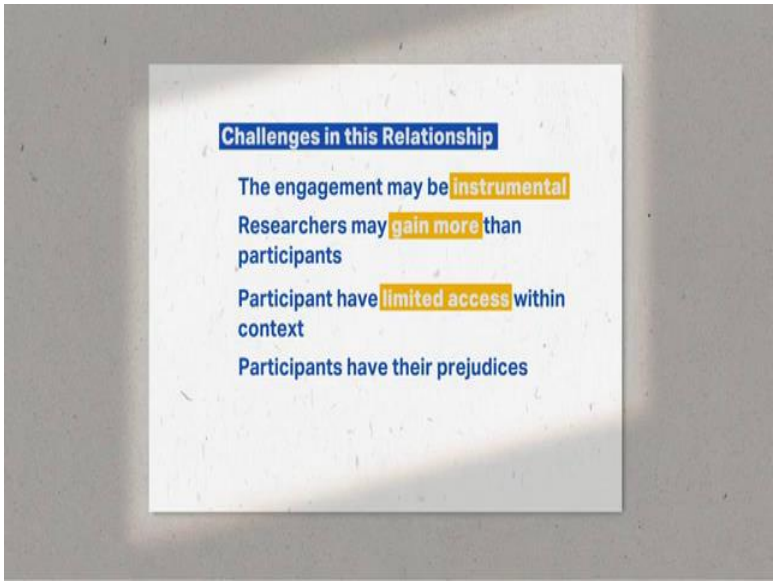

There are, however, challenges that complicate this relationship between researchers and their key participants. This relationship runs the risk of being 'instrumental' and unequal in nature. The researcher needs the help of the participants for their work. However, participants do not often stand to gain much from helping the researcher. And while researchers build relationships of friendship and camaraderie, it can be argued that they do so, only to further their own ends.

But many researchers, conscious of these possibilities, make an effort to develop equal and mutually beneficial relationships with key participants. Some of the people I first got to know in this capacity are friends today, and our friendship continues to grow long after the research itself has ended.

Another challenge is that these participants themselves may have limited access to different parts of the context. For instance, male participants might have little or no access to spaces occupied exclusively by women. We need to be aware of and recognise the limited access of individual participants in their own world, and refrain from relying on their views alone.

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In entering the field, we sometimes encounter persons who hold a role of importance in that community and can act as gatekeepers, enabling us, or keeping us from accessing certain participants and certain parts of the context. The *pradhan* or the head of a village, the principal of a school, the most popular person in a group of teenagers, any of these might act as a gatekeeper.

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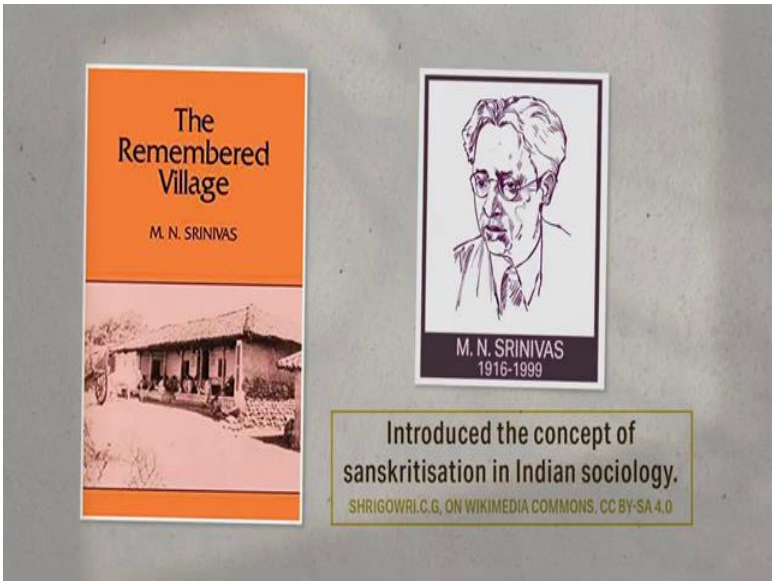

M.N.Srinivas, a celebrated Indian ethnographer, encountered a gatekeeper in his research too. In his early days of conducting ethnography in a village, he was hosted by an important Brahmin of the village. This itself defined how others in the village saw Srinivas - as an upper-caste man, not to be approached by lower caste people. His host would tell Srinivas who to meet, what places to visit and so on, once, even chiding him for speaking to a lower

caste person. In this manner, he tried to direct Srinivas's interactions. Soon enough, Srinivas felt the need to break away from his influence.

So, we can see, we gain the much-needed support but also encounter challenges in working with informants and gatekeepers. They often play a crucial role in enabling access, but also have their own limitations and biases, which may influence our on-field interactions.

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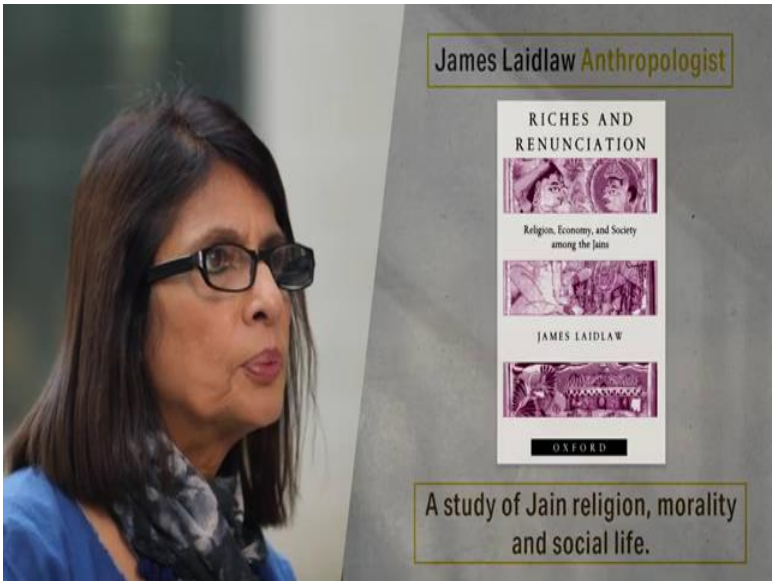

We have a reading here, an essay by anthropologist James Laidlaw about the relationships he built with his key participants. He writes that these relationships enriched his research and his participants' understanding of their own context.

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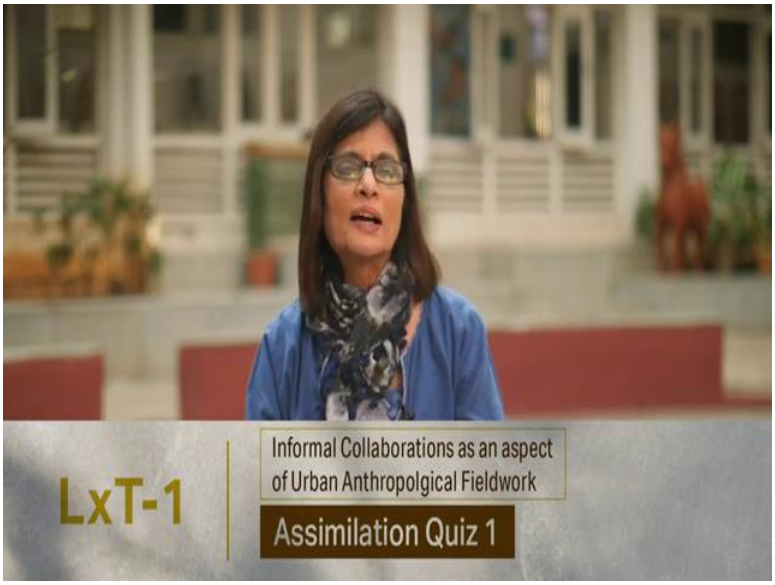

We recommend this as reading for those of you interested in further exploring the relationships researchers build with their participants. And there is a quiz that you can take, based on the essay.