

Understanding Ethnography
Indian School of Design
Lecture No. 27
Gaining Trust

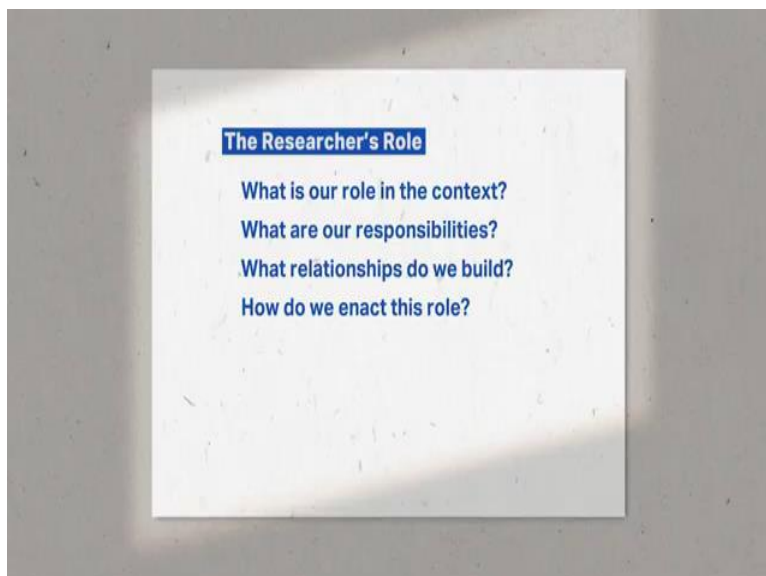
Even as we gain familiarity and access to our participants, their doubts about us and our work may persist. Gaining their trust involves putting these doubts and suspicions to rest.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:18)



For this, we need to present ourselves in a manner that clearly conveys our place in the context and our reasons for being there. In other words, what is the role and purpose of our presence in their world? We need to be clear about this, to ourselves, and to our participants.

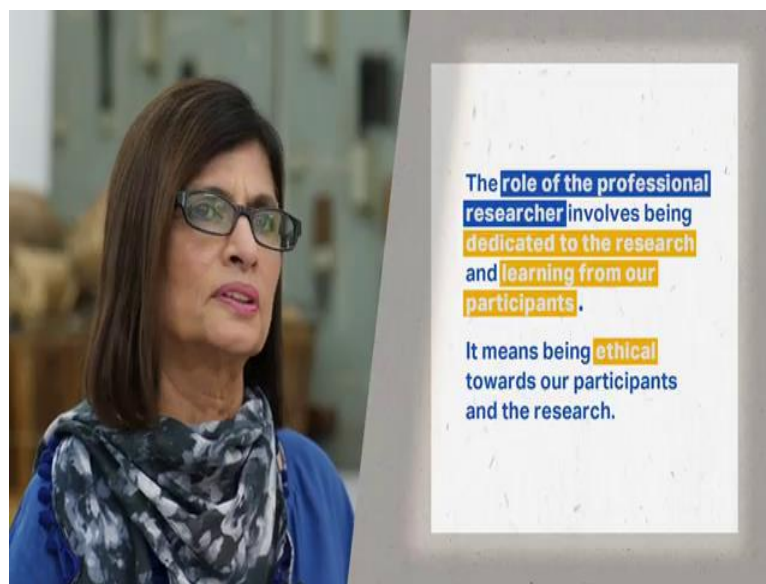
(Refer Slide Time: 0:38)



Lets speak about this role, and what it entails. What are the responsibilities and relationships that it comes with? And how do we enact it? Some ethnographers recommend that as we begin fieldwork, we take on '*the role of the professional researcher*'. This means behaving and conducting ourselves in such a manner that conveys professionalism, dedication and competence towards the tasks of research.

We may convey such qualities by prioritising research-related activities. And by displaying a keenness to learn about the other. Being 'professional' does not mean that we have to be all serious and business-like.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:23)



It simply means we have to be committed to learning from our participants. At the same time, it is important to maintain certain principles - like respecting the confidentiality and privacy of our participants. Taking on such a role helps diffuse some concerns about our presence and our intent.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:44)



So how do we enact this role? Our physical appearance and social behaviour are the most basic aspects of our self-presentation. This includes how we dress, the language we use, our manner of speaking, and so on.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:01)



The thumb rule is to dress simply, neatly. We should not stand out too much, but we need not try to dress like our participants either. We are often outsiders anyway!

(Refer Slide Time: 2:14)



Knowing the language of our participants can be a great advantage. While working in Kutch, I spoke to some artists in Sindhi, a language that one of the community was comfortable with. This immediately got us off on the right foot. Why? Because it made interactions more immediate and direct without someone mediating and interpreting.

Equally important is how we speak, the ways in which we address people, how we ask for their time, and so on. Here, too, knowing the particularities of a culture is important. In some communities in rural India, for example, interacting with someone over the phone, more than in-person, can be seen as a sign of arrogance. As a participant in rural Bihar once told a researcher, someone who wants to talk on the phone, without having an in-person meeting, comes across as "too haughty".

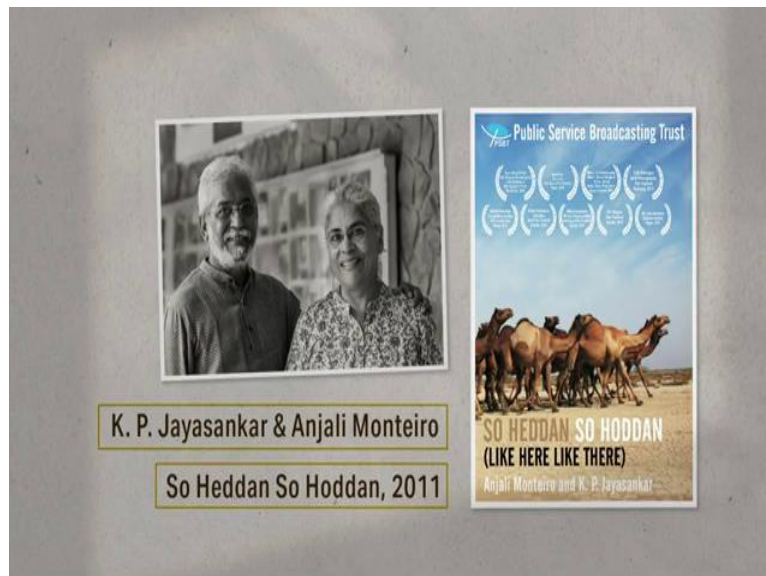
On the other hand, in many urban communities, we would be expected to "call for an appointment" before meeting in person. Just showing up for a meeting would be considered rude even. Through our manner of engaging with participants and their context, we should be able to demonstrate our interest in their world. This involves Being open and curious about what we are being exposed to; asking questions about the phenomena that we encounter; listening patiently and without judgement; and adapting to the climate, food, and ways of living, to whatever degree possible.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:54)



Such actions represent our commitment to our research and our willingness to learn from participants. This commitment gives participants a reason to trust us and to work with us.

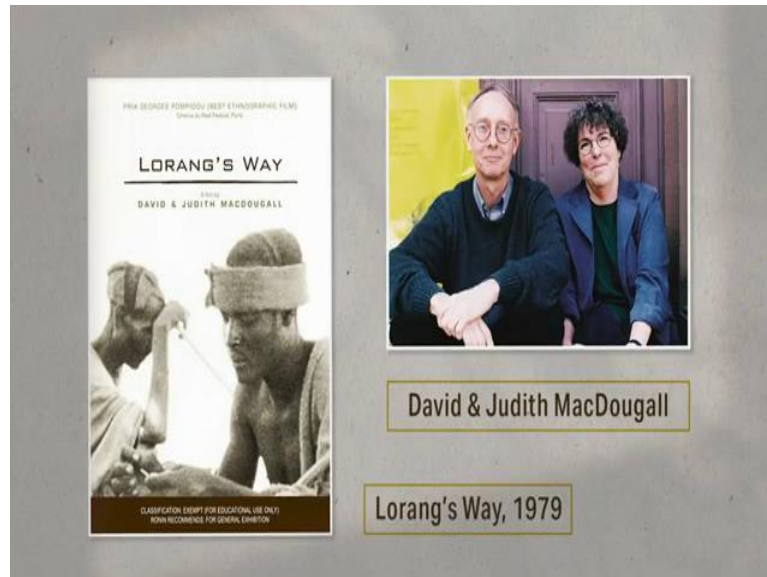
(Refer Slide Time: 4:06)



Filmmakers-researchers Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar had such an experience while making their film *So Heddan So Hoddan*, for which they lived among the pastoral communities of Kutch. The team's commitment to their work and their subject translated into their continued presence in an environment which was unfamiliar and perhaps not-all-that-comfortable. The participants were not oblivious to the efforts of the team and responded by working with the filmmakers, supporting them in their project.

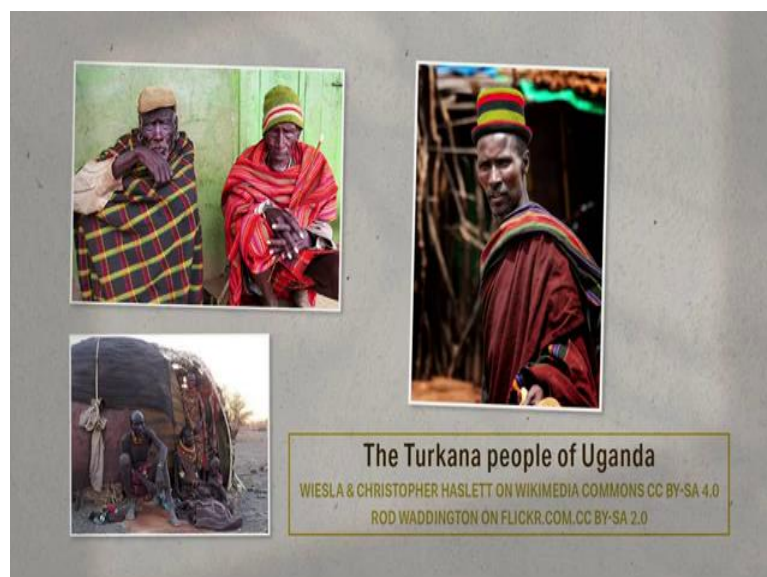
This sequence from *So Heddan, So Hoddan* shows us that participants are just as observant and curious about us as we are about them. As we learn about them, they learn about us and formulate their analyses just as we do.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:24)



A moving example of this is to be seen in Judith and David MacDougall's film *Lorang's Way*.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:32)



The film is based among the Turkana people of Uganda. It speaks about the impending changes to their ways of life, brought about by developments in Uganda, after the country's independence from British rule. This narrative is told through conversations with Lorang, a community elder. Having worked in the army and lived in many different places, Lorang

chose to return to the community. And over the years, through hard work and careful planning, he established a large household and family and became the owner of several herds of cattle.

In the sequence we are about to see, Lorang speaks to his son, a young man, about the importance of maintaining their herds through hard work. In advising his son, Lorang speaks of the changes occurring among the Turkana, and across Uganda. He speaks about the advent of new forms of knowledge, such as literacy, and the conflict between literacy and traditional forms of wisdom.

And into this conversation, he brings his understanding of 'white folk', people like the filmmakers and researchers recording Lorang's conversation with his son.

(Short video is being played from 7:45 to 13:09)

Lorang develops a keen and complex understanding of his 'researchers', even as the researchers are trying to develop an understanding of him and his community. This curiosity that participants have about researchers and their research and takes varied forms. Sometimes, as with Lorang, it is an analytical. Other times, it is a simpler kind of curiosity.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:35)



The film *Kitchen Stories*, directed by Bent Hamer, articulates this in the most accessible way.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:43)



By actively sharing about ourselves - who we are, where we come from, we address the curiosity that our participants have about us. In doing so, we make ourselves more comprehensible to them and enable them to trust us.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:00)



By sharing about ourselves, we also try to build a reciprocal relationship where they can learn about us just we want to learn about them. In all these ways, we try to be more approachable and invite dialogue. And in fact, most participants, even when they are questioning us, are seeking a dialogue. The barrage of questions that the Kaavad makers posed to me was, in fact, the opening of a dialogue.

By asking me all of these questions, they were giving me a chance to introduce myself and my world to them, just as I was inviting them to tell me about theirs. These conversations and engagements are prerequisites for building a relationship where the researcher and the participant are comfortable with each other.