Understanding Ethnography
Indian School of Design
Lecture No. 28
Limits to Access

So far, we have been discussing how we may gain our participants' trust. In this section, I would like to emphasise the limits of access. Like all other aspects of ethnographic practice, the process of gaining access and building relationships is fluid and ever-evolving. The degree of access we are given could change from one conversation to the other, or from one day to the next.

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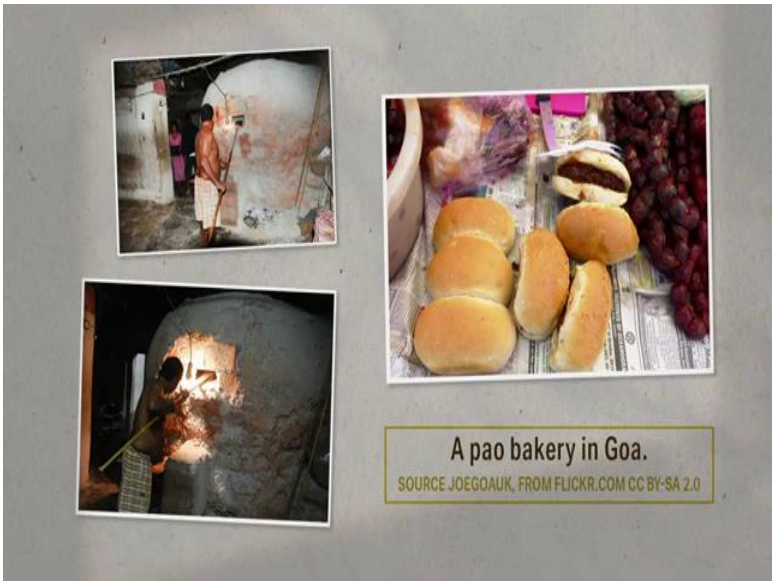

Once, while visiting a traditional bakery in Goa, I had a great conversation with the owner. I wanted to document the process of pao making in the traditional oven, and he seemed very welcoming towards the idea. But when I returned the next day, he seemed to have changed his mind. He was cordial with me, but far from warm, and his excitement for my project had vanished. I was really taken aback and did not understand this sudden shift in his behaviour.

I learnt later from another informant that I had made the mistake of not paying any attention to the other workers at the bakery. Apparently, this led them to mistrust me and share their mistrust with the owner. As he was employed in a government job, he was told to be cautious of me as I could be there to check if he was moonlighting. I then realised that I had assumed it was enough to get permission from the owner. And further, I had not given enough time for all the other people working at the bakery to trust me.

They were obviously watching out for him because I was just this stranger who turned up one day with so many questions that made them suspicious. Sometimes, it may happen, that people agree to talk to us, and then, for reasons of their own are unable, or unwilling to. We might turn up, with team and equipment, at the house of a participant, who had promised to speak to us. And learn that he had to go out of town for some urgent work.

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This is not an uncommon feature of fieldwork. It may be important for our project that we speak to our participants. But for them, talking to us may be less important than many other tasks and commitments in their lives. The uncertainties of fieldwork often arise from this difference in priorities. As we attempt to gain people's trust, there are multiple challenges we may face.

These challenges are not always barriers. They are, in their own way, engagements; some difficult and some confusing ones. In trying to make sense of these, we learn about the norms and the sociality of our participants. We also learn what we could be doing differently. Sometimes finding a different route or an innovative way helps. Here's an example:

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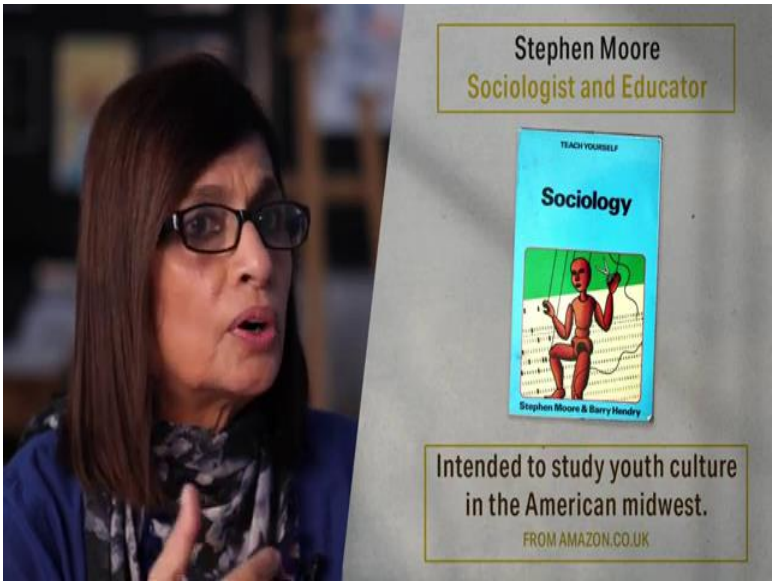

Stephen Moore, an American sociologist, wanted to study youth culture among a group of youngsters who 'hung around' street corners in a mid-western American town. He was conscious of the considerable age gap between the young people and himself. He realised that they may not be very comfortable and candid with him. Nor would he be able to engage in some of their activities. So, he put together a team of young researchers who could conduct the fieldwork on his behalf.

Sometimes, researchers use tools and devices in unique ways to build familiarity with participants. Some ethnographers use photography, offering to take pictures of participants and giving them copies of their photos. Others use drawing in a similar way. These techniques have their advantages. They put the participants at ease with the researcher. And, they help the researcher learn about the participants.

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We find a great example of this in the work of visual ethnographer Sarah Pink. Pink has done much of her fieldwork in Spain, where she used photography as a way of getting to know her participants.

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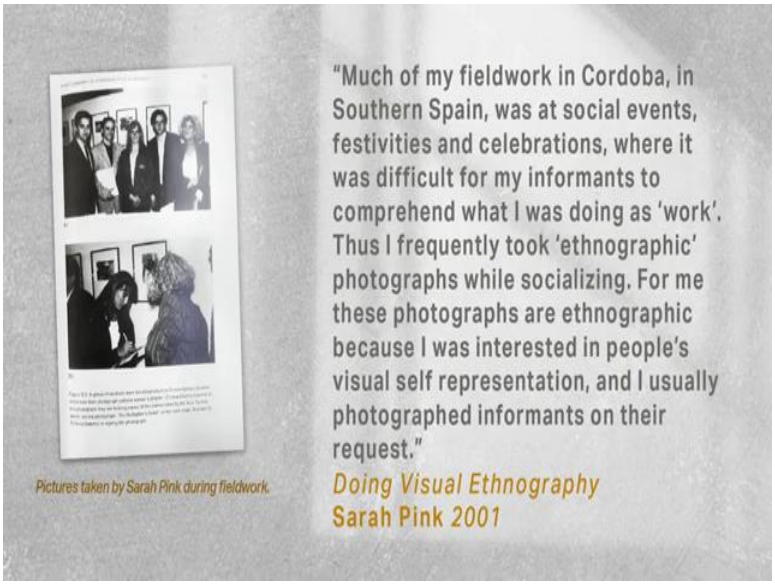

She says: "Much of my fieldwork in Cordoba in southern Spain was at social events, festivities, and celebration, but it was difficult for my informants to comprehend what I was doing as work. Thus, I frequently took ethnographic photographs while socialising. For me, these photographs are ethnographic because I was interested in people's visual self-representation. And I usually photographed informants on their request."

Pink was interested in how people like to represent themselves. As her participants requested her to take pictures of them, she learned about how people wanted to be seen and represented

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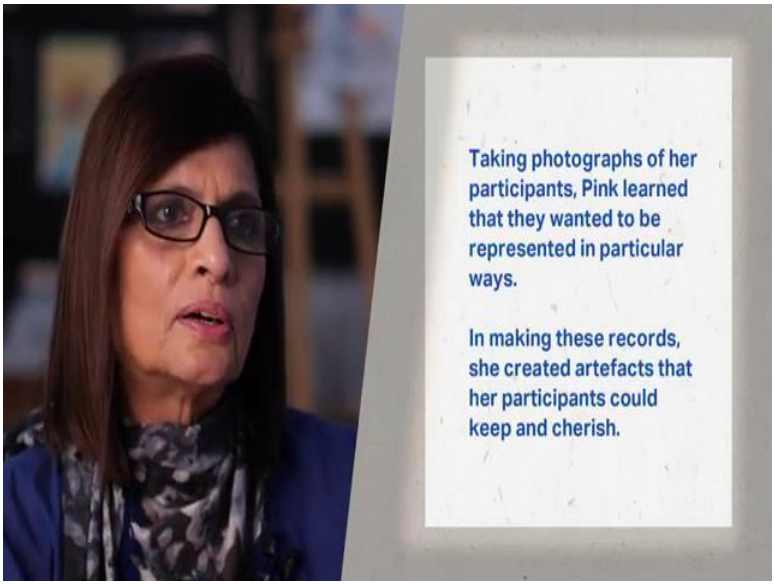

Their instructions to her on how to photograph them, and the photographs themselves, became important ethnographic records. And for her participants, these photographs became precious memories. The process of taking the pictures and sharing them helped Pink build comfort and familiarity with her participants.

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Important as it is for us to gain access to participants, it is just as important to know our boundaries. Access for our research should *not* come at the cost of their comfort. Sometimes

people simply do not want to let us in, with or without rational reasons, just like sometimes, we do not want to have certain conversations or meet with certain people. We need to understand and respect this.

The process that we have been discussing so far, of building relationships with participants is an important aspect of fieldwork. It is sometimes referred to as '***building rapport***'. It is a crucial part of immersion, which is what we will discuss in our next section.

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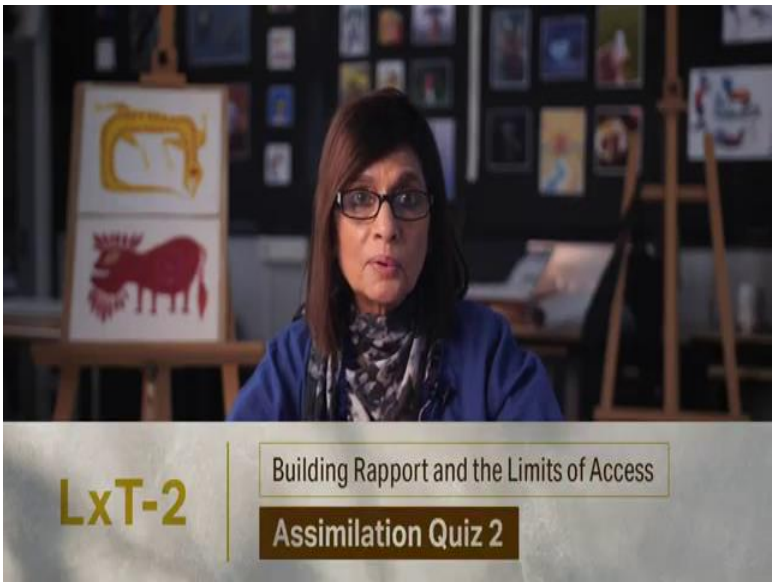

For those of you who want to explore this process some more, we have some readings for you. And a quiz to help you reflect and revise.