

Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 3
Module 1: Engaging with the Other

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We have been talking about engaging with the 'other'. Let us try and understand what we mean by the other. We have seen from our earlier discussion that the other is someone who is different from us, and this someone as 'other' changes across contexts. So, you see how the definition of the other is a dynamic one. There is always us and them or me and the other.

In ethnography, the 'other' is the person or the community we engage with. The terminology we use to refer to the people we are researching tells us how we see those people. Some of the terms commonly used are *user*, *subject*, *respondent*, *participant*. Each of these terms reveals what the 'other' means to the researcher.

If we refer to someone as a '*user*,' we enter that relationship with the understanding that we are to create something that the other will 'use'. The terms '*respondent*' or '*subject*', are commonly used in social science research, to refer to the other. In using the term

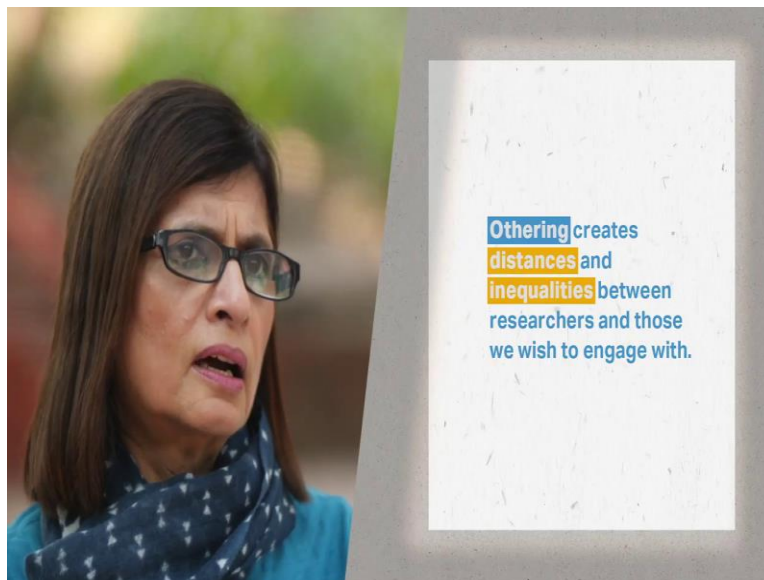
'respondent', we term the other as someone who is simply responding to questions and cues provided by the researcher.

The term implies that the researcher alone directs the course of the research, defining what is to be learned, and the role of the other is to provide answers as required by the researcher. This terminology somewhat ignores the contribution of the other to the research. And, it overlooks their ability to make sense of their own world.

The word *'subject'* is most commonly used to refer to someone or something being studied. It somehow implies that the other is a passive entity, unlikely to have much active participation in the study. This way of seeing also keeps us from recognising and acknowledging their contribution to our research. In each of these ways of relating to those who the research is about, we run the risk of 'othering' them.

This may translate into the research having little or no meaning to the people it is about. It may have no value for them, and may not contribute to their lives in any significant way.

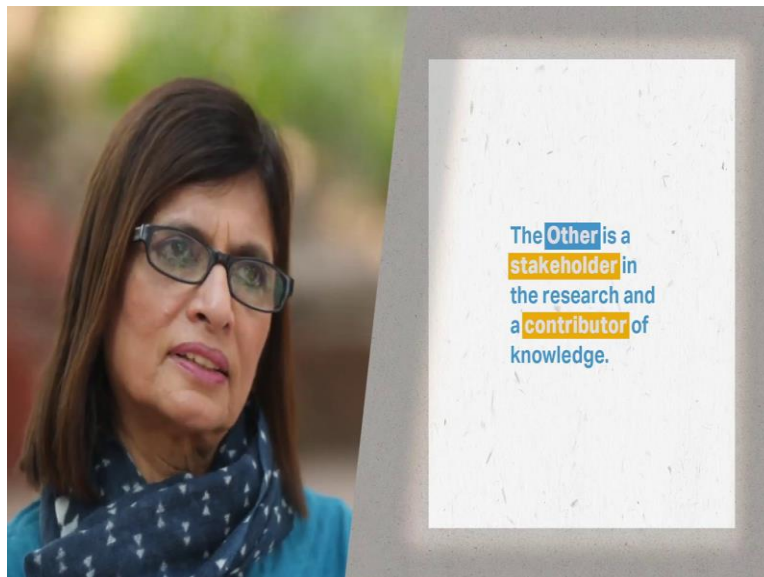
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Othering creates inequalities between us and those whose worlds we study. Far from

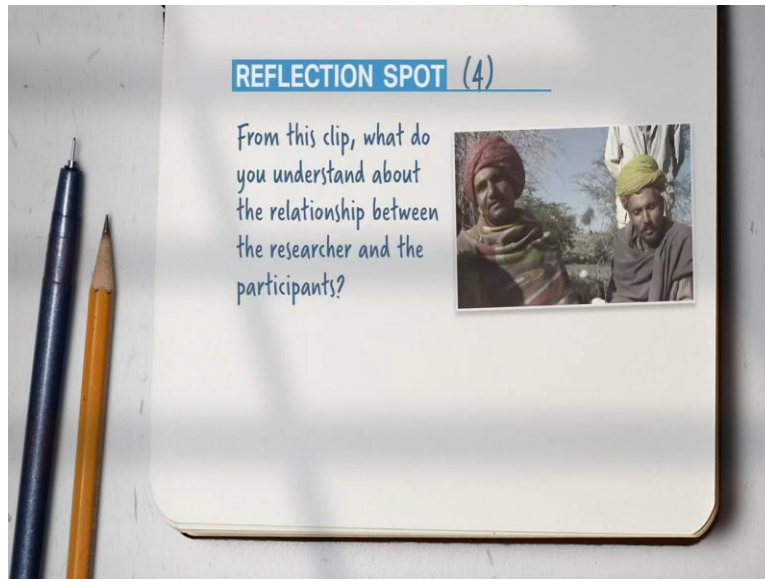
being something harmless and simple, it is an authoritative and complex phenomenon that is capable of creating distances between individuals, societies and cultures. Over the years, ethnographers have worked towards building a more inclusive approach. Today, we refer to those whose worlds we study as *participants*' or '*contributors*' to our research. In using these terms, we try to acknowledge their contribution and their active role in the research.

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We see the other as stakeholders in the creation of the knowledge or solutions that emerge from the research. This shift in terminology symbolises a shift in our relationship with our participants and in our methods of engaging with them. Let us pause here and think about the relationship between researchers and their participants. Watch this short video clip from my engagement with my participant kaavadiya Kojaram as part of my research on the Kaavad tradition. [Video being played from 3:46 to 4:36].

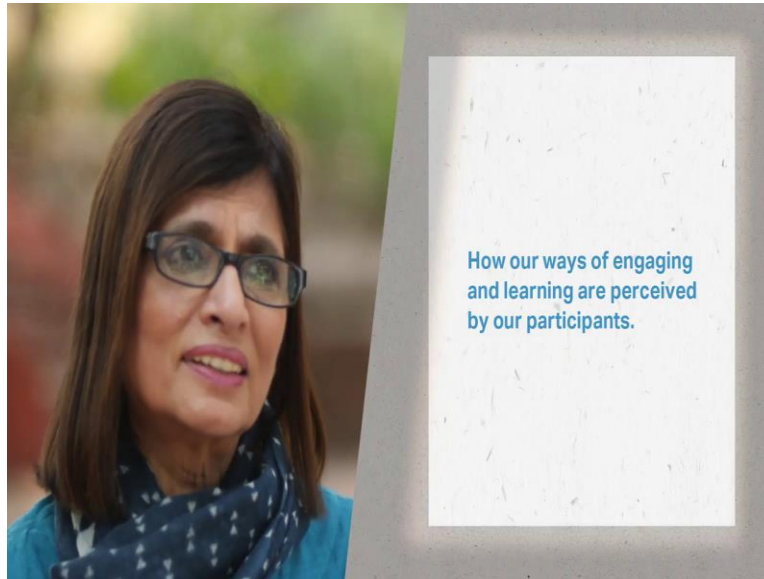
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From this clip, what do you understand about the relationship between the researcher and the participant? Some of you may have noticed that there is a sense of comfort between the two. They speak to each other, as though friends discussing a topic of common interest. The participant does not respond to the researcher as though she is more knowledgeable or more important than him.

Nor does the researcher hold a position of authority over the participant. In fact, both of them seem to be rather relaxed in the other's presence, and in sharing their banter with each other.

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In fact, after this conversation, I realised how our ways of learning are seen by our participants in relationship to theirs. What we are trying to say here is that we need to design our research in such a manner that the process of learning from participants is based on mutual respect and comfort. Developing such a relationship is an important part of our work, and we will discuss this in our next section.