Understanding Ethnography
Week 4
Lecture 07
The Ethics of Engaging

Before we move on to participating and observing, we would like to deliberate a question we had touched upon earlier in our discussion. As we engage with our participants, we are often faced with several dilemmas.

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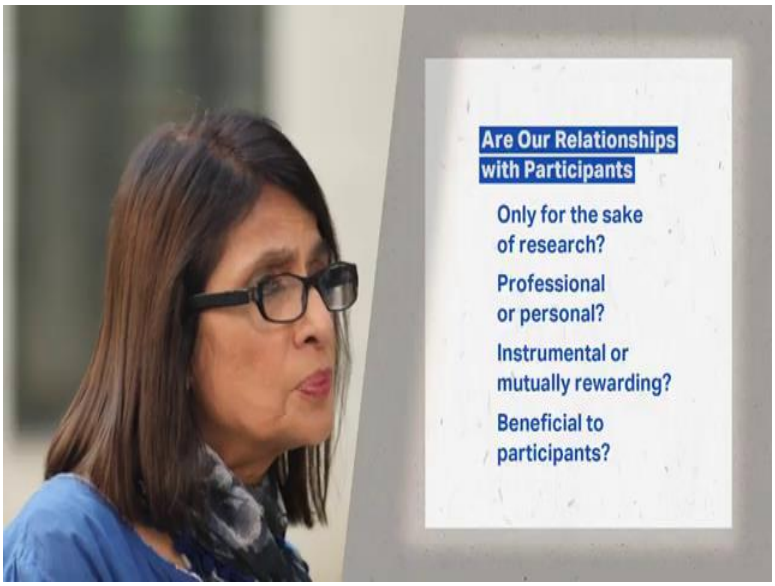

These may be about the nature of our relationship with them, the intent behind our engagements, the ways in which we engage, and the impact of our work on them.

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Are we building these relationships only for the sake of our research? Are these relationships professional or personal? Are they instrumental or mutually rewarding? And what do participants gain from contributing their knowledge and narratives to our projects? Often, as we go about our fieldwork, we encounter questions and situations that push us to consider the implications of our work.

In pondering these questions, we reflect on our own practice and the ethics of our research. In ethnographic interactions, it is common for us to ask people to reveal their narratives, desires and opinions. This is perhaps the most basic way in which we learn from them. But sometimes, such a sharing unexpectedly triggers intense emotions and memories. This can make a participant feel very vulnerable.

And to speak about something deeply personal to a someone who is 'researching' your context makes the situation a little worse. This is where disclosure or sharing on the part of the researcher plays an important role.

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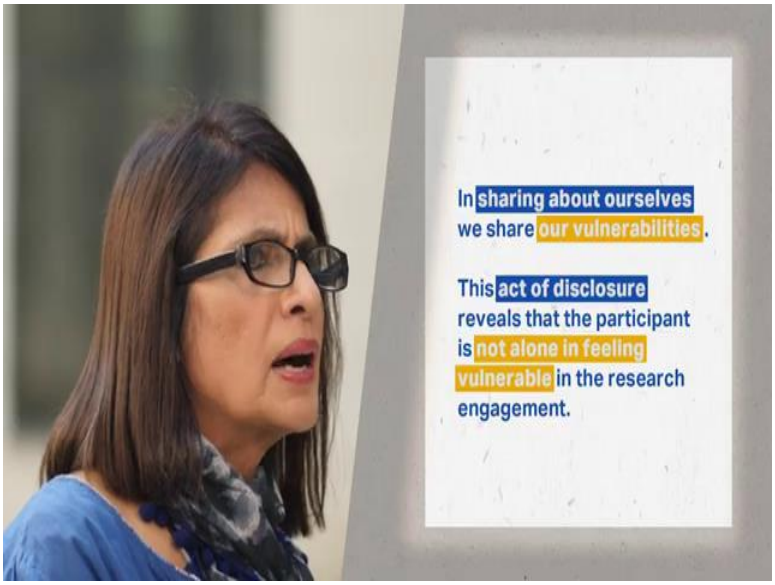

By sharing our narratives with our participants, we make ourselves vulnerable to them. And thus try to create a relationship that is more equal and an environment of sharing that feels secure. Sometimes it is participants who do the questioning, putting ethnographers in an uncomfortable spot.

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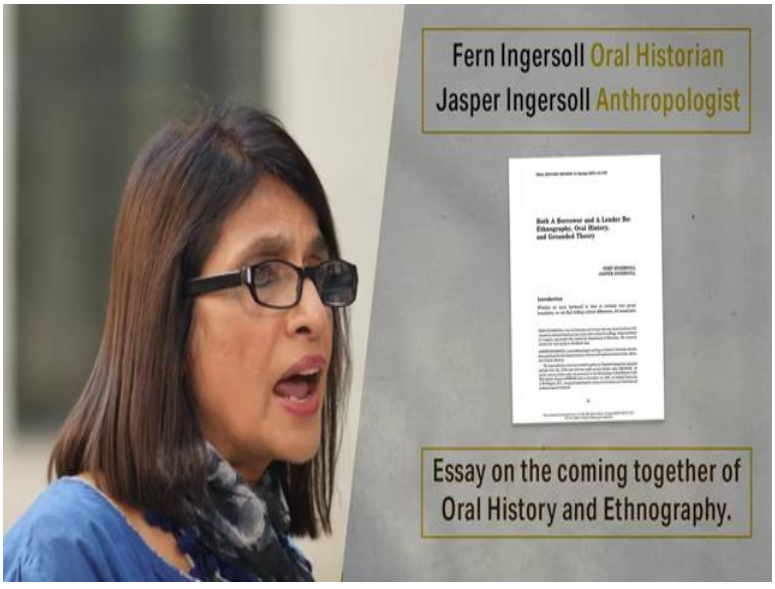

Let us take an example here, from the work of ethnographers Fran and Jasper Ingersoll. The Ingersoll's' fieldwork was based in a village in Thailand. Their research was about the ways in which life had changed in the village as modern infrastructure and government policies had entered people's lives. Often, their questions were about the material conditions of people's lives, their social and economic situations, changes in income, and so on. And as Americans

in a developing country, they too, were subject to much questioning. They were often asked questions about how much money they make.

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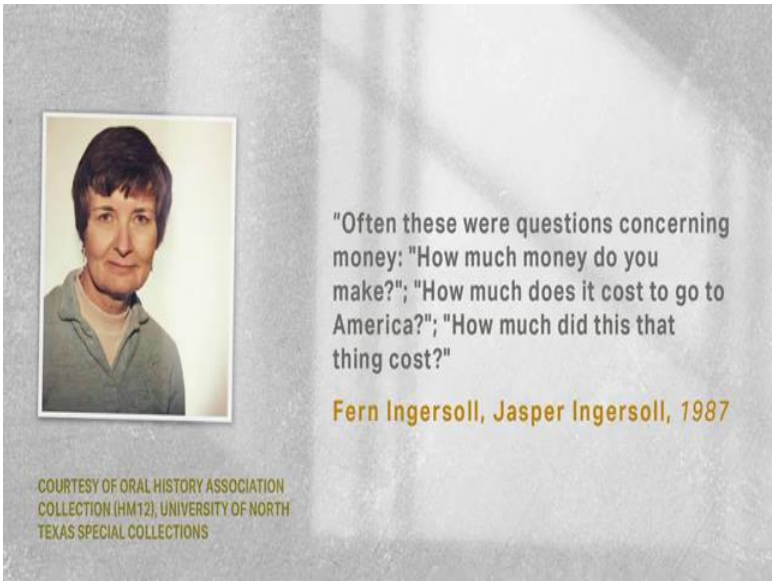

Often these questions were concerning money. How much money do you make? How much does it cost to go to America? How much did this that thing cost? As you might imagine, the persistence of these questions felt uncomfortable at first, but they also presented a dilemma. Can we avoid answering questions that we ourselves ask of our participants? Does that not make our relationship with them unequal? The Ingersoll had to make the decision of engaging with or ignoring these questions; they decided to reflect on them.

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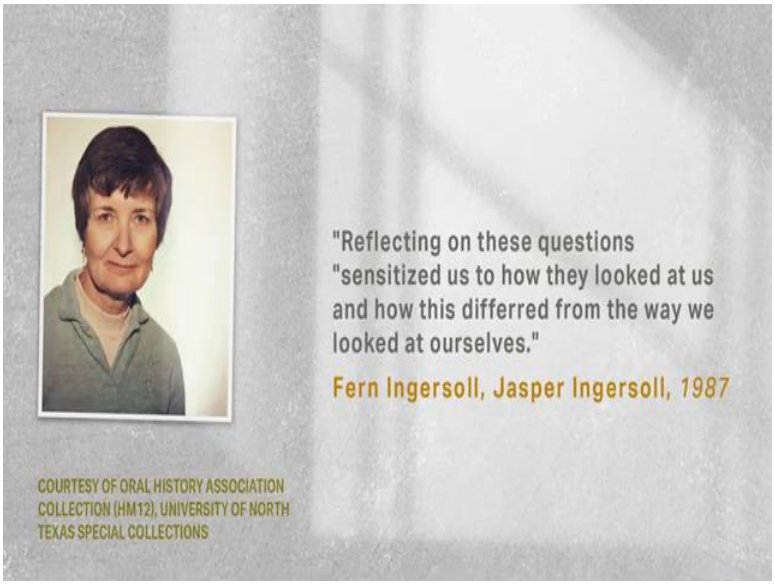

Reflecting on those questions sensitised us to how they looked at us, and how this differed from the way we looked at ourselves. This act of reflection helped them gain insight into how their participants understood material wealth and economic prosperity. They were also able to see how they were perceived by their participants. Often in our engagements, we face the dilemma of how much to disclose about ourselves to our participants.

The Ingersoll's' decision to share and learn from their participants' curiosity helped their research. We learn from them that critically reflecting on our research engagements and their impact can reveal knowledge about the participants' worlds and about our practice of research.

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Practising self-reflexivity contributes to the ethics rigour in research. But the decision to share our narratives and opinions with our participants must be considered carefully. If it makes us feel uncomfortable even after considering the value of sharing, it might be best to refrain from sharing.

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Similarly, we must consider the comfort of our participants as we ask them to share their narratives. This often depends on the nature of our relationship with them, and on the subject, we are discussing. If we expect to be discussing something that people usually don't talk about, then we must be all the more careful in approaching it. And if it makes our participants feel too uncomfortable or vulnerable, it is better to just drop it. Sharing and disclosing can

have very tangible impacts on the lives of our participants. Especially, considering that we might hope to publish our research or make it public in some way or the other.

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Publishing our research makes the personal opinions and narratives of our participants open to public scrutiny. And so, in some cases, it becomes important to protect the identities of our participants, particularly when we are working with communities who are considered vulnerable, like sex workers, or Dalit landless workers.

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So researchers follow procedures such as taking informed consent from participants or anonymising them in their writings. This also impacts the methods through which we engage with them.

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. For instance, if participants want anonymity, we should not take photographs of them. We should use pseudonyms instead of their actual names. And we should not disclose any specific details such as phone number, addresses, place of work, and so on. Ethical conduct also includes a consideration of how we respond to our participants' narratives.

Should we take whatever they choose to share with us? Or should we probe further? And what happens when we disagree with something our participants share with us, whether it is fact or opinion? In such a situation, should we correct them, or present our ideas? Think about this for a bit.

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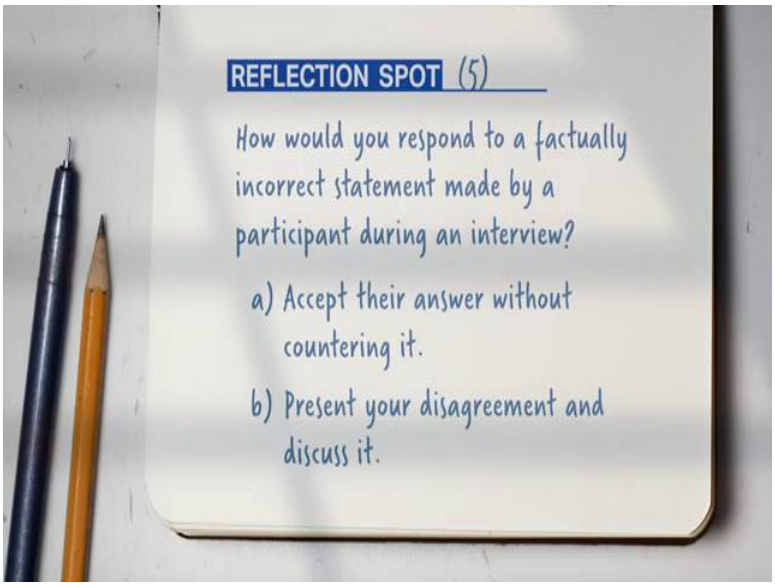

Imagine you are conducting an ethnographic interview.

Your participant has stated her opinion about an observation you had made. What would you do next?

Would you take their opinion at face value and move on to the next question?

Or would you present your disagreement, and discuss why you disagree with them.

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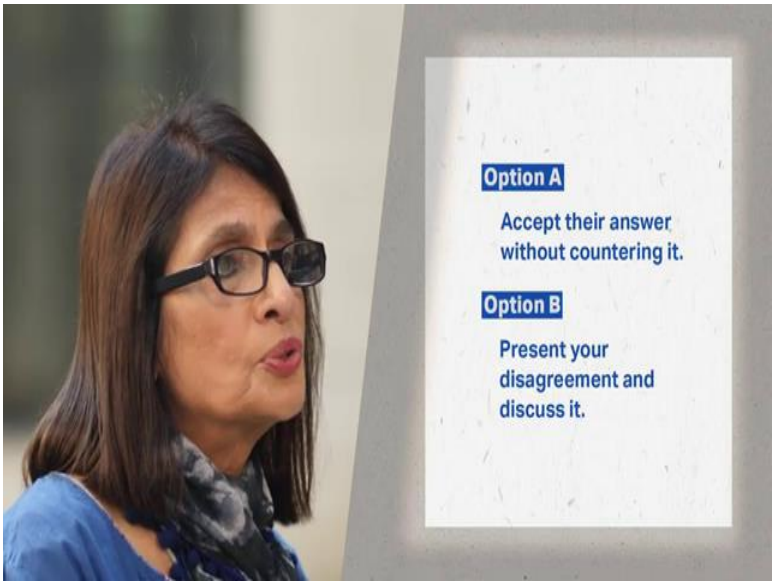

So, which option did you choose? To those who chose option a), to simply accept an answer that we think is incorrect or which we do not agree with might be patronising. On the other hand, for those of you who chose option b., to probe further, or to present counter facts might be seen as disrespectful. It could put off the participant and impact our future interaction with them. A bit of a dilemma, isn't it? How to choose one or the other?

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Let us take another example here. From the work of Alessandro Portelli, a researcher and oral historian. Portelli was researching the history of workers' movement in Italy. For his research, he was interviewing multiple workers who had been involved in the movement, asking them to remember particular moments from their history of protest. In any of the accounts he

heard, one incident featured prominently.

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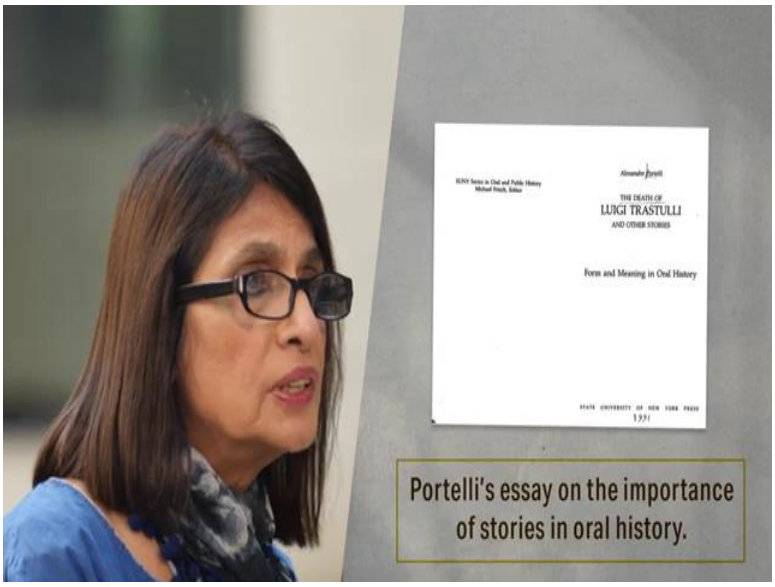

This was the death of Luigi Trastulli, a 21-year-old worker, in the city of Terni. Trastulli had been killed in a scuffle between protestors and police, during a protest by workers. However, the persons who recounted the incident placed it in different years, and indifferent protests. Some said he was killed in a protest opposing Italy's involvement in NATO, in 1949.

Many others said he was killed in protests against mass lay-offs of factory workers in Terni. One worker, Amerigo Matthew described a huge protest that followed the lay-offs of 2700 workers from a steel factory in Terni in October 1953. And it is here that he placed Trastulli's death.

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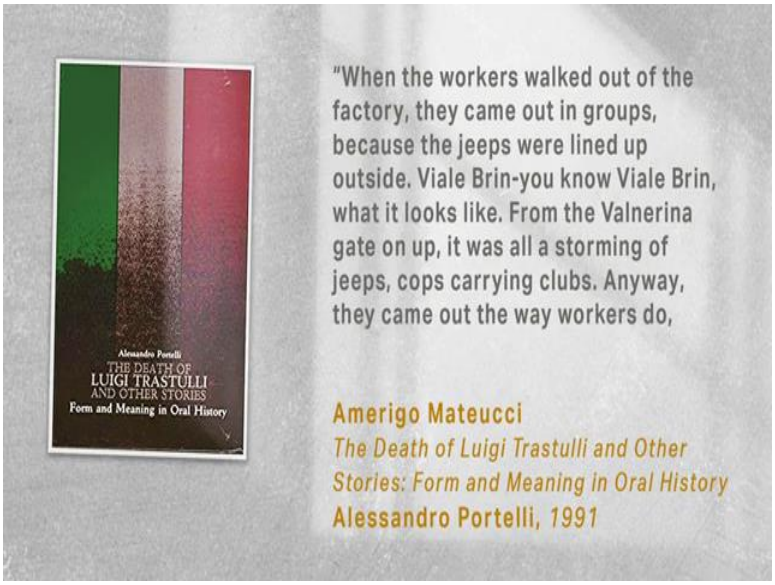

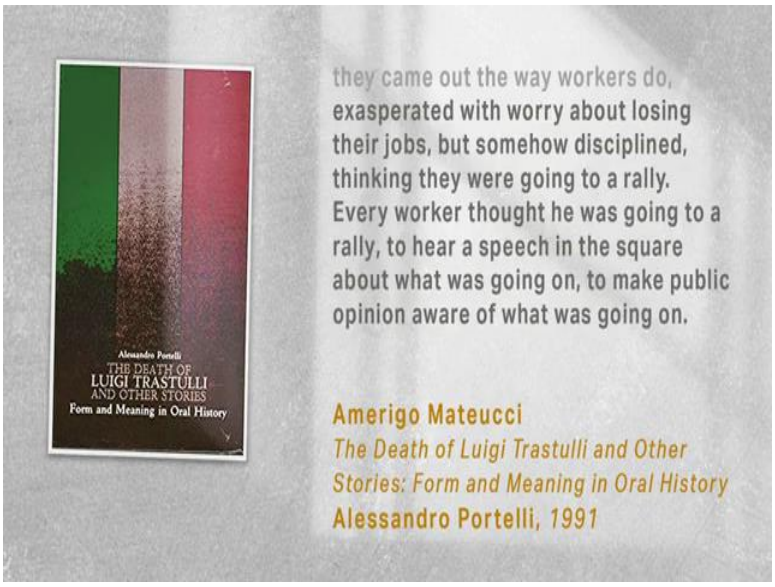

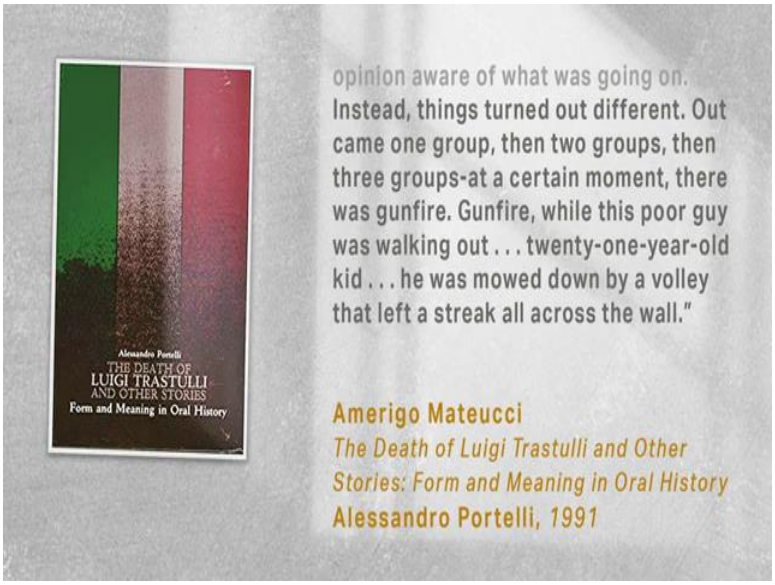

When the workers walked out of the factory, they came out in groups because the jeeps were lined up outside. Viale Brin, you know Viale Brin what it looks like? From the Valnerina gate on up. It was all a storming of jeeps, cops carrying clubs. Anyway, I came out the way workers do.

Exasperated with worry about losing their jobs, but somehow disciplined, thinking they were going to a rally. Everyone worker thought he was going to a rally, to hear a speech in the square about what was going on, to make public opinion aware of what was going on. Instead, things turned out different, out came one group, then two groups, then three groups, at a certain moment there was gunfire. Gunfire, while this poor guy was walking out 21 year old kid, he was mowed down by a volley that left a streak all across the wall.

His description of the event is a faithful one. However, this was not the event at which Trustalli was killed; he had been killed at the anti-NATO protests in 1949. So how was Portelli to work with information which he knew was incorrect

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? He could have given up on his participants as misremembering the event and moved on to other parts of his research, but he decided instead to explore these Mis-rememberings. Through his explorations, he came to understand that many of his participants were deeply affected by the mass lay-offs that took place, and that many workers and the workers' movement had been shocked by Trustlli's death. In an attempt to make sense of these two events to come to terms with them, many of his participants were linking the two.

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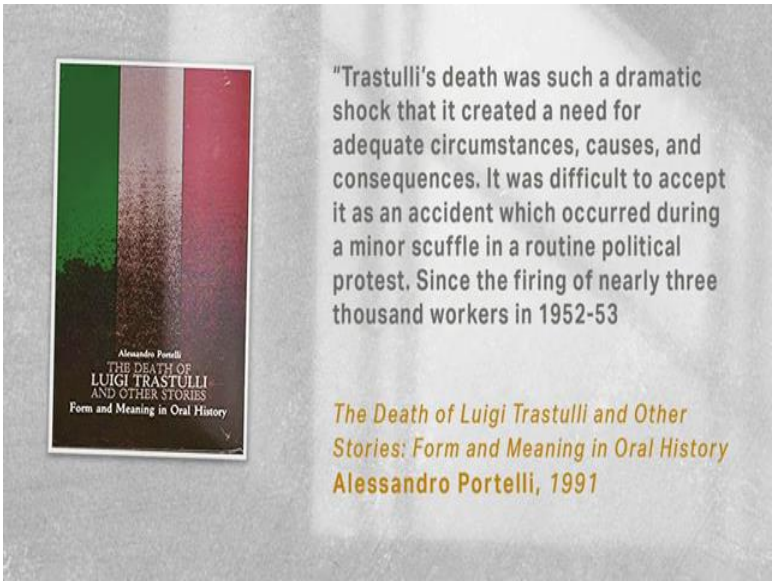

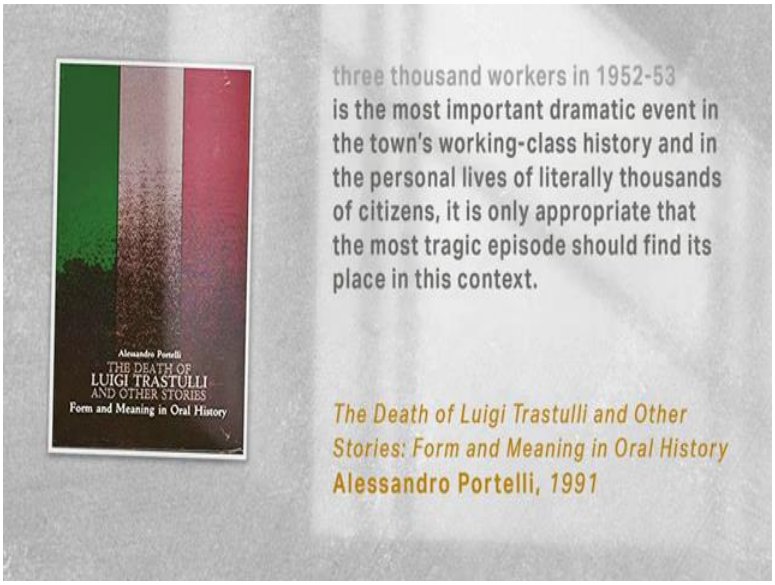

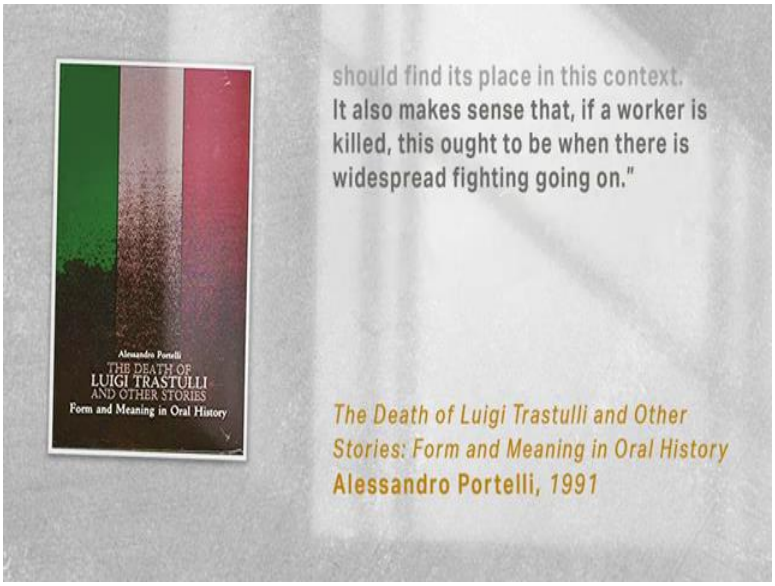

Trustulli's death was such a dramatic shock that it created a need for adequate circumstances, causes and consequences. It was difficult to accept it as an accident which occurred during a minor scuffle in a routine political protest. Since the firing of nearly 3000 workers in 1952-53 is the most important dramatic event in the town's working-class history and in the personal lives of literally thousands of citizens.

It is only appropriate that most tragic episode should find its place in this context. It also makes sense that if a worker is killed, this ought to be when there is widespread fighting going on.

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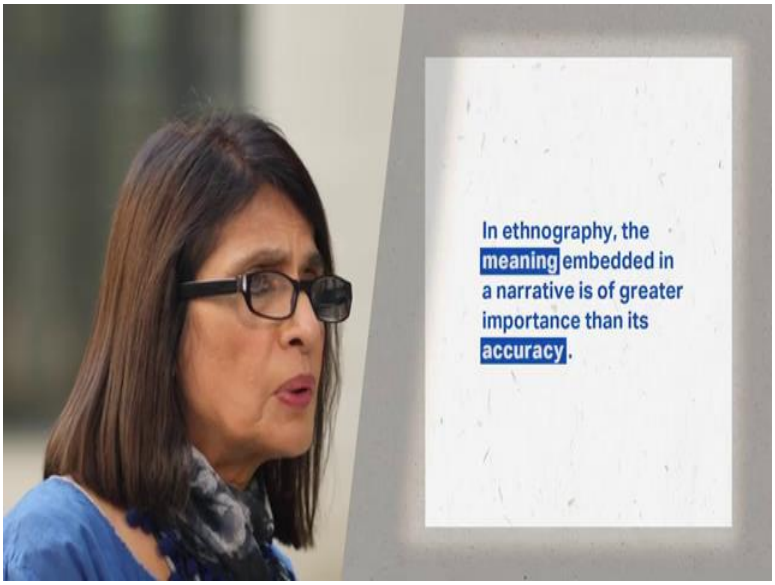

For Portelli, the accuracy of his participants accounts was not of primary importance. He was interested in learning the meanings embedded in their narratives. Like the Ingersoll Portelli lays out an important lesson for us in engaging with our participants, our responsibilities extend much beyond building a relationship of trust, or protecting their identity.

Ethical conduct includes respecting what is shared with us. It extends to the ways in which we interact with them, learn from them, and make sense of what is shared with us. And so we need to practice self-reflexivity in every aspect of our engagement with participants.